

# Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 57 ■ September 2018





## The glimmering hope



*Allow me to first and foremost thank all those who have showed their respect and sympathy following the passing away of my father Joe Sultana, who has instilled in me and many others the passion for nature and the drive to protect it.*

For those working in conservation, life can be pretty frustrating at times. Many times we are stuck in the present moments and focusing on what is lacking but fail to stop and realise the successes we have had over the years. I think we should do it more often because it would keep us focused on our mission and motivate us to achieve more, as an organisation and as individuals.

Of course, we need to remain grounded. We need to understand we still have challenges. Stopping illegal killing of birds in our country, reducing pollution particularly the use of heavy fuels and plastics, and using sustainable development to grow as a country are all dreams for the future.

As hard as it is sometimes to remember the successes, it can also be hard to find hope - but it's there! Some actions from the past few months have given me a lot of hope. We had two young boys urging their parents to do all they can to save flamingos that were in difficulty. A food chain declared it will not be giving out any plastic straws or cup covers unless asked for by the customer. A member of the public filmed the illegal killing of White Storks and accepted to testify in court. There was also the European Court of Justice ruling that has stopped finch trapping in Malta as well as Salina Nature Reserve officially being transferred into our management.

All of this gives me hope; the hope that one day our country will have more nature ambassadors and that biodiversity will be respected and appreciated. This is what we aim for at BirdLife Malta and you are all part of this too!

**Mark Sultana** CEO

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## Here's our autumn migration issue!

We're in September which brings with it the autumn bird migration, most notably of raptors, over the Maltese Islands. That is why on the front page of this issue you can see the Eurasian Hobby, a common autumn migrant and spectacular species. Sadly, autumn also brings with it the next hunting season which this year has already been marred with the massacre of 18 White Storks that visited Malta in August, and 15 known illegally shot protected birds so far. But not all is negative, on our back page we illustrate the beautiful story of the record number of Greater Flamingos we had at Għadira this summer.

On page 5 we take a closer look at the nature of Salina Nature Reserve at an exciting time with the site now officially handed over to BirdLife Malta by the Government to manage for the next five years. Turning over to pages 6 and 7 we have a different type of spread – an opinion piece penned by BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager Nik Barbara following the ECJ landmark judgement leading to the end of finch trapping in Malta and also the theme of our stand at the Birdfair this year. This issue's nature walk on the following two-page spread takes us to Gozo, on a 6km route through Nadur Valley, Mixta Cave overlooking Ramla l-Hamra, and San Blas Bay, whilst our research page focuses on our breeding birds project and the installation of nest boxes in several parts of Malta. Last but not least, on page 11 you can find out all about our latest events, campaigns and brand new merchandise. Happy reading!

### The Editor

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**Contact BirdLife Malta** 57/28 Marina Court, Abate Rigord Street, Ta' Xbiex XBX 1120, Malta, +356 21347645/6  
info@birdlifemalta.org, www.birdlifemalta.org

**Printing** Poulton's Print

**Front cover photo** Eurasian Hobby by Aron Tanti

Reg. Vol. Org. VO/0052

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### Autumn hunting season opens

The autumn hunting season has been opened again, following the illegal killing of White Storks in Malta. In August, an 18 strong flock stopped over the islands, however within hours they were already being targeted by hunters. Within 10 days the flock was reduced to one which eventually also disappeared. This shocking incident highlights the continued problem with illegal hunting in Malta and the need for stronger enforcement of the law, reiterated in a press conference held by BirdLife Malta calling for a delay in the season opening until mid-October. During the press conference BirdLife Malta also released figures showing that 2018 could be the worst year for the illegal killing of protected birds. Despite this call, which had the support of Malta's main eNGOs, the season still opened as scheduled on 1st September. During this year's autumn hunting season, we will once again be in the field for the annual Raptor Camp to monitor illegalities.

