

# Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

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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

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## Let's learn from COVID-19

Surreal! That is how I have felt in the first weeks of understanding how COVID-19 is changing the way we have to cope with life. To be honest, once we decided to close the office with most staff either working from home or are posted in nature reserves or in the countryside I had a few days of panic.

We are finding ways to keep planning how to keep everyone involved, communicating and following what we planned to do as much as possible. Then we realised there was a lot of work we always put on the shelf that we could start working on. Then I realised that life was moving along slower, more peacefully, even more effective at times.

Seems like we really needed to slow down our way of living. Of course, the illness and drastic effects that COVID-19 will bring to the world are ones we all wish never happened but we must admit that this situation we are in gives us time to understand better how we can achieve better quality of life. I am hoping that after this ordeal we shy away from nationalism and understand we are one world. I am hoping that the human approach to everything re-establishes itself in our daily operations.

With regards to dear mother nature it seems it is getting a well-deserved breather right now. Venice clearing canals, China seeing blue skies and in Malta air pollution going down by 70% are just an indication of how we have pushed our earth to its limits and we were killing it... hence killing ourselves.

While wishing you all good health and safety I augur that the world learns from this ordeal and we owe it to those who by the end of the COVID-19 pandemic would not be with us.

**Mark Sultana**  
CEO







# Cattle Egret

**Maltese name:** Agrett tal-Bhejjem

**Scientific name:** *Bubulcus ibis*

**Length:** 46-56cm

**Wingspan:** 88-96cm

**Conservation Status:** The International Union for Conservation of Nature lists this species as of "least concern" worldwide

**Local Status:** Formerly considered a vagrant. Since the last ten years, as a result of birds escaping or being released from the bird park at Burmarrad, a small feral population seems to have established itself at the periphery of the same park. Small numbers are regularly seen at Salina and the surrounding area throughout the year. In addition sightings of genuine wild birds are, nowadays, not rare, undoubtedly as a result of the expansion this species has been enjoying in its southern European range

**Call:** Rarely vocal outside breeding colonies. In flight it may utter a monosyllabic soft croak

**Behaviour:** Although locally it is not infrequent to see solitary birds, Cattle Egrets are generally seen in flocks, whether on migration, at breeding colonies as well as nonbreeding roosts. They like to associate with cattle and other herbivores (hence its common English and Maltese names) where they feed on ticks parasitizing the herbivores but mostly on insects disturbed by the grazing cattle

**Habitat:** Unlike other herons and egrets, Cattle Egrets are much less often seen feeding at wetlands. Their preferred habitat consists of grassy plains and fields where they forage for insects

Compared to other egrets and herons, the Cattle Egret is noticeably smaller and stockier. Its legs are relatively short as is its rather thick neck. It has a straight, dagger-like bill which is shorter and thicker than in other egrets and herons. Both bill and legs are yellow in colour (darker in juveniles). Legs of adult bird may also be dark outside the breeding season. The plumage is all white, but in the breeding season the head, chest and back are adorned with golden plumes.

The Cattle Egret is a cosmopolitan species found in the tropics, subtropics, and warm-temperate zones. It nests in colonies, usually in large trees in rivers and other wetlands. Colonies are often large and are also often found in shared colonies with other heron/egret species. It is a short-distance migrant and outside the breeding

season forms large roosts in trees. The Cattle Egret represents one of the great avian success stories due to its rapid, remarkable range expansion. In the late nineteenth century it spread from Africa to South America, reaching North America in the early 1950s. More recently it has also colonized the Australasian region. Its European range is also expanding.

In Europe the Cattle Egret is protected by the EU Birds Directive and three other international agreements. Over 300 Natura 2000 sites are designated for this species.

**WORDS** Charles Gauci BirdLife Malta bird ringer and former Nature Reserves Managing Warden

### Spring hunting season opens despite COVID-19 crisis

Despite the COVID-19 crisis, and in spite of an unprecedented unified call by BirdLife Malta, BirdLife International CEO Patricia Zurita, 10 eNGOs, Alternattiva Demokratika and the independent media, the Government in the most irresponsible manner forged ahead and opened this year's spring hunting season for Quail between the 10 and 30 April following a recommendation by the ORNIS Committee. The decision left everyone in awe since while all the population was being asked to stay indoors and avoid unnecessary outdoor activities, the Government was allowing the privileged hunting lobby's members to roam the countryside and shoot birds. The biggest issue was that with the country's resources shifted to manage the Coronavirus pandemic—including ALE police—it remained to be seen how the Government would be ensuring that the enforcement requirements of the derogation to have 7 police officers for every 1,000 hunters in the field would be met. Apart from this BirdLife Malta argued that the season would once again be a smokescreen for hunters to shoot at the protected Turtle-dove due to the fact that the season's dates coincided with the peak migration of this vulnerable bird, leading to another massacre of protected birds.