### A record of stranded Yelkouan Shearwaters

Following a call made to the public to look out for stranded Yelkouan Shearwater chicks during the fledging period, a record number of young birds were rescued. A total of nine juveniles were found between June and July, with eight successfully returned back to the wild. We would like to thank the public for all of their support.

### Risk of a new European Commission court case

Following the Ornis committee's recommendation for a trapping season to open for Golden Plover and Song Thrush, BirdLife Malta reacted by stating that if the Government were to approve a new season, it risks the European Commission launching a new court case against Malta. BirdLife Malta also reminded the other members of Ornis that the recent European Court of Justice ruling on finch trapping has direct implications on the trapping of other species.

### Breeding success for Kestrels

Earlier this year, two pairs of Common Kestrels bred in the Maltese Islands – one in Malta and another pair in



► Shot White Storks

Alice Tribe



► Downy Kestrel young

Denis Cachia

Gozo. By the end of June, both pairs' chicks successfully fledged from the nests after being observed learning how to feed on their own. Common Kestrels are scarce breeding birds in the Islands, yet a decrease in illegal hunting on the species in recent years is encouraging an increase in the frequency of breeding records.

### New air pollution measurements taken in Valletta

As part of our joint Together Against Air Pollution from Ships project with NABU, new air quality measurements on the arrival and departure of four cruise liners and several smaller ships were taken at the Grand Harbour. The exercise revealed high concentrations of ultrafine particles and NO<sub>2</sub> in the presence of cruise liners, passing by and berthing in the port. BirdLife Malta believes that air pollution is one of the major environmental issues in the world along with plastic use and direct wildlife crime and has therefore called on the Government to address air pollution from ships in Malta appropriately.

WORDS **Jessica Irwin** BirdLife Malta Communications Officer

### Malta loses the the founding father of modern conservation



Joe Sultana, considered as Malta's foremost ornithologist, conservationist and avifauna expert, died on 11th September 2018 at the age of 78. Joe was instrumental in building the organisation we form part of today having been involved since its inception in 1962. Having served as Secretary General and then President of the Malta Ornithological Society (MOS) which later became BirdLife Malta, his energy and leadership led to the setting up of Malta's first nature reserves managed by BirdLife Malta. He also played a crucial role in the enactment of several environmental and bird protection laws and also in the designation of protected areas. Apart from serving in several local and international roles and positions, Joe was also an accomplished writer and author. During his lifetime he was honoured with a number of local and international awards. Joe was married to Lucy and they have two children: Mark, who is BirdLife Malta's current CEO, and Ruth. Although Joe is not with us anymore, his legacy will live on. Many will continue to be inspired by what he stood for, whilst others will take up his efforts to continue what he fought for through his lifetime.



# Eurasian Hobby



**Maltese Name:** Seġer Tal-Hannieqa

**Scientific Name:** *Falco subbuteo*

**Length:** 29-35 cm

**Wingspan:** 70-84 cm

**Conservation Status:** Least Concern (IUCN). Despite the fact that population trend appears to be decreasing, the decline is not believed to be sufficiently rapid to approach the vulnerability thresholds

**Local Status:** Fairly common spring migrant and common autumn migrant

**Call:** A scolding 'Kew-kew-kew-kew-....'

**Behaviour:** Very fast and agile flier

**Habitat:** Mostly found in woodlands, especially where these are interspersed with clearings and fields



A visit to Buskett woodland in September or early October is the best time to observe Hobbies in the Maltese Islands. This species mainly hunts over the woodland and is extremely agile in flight, either hunting leisurely on large flying insects like dragonflies, or in dashing pursuit of small birds like swallows and even swifts. At Buskett especially on calm days they are frequently seen hunting flying bats at dusk, with some days up to twenty or more birds seen hunting together!

The Eurasian Hobby is a medium-sized falcon with long pointed wings and a square cut tail. Adults are a bluish-slate grey on the upperparts, with rufous thighs and under tail coverts, underparts boldly streaked, and prominent white cheeks. Sexes look alike but males are slimmer in silhouette than females, with narrower wings and slimmer body. Juveniles are browner above, with pale edges to feathers involving a scaly effect. Undertail coverts and thighs are buff instead of rusty-red. When distant or seen in poor light, the Eurasian Hobby can often be confused with other small falcons like the Eleonora's and Red-footed.

The species can be found all over the Palearctic, from Europe to Japan where it breeds mainly in other large bird nests (mainly crows) in squirrel dreys, in tree clumps or open woodland. Breeding season begins in late May in the south to late June in the north, with two to three eggs usually laid after a 28-day incubation period. The female broods the young for the first week, feeding them on prey brought by the male before the young begin to feather in 2-3 weeks, and then fly at 28-32 days. The young continue to be dependent for several weeks after they leave the nest.

They migrate to sub-Saharan Africa (Eastern birds winter in South and Southeast Asia) in autumn where they spend the winter, returning to Europe in April-May. In Malta all birds of prey including the Eurasian Hobby are protected by law but some are still illegally shot at and hunted for stuffed bird collections. BirdLife Malta works hard to tackle illegal activities and conserve amazing species of wild bird, just like the Eurasian Hobby!

**WORDS Raymond Galea** Chairman of The Malta Rarities and Records Committee



### Common Shelduck Kuluvert tas-Salib *Tadorna tadorna*

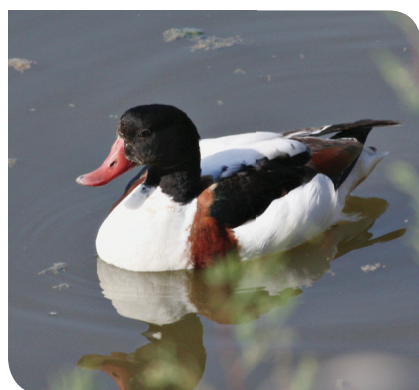
One of the regular duck species that occur in Malta, though never in large numbers, is the Common Shelduck: a big white beauty with dark bands and stripes on wing and breast. Birdwatchers often see them flying at sea on migration but Shelducks are really birds of shallow waters, especially lakes. They are dabblers, feeding by up-ending and stretching their neck to get at the bottom vegetation, so deep water is little use for them except to swim in! Since we don't have many lakes in Malta, a place like Salina is a godsend for this species, so one or two Shelducks often turn up there for a rest and maybe a soggy veggie snack. Shelducks are protected but many get shot all the same. With Salina now under full BirdLife Malta management, the site should become another safe haven for Shelducks and the rest of nature.

### Sea Samphire Bużbież il-Baħar *Crithmum maritimum*

One of our coastal plants is the Sea Samphire. It is quite common in some areas, including Salina, where it can grow thick on sandy or stony slopes. Like many of its relatives in the carrot family, the Sea Samphire's flowers grow in large disc- or ball-shaped flowerheads, which it produces in profusion. Despite this, many people don't notice it, probably because the flowers are pale greenish yellow – not exactly psychedelic! But they do smell nice and insects visit it in droves. The Sea Samphire's forte is its ability to survive regular bashings of sea spray, sandblasting winds that would corrode the most robust metalware, scorching summer sun, and blistering hot sand. You have to hand it to these plants: they make us humans look like a bunch of wimps!