### BirdLife Malta takes Government to Court



► BirdLife Malta officials briefing the press following the presentation of the judicial protest

BirdLife Malta filed a judicial protest against the Prime Minister's decision to place the hunting regulator under Gozo Minister Clint Camilleri.

Apart from being a vote-catching decision, moving the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) under the Gozo Ministry is also illegal. The Environment Minister is the only minister who is legally recognised to act in terms of Malta's environmental laws. This means that any legal notice or appointment made by the Gozo Minister in this regard would be in breach of the law. Whilst challenging the legality of the decision in court and asking for it to be revoked, BirdLife Malta made it clear that as stipulated by law we will not engage with Minister Camilleri in regard to any issue related to hunting and trapping, and will only be recognising and communicating with Environment Minister Aaron Farrugia. Whilst hoping that Minister Farrugia is not used as a rubber stamp for Minister Camilleri's decisions in this regard, we also deem any actions of WBRU and the Ornithology Committee as illegitimate. This legal uncertainty on how hunting and trapping shall be regulated means that the future of conservation of wild birds in Malta remains in limbo.

### 2019 second-worst year in the past seven for illegalities

The 2019 autumn hunting and trapping seasons came to a close in January. During the five months of the hunting season BirdLife Malta and police recovered a total of 53 known illegally shot protected birds. These birds represent only a fraction of the total number of protected birds illegally shot down during any hunting season since many others are never found or end up in taxidermy collections. Overall, in 2019 a total of 99 illegal hunting casualties

were retrieved, making 2019 the second worst in the past seven for illegal hunting. This was aggravated by a number of factors such as a failed game reporting system, the unregulated use of electronic bird callers, enforcement by ALE and WBRU at its lowest-ever capacity and increasing uncertainty following the illegal ministerial move in the hunting portfolio under Gozo Minister Clint Camilleri.



► Protected Grey Heron shot down during the last autumn hunting season

### Strong response to #NoMoreCallers campaign

In the last month of 2019 BirdLife Malta launched its #NoMoreCallers public campaign in a bid to address the widespread illegal use of electronic bird callers. Following an analysis of the situation, action will be taken in this regard with BirdLife Malta compiling all the information gathered into a report to be sent to the European Commission. In a month and a half we received nearly 400 reports from the public, an average of eight a day. Uncontrolled trapping of song birds continues to this day in spite of the fact that this is illegal following the landmark ECJ judgement delivered two years ago. This transformed the last trapping season into yet another smokescreen for the illegal trapping of song birds and puts Malta at risk of facing an escalation of the open Infringement Proceedings which the European Union has already put in place over the Song Thrush and Golden Plover trapping derogation.

### Trapper threatens to kill BirdLife Malta officer, fined €20!

In November last year, BirdLife Malta Conservation Officer Alice Tribe came across an incident of illegal finch trapping at Marfa Ridge. While two ALE police officers were inspecting the property, a trapper approached the BirdLife Malta officer and started shouting verbal abuse, at one point even threatening to kill her. Having the evidence recorded on the video, BirdLife Malta filed a report regarding the verbal abuse at Mellieħa Police Station. Following a very short session in front of Magistrate Charmaine Galea after being arraigned in court, the trapper was fined a meagre €20. The perpetrator admitted to the charges of verbal abuse but the police did not even request that the video evidence be played in court.

### Illegal trapping site in Kalkara

In February, BirdLife Malta reported an illegal trapping site at Fort Ricasoli in Kalkara to the ALE police unit. During their site inspection, the ALE confiscated unattended nets, as well as 23 protected birds that were found kept in captivity.



► The illegally trapped protected birds found at government-owned Fort Ricasoli

During the site inspection, the ALE were assisted by ERA officers as nobody from WBRU was able to attend. The confiscated species included Robin, Dunnock, Short-toed Lark, Tree Pipit, Common Chaffinch and Linnet. As they were deemed to be non-captive bred birds, and therefore taken wrongly from the wild, they were seen by the government veterinarian to assess their health. Whilst some of the birds were not in the best condition, all birds were given the go-ahead for release, in order to not stress them any further. BirdLife Malta ringed all the birds before releasing them at Ghadira Nature Reserve. The case is still under investigation.

### Hands off referenda!

In February, the hunting lobby announced it had written to the President of Malta, demanding amendments to the Referenda Act as part of an ongoing public consultation about the reform of the Constitution. The hunting lobby wants the President to abolish the citizens' right to invoke an abrogative referendum under the excuse of "protecting the legal rights, interests, practices, traditions and privileges of minority groups" and their line of thought is supported by a June 2014 petition signed by 104,000 people and presented to Parliament six years ago. In response to this, 13 civil society NGOs led by BirdLife Malta called upon the President of Malta, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet of Ministers to keep the country's strong democratic mechanisms intact and to ensure that Malta's legislation is not in any way tampered with to appease this undemocratic request. We declared that the right of voters to demand a referendum – one of the most democratic tools in any country, including Malta – should not be hindered in any form of way. The proposal by the hunting lobby to curtail this power is undemocratic and impinges negatively on citizens' rights in a democratic society.

### We have saved Dwejra!

The Court of Appeal upheld the arguments of a coalition of 15 NGOs and the general public to save Dwejra from the threat of further development. The appeal was filed by BirdLife Malta and the University's Institute of Space Sciences and Astronomy (ISSA) as registered objectors. We challenged the decision of the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal (EPRT) to grant the permit for the extension of a restaurant in the area, which has now been revoked. Saving Dwejra's night sky and habitat, which is home to an important colony of Scopoli's Shearwaters, was made possible thanks to all of the people who donated to our crowdfunding campaign which raised €3,000 in less than two days.

### Shore-to-ship power project welcomed

In an official reaction to the announcement of the Grand Harbour Clean Air Project by the Government, BirdLife Malta welcomed the shore-to-ship power project as one which rewards our advocacy efforts in this regard. We have been for the past years leading an awareness campaign calling for the reduction of air pollution generated by cruise ships. We now look forward to the Maltese Government going a step further to declare Malta's support for the establishment of an Emission Control Area (ECA) in the Mediterranean, which is the long-term goal of our "Together against Air Pollution from Ships" project.

### New BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme committee

A new committee for the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme has been elected, with BirdLife Malta Council member and bird ringer



John Borg

#### ► The BirdLife Malta ringing group

Nicholas Galea at the helm as its new head. The bird ringing group committee, which led the annual ringers meeting at Salina at the end of January, also includes Alice Tribe, Martin Austad, Nicholas Barbara, Raymond Galea and Timmy Micallef as members. The BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme is the official registered EURING partner for Malta. During their annual meeting, BirdLife Malta licensed ringers and trainees discussed various subjects related to bird ringing in Malta. A summary of the data collected by bird ringers in 2019 was also presented. The total number of birds ringed in 2019 was that of 19,406 of 114 species. This was higher than the average yearly total of circa 15,000.

### Malta Breeding Bird Atlas 2018

BirdLife Malta is the main scientific contributor to the latest issue of the Malta Breeding Bird Atlas published by the Environment Ministry which portrays the results of breeding bird surveys undertaken during 2017/2018. Though the Maltese Islands are well inhabited and impacted by human activity we still nurture an interesting range of avifauna with 29 regularly breeding species and a further 19 irregularly breeding birds. We thank Epsilon Malta Limited and Nature Conservation Consultants who with the support of the Ministry entrusted our birding community with such an important task which will help shape future policies and decisions in protecting our limited wildlife. This report and scientific study was also instrumental for the Maltese Government's obligations in submitting reports under Article 12.

### Destiny's music video recorded at Ghadira

We're proud to have hosted X Factor Malta winner Destiny Chukunyere at our Ghadira Nature Reserve earlier in March for the filming of part of the music video of her song All of my Love. She would have represented Malta in this year's Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam with this song. Sadly, however, this was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a post on social media Destiny thanked BirdLife Malta for allowing her to record part of her video at Ghadira and said she's



Nathaniel Attard

#### ► Destiny at Ghadira Nature Reserve

extremely happy to have done this at one of our beautiful reserves. She also delivered an inspiring message to her followers, stating that nature is important for everyone and calling on them to enjoy, protect and love it!