### Great Cormorant Margun *Phalacrocorax carbo*

It's not your average garden visitor but for people who live, work, or watch birds close to the sea, the Great Cormorant is a frequent sight, though rarely actually common around Malta. A sturdy large waterbird, sleek and muscular, with iridescent black plumage and piercing green eyes, the Cormorant is a stunning sight. These birds love shallow bodies of water, so Salina is no stranger to this species. It's hard not be amazed when you see one of these birds gliding through the water, arching its snake-like neck before diving for a fish. The



Victor Falzon

▶ Common Shelduck



Victor Falzon

▶ Sea Samphire



Aron Tanti

▶ Great Cormorant

## Nature at our reserves *Salina*

*For this issue of Bird's Eye View, we will be exploring the fascinating flora and fauna that can be found at Salina Nature Reserve. This comes at an exciting time with the site now under the official management of BirdLife Malta following a handover ceremony in August.*

Victor Falzon



▶ Salina

Cormorant's pièce de résistance, however, is its habit of sitting with its broad wings spread open, presumably to dry. When one strikes this pose right on top of the the stone cross in the middle of Salina, it certainly steals the show.

WORDS **Victor Falzon** Naturalist & BirdLife Malta Field Teacher



# PERSEVERANCE

## *A five-year all-fronts battle*

The 21st June 2018 shall forever mark an achievement for BirdLife Malta; one that has come a long way to define the manner we strive for a principle, and a ray of hope that environmental justice, if sought intelligently, can give us some respite from the environmental slaughter that results from political ploys of successive governments in pursuit of votes from trappers and hunters. Way back in 2003, most of us clenched on that EU referendum vote as a matter of hope that finally somehow our environment would take priority. But even now that Malta is an EU member state, justice still does not come that quickly or that easily. Over the years we've seen how unsustainable spring hunting survived the years and finch trapping made a daunting comeback after being banned in 2009. Derogations from the European Birds Directive, which make things like trapping and spring hunting possible, have become the bane of the conservation of wild birds in our country and elsewhere.

The finch trapping case started off way back in 2013. The current government elected on a wave of popular vote including that of the trapping community, obliged to have finch trapping return. The previous government saw it being outlawed in agreement with EU accession treaties, while the current government saw it worth risking throwing the derogation card on the table – also termed as the famous 'loophole'.

As soon as the matter was placed on the agenda of the infamous Ornis Committee, we started sifting through the nitty gritty of the derogation conditions that would determine if this practice was eligible. For it to be applied correctly, a derogation needs to satisfy many criteria – from ensuring that a season is strictly supervised, to ensuring that there is actually a valid justification for culling birds and that no other alternative to such culling exists. Indeed, all the signs were clear that such justifications were weak. All finches are also protected by EU law, unlike the case for Golden Plover and Song Thrush, for which a trapping season seems somehow more justifiable for these huntable species.

Once we established in principle that this derogation could not be well justified, it was then a matter of ensuring the European Commission was in line with such reasoning and had the necessary evidence for a strong court case. Our work took us to the markets and local pet shops to uncover the trade in wild finches, to the field to witness the plight of our fauna at the mercy of traps and the incapability of matching enforcement to circa 8,000 active trapping sites, and to the air to record and monitor the visible scar such trapping sites cause to our Natura 2000 sites. Our work took us to Brussels to the Commission's Environment Directorate offices to explain the evidence we collated over the years. Ultimately we even ended up at the European Parliament in Strasbourg to mount



BirdLife Malta

► Keep out sign



BirdLife Malta

► Linnet in a cage



# CE PAID OFF!

## *to end legal finch trapping*

enough political pressure through supportive Members of the European Parliament that understood and befriended our cause from across the political spectrum.

At the end of it, this time round it wasn't just a close shave of a result as it was with the ECJ spring hunting sentence of 2009. The sentence on finch trapping has ramifications for the trapping of Golden Plover and Song Thrush which will still be permitted this year, and will also serve as case law to confront other unsustainable trapping practices such as in Spain and France. BirdLife Malta has learned and solidified its conservation, policy and campaigning work over the years and continues working with its BirdLife partners in Europe to achieve more.

Our next goal is securing an end to unsustainable trapping of birds. From the 20th October, thousands of nets will still become active for Song Thrush and Golden Plover – some will invariably still target finches – while others will continue causing damage to our Natura 2000 sites. Our work will continue, with your support, with the help of our BirdLife partners, as well as thanks to international initiatives such as the OAK Foundation who are funding this work in Malta, Cyprus and Italy.

WORDS **Nicholas Barbara** BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager



BirdLife Malta

► Finch trapping in the north of Malta

## We did it!



Nathaniel Attard

► Birdfair 2018

The European Court of Justice judgement was also the theme we chose for our stand at this year's Birdfair at Rutland Water Nature Reserve. With the words 'We did it!' the main banner adorning our stand portrayed a number of finches flying free out of their trapping cages. Hundreds of people, who visited our stand to donate money or become members, asked about the history of finch trapping in Malta and were curious to know what the next steps will be after this landmark judgement.

The UK Birdfair is the world's largest wildlife event and so we also took the opportunity to make sure that this amazing news took centre stage during Chris Packham's presentation and in the fair's main information area where footage related to our campaign against finch trapping was looped on the big screen for all to see!

It was great to see so many people supporting our work and sharing this victory with us!

BirdLife Malta would like to thank everyone who visited our stand, donated or became a member. A big thank you must also go to the The Alfred Mizzi Foundation for its financial support towards our participation in this year's edition of the fair.





# From the valley to the sea

## EXPLORING GOZO'S RICH NATURE

*In this Gozitan tour, you will be treated to a diverse natural scenery and wildlife...from the lush valley of Nadur to spectacular views at Tal-Mixta Cave and finishing at San Blas Bay where you can discover the marine wildlife. The route is approximately 6km long and it will take you from 2-3 hours to complete.*



## Start at Nadur main road

Head north on the main road leaving town and follow the signs towards Ramla Bay. On your left you will be able to see the beautiful Ramla Valley that separates Nadur and Xagħra and on your right you will have graphic buildings. Thirty minutes into this walk, there is a viewpoint where you can relax, have a snack and enjoy the pristine countryside of Gozo and the view of Ramla l-Ħamra Bay. You will see a big sign on your right that directs you into the rural road of Triq ta' Xurdin. Take that road and then take the first cement road on your left and then the first again. You will then have to take a right towards the sign indicating Tal-Mixta Cave. Along this path, you will be able to see - and hear the distinct call of - the smallest breeding bird in Malta, the Zitting Cisticola. On your left, you will enjoy the coastal view and rolling hills.

## Tal-Mixta Cave

Keep following the path and you will see a narrow rock-hewn passage and some steps on your left that lead to the cave. This cave was constructed as a lookout under the rule of the Knights of St. John in 1733 after an attack by Muslim vessels in Ramla Bay and it offered shelter as it could not be seen from open seas. Here, you will be welcomed with spectacular views of Ramla Bay, a relatively undeveloped beach with a wide stretch of red sand. You can relax, enjoy the view and have a lookout to see Barn Swallows flying rapidly above, a very common migrant and scarce breeder in the Maltese Islands. You can also take the opportunity to capture a stunning silhouette photo!

## San Blas Bay

When you leave the cave, retrace your steps until you reach a crossroad and then take a left. After a while, take the road on the right and then the first road on the left. You will see the beautiful view of the largely untouched red sandy bay and the Wied ta' San Blas valley on your right. You will then see a narrow path to take on your right towards San Blas Bay. This path is steep but very rewarding as you will be surrounded by fields and wild plants. You should also look around to spot the Sardinian Warbler, the most widespread breeding bird in Malta after the Spanish Sparrow. When you reach the bay, you will enjoy the views of the towering cliffs and realise that it is quite a peaceful and secluded beach. This area is also great for snorkelling as it is very shallow and clear! Have a dip to freshen up and see marine animals such as the Mediterranean Shore Crab, the Saddled Seabream and the colourful Ornate Wrasse. After swimming and relaxing at the bay, you can start your way back by following the straight main path. Climbing back up the hill requires some stamina as it is very steep but being surrounded by the valley and wildlife certainly makes up for it! Notice the maquis vegetation as well as trees such as the Carob. Don't forget to keep your eyes open for dragonflies, lizards and if you are lucky, even chameleons! When you reach the end of the path, you will find the bus stop where you can make your way back or explore more of this amazing island.

WORDS **Eleni Karatzia** Communications & Events Assistant

## HOW TO GET THERE

By bus:

- Mġarr Harbour in Gozo to Hanaq bus stop in Nadur: 322
- San Blas Bay to Mġarr Harbour: 303 towards Vapur

*The transport will cost approximately €9 per person including the Gozo ferry fee, without car.*

<https://www.publictransport.com.mt/en/routes-timetables>



Map Kinga Kupska



► Barn Swallow

BirdLife Malta



► Mediterranean Shore Crab

Eleni Karatzia



► Maltese Wall Lizard

Kinga Kupska



► Broad Scarlet Dragonfly

Kinga Kupska



# Breeding birds in Malta...our natural heritage

*As a small, densely populated island, Malta is home to 18 wild bird species regularly breeding, of which 11 are sedentary year-round residents, such as the Blue Rock Thrush, Cetti's Warbler and Spanish Sparrow. Other species such as the Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt and Common Swift breed in Malta during the summer months. In addition, 27 species of wild birds are irregular or occasional visitors, nesting in different parts of the Maltese Islands throughout the year.*



Janina Laurent

With the aim to provide better breeding conditions for these species, we have developed guidelines for building nest boxes and to raise awareness with the general public as part of an initiative implemented by our conservation team. During the year, we also organise different activities to increase knowledge of current breeding species in Malta, provide better conditions by installing nest boxes and thereby increase breeding numbers of wild birds in the future, with a focus on Spotted Flycatchers, Tree Sparrows, Collared Doves, Barn Swallows, Common Swifts, and Common Kestrels.

*Our nest boxes were tailor-made to fit the specific needs for each species and to maximise potential success of breeding in the upcoming years*

► Installation of nest boxes for swifts at the Mosta Bridge



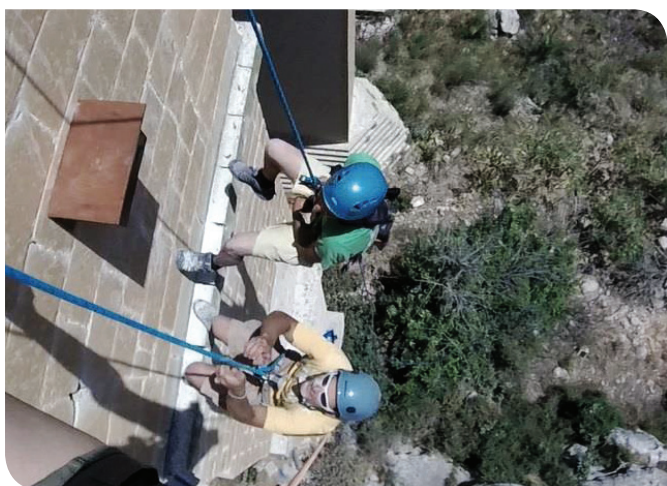
Noel Camilleri

One of the first steps of the project, which is funded under the Conservation of Wild Birds Funding Scheme, is the installation of these specially-designed nest boxes in places where these species are already comfortable and have been sighted by birders or members of the public as well as locations where they were previously not present. Our nest boxes were tailor-made to fit the specific needs for each species and to maximise potential success of breeding in the upcoming years.

In early June, 10 swift nest boxes were installed below the bridge crossing over Mosta's Wied il-Ghasel, which is a location known for its numerous sightings. These boxes will likely only be visited at the end of next spring when the swifts return from Africa to breed. Two Spotted Flycatcher boxes were also installed in the gardens of Villa Frère in Pietà at the end of August. As a source of vegetation in a developed area, Villa Frère is regularly visited by a variety of birds, making it a great location to encourage breeding birds. The national bird of Malta – il-Merill – was witnessed visiting Villa Frère regularly during this year!

Eventually, more nest boxes will be installed across the country, with an emphasis on getting the general public involved in the project to give a sense of ownership and responsibility of breeding birds to the public. Events and workshops to interact with the public, as well as to increase recording of breeding efforts, and ringing of birds to follow the evolution of bird populations in Malta will be organised all around the year. We're looking forward to seeing some successful results and can't wait to share them with you!

WORDS **Naomi Sadoff** BirdLife Malta Conservation Assistant



Janina Laurent

► Installation of nest boxes for swifts at the Mosta Bridge



## Upcoming Events

### Science in the City

Friday 28 September

18:00-00:00 | Valletta

We are going to be participating in this year's Science in the City event - Malta's largest science and arts festival. Children will become scientists with our educational games and activities focused on our LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija and Together against Air Pollution from Ships projects – so come along and join the fun!

### EuroBirdwatch18

Saturday 6 October and Sunday 7 October

14:00-18:00 | Buskett

Join us at Buskett for the 25th anniversary of the BirdLife Partnership's largest event. During this period, millions of birds are migrating from Europe to Africa to spend the winter there. Join us and observe migratory birds and learn how important it is to protect their habitats, breeding sites, stopover areas, and flyways.

### Reserves Open Day

Sunday 28 October

10:00-16:00 | Għadira and Foresta 2000

Our nature reserves are opening again for the public! We are organising a fun-filled day to enjoy the nature and wildlife at two of our reserves. Come to Għadira to see amazing bird species and participate in some great activities held by our education team at Foresta 2000!

### BirdLife Malta has an online shop!

Visit our online shop where you can find pin badges, magnets, keychains, notebooks, books and our #BirdHero adoption packs. Mix and match, purchase a gift for a loved one, and give something back to nature at the same time! We also accept big orders for parties, weddings or any other special occasion. Just get in touch.

### Birds of Malta: our brand new memory game launched

We've just launched our new memory game on Indiegogo! 'Birds of Malta' is a simple and classic game which includes 25 species of bird that were recorded breeding in the Maltese Islands throughout the years. All the profits from this game will support our vital conservation work. We're aiming to raise \$5,000 pre-selling the game at the price of \$7 instead of \$15. If we don't reach our target for production, all money will be refunded.



## Past Events



► BirdLife Malta AGM

Eleni Karatzia



► LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija Shearwater Boat Trips

Eleni Karatzia



► Pirate Day at Simar

Kinga Kupska

### We've published another book!

*Dragonflies and Damselflies of the Maltese Islands* takes a look at each of the 19 species of dragonflies and damselflies recorded in Malta and Gozo with fabulous photos and illustrations! Authored by former Managing Warden at Għadira Nature Reserve, Charles Gauci, this new book has been published and designed for BirdLife Malta by MediaToday and is available for purchase from our offices at the price of €20.



### Want to help us continue our work?

**Join:** [www.birdlifemalta.org/become-member](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/become-member)

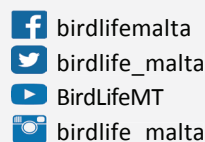
**Donate:** [www.birdlifemalta.org/donate](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/donate)

### Want to join an event?

**More details:** [www.birdlifemalta.org/events](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/events)

**Email:** [events@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:events@birdlifemalta.org)

**Call:** +356 2134 7646



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Ghadira Nature Reserve was a hive of activity in August when it became a temporary home to an astonishing 14 Greater Flamingos. The resident juvenile that has been at the reserve since last year was joined by 13 more of its kind throughout the month with some arriving in small flocks and others rescued by our dedicated conservation team. These fabulous flamingos sparked such enthusiasm with the public that we held four open days at the reserve so people could come and enjoy this rare spectacle first-hand. We really enjoyed welcoming everyone at Ghadira and were delighted to see such a positive response to these special guests!