WORDS **Maria Dyrdenkova** BirdLife Malta Communications Assistant



# Nature at our reserves Simar



Opening hours  
**September to May**  
**Tuesday & Friday 2pm-6pm**  
**Sunday 10am-4pm**  
Entrance free (donations welcome!)  
More info at <http://bit.ly/SimarNatureReserve>

Currently closed due to COVID-19!



### Alexanders *Karfus il-Ħmir* *Smyrnium olusatrum*

Each season has its flowers, but for sheer variety of species spring wins hands down. One plant that flowers early on in the season is the Alexanders. One of the carrot family, it typically produces flowers in nice umbrella-shaped bunches. Its flowers are not very showy, being a rather greenish yellow, though several hover-flies, bees, wasps and beetles love them well enough. Its leaves look rather like parsley leaves, hence the Maltese name *Karfus il-Ħmir* for this species (no idea where the donkeys come in, though!). The plant is neither rare nor particular about its habitat, growing just as happily on a pile of construction debris as in a lush valley. Sadly, its presence at the side of country lanes all too often dooms it to herbicide oblivion. At Simar, of course, all plants are treated with respect, and the Alexanders growing along the nature trail are left to flower and provide food for pollinators.



Victor Falzon

► Alexanders

### Night Heron *Kwakka* *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Hérons are long-legged birds of marsh and shore. We get six species of herons migrating regularly over Malta (plus some rarer ones), sometimes in nice big flocks. One of these is the Night Heron, so called because it often flies by night, resting in large trees by day. To keep the flock together while flying in the dark, the birds often emit short croaky calls (known as contact calls), which is what gave this bird its Maltese name *Kwakka*. Spring is a good time to watch out for Night Herons as they migrate to their breeding grounds in mainland Europe. Like all herons, the night heron is protected but many still get shot by hunters. The thick tamarisk and olive groves at Simar provide these birds with good shelter where to rest without disturbance. A quiet stint in the birdwatching hide may regale you with one of these secretive birds walking down to the water's edge for a fishy snack.



Victor Falzon

► Night Herons

### White-spotted Barbary Beetle

Busuf tat-Tikek Bojod *Oxythyrea funesta*

Now that spring is under way, the White-spotted Barbary Beetle is showing up on crown daisies, boar thistles and other flowers. This delightful creature is quite the hippie of the insect world, spending its adult life sucking up flower power and championing free love. And it's hairy! These beetles don't just visit a flower, they practically belly-flop into the middle of it, getting a good dusting of pollen on their hairy coat as they feed on the scented goodness. After feeding themselves almost comatose they often stay put on the flower, motionless and presumably asleep. But the males are also on the look-out for females, with whom they mate half buried among the stamens and the pollen. But despite their bulky appearance, Barbary Beetles fly quite well, visiting plenty of flowers and doing their bit as pollinators.



Desirée Falzon

► White-spotted Barbary Beetle

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



# Out-of-classroom experiences at the nature reserves

“Are there crocodiles here?” “Are there big snakes?” Twenty-odd young, eager and slightly horrified faces await the announcement that they are about to step into a nature melodrama documentary scene just like on TV. A class of children has just arrived at one of the BirdLife Malta-run nature reserves and descends on the field teacher who will spend the next three hours sharing nature’s secrets with the young minds.

At BirdLife’s nature reserves students are taken on a journey away from the sensationalised picture of nature painted by programmes about the ugliest or most predatory animal and into the oases hosted by these special habitats. While today’s urban lifestyle creates a void in children’s real experience of nature, the void is often filled by documentaries that resort to shock tactics to engage children in ‘screened’ nature. Redirecting the excitement towards the smaller scale of Maltese nature is the challenge faced by our nature reserves field guides – all teachers by profession and passionate about nature themselves.

Why do schools spend precious syllabus time outdoors at nature reserves? BirdLife has worked closely with the Education Directorate since the 1980s to provide

experiences for students that illustrate the syllabus through nature directly. The educational potential of the nature reserves was recognised when the first state teacher was posted at Ghadira

Nature Reserve in 1986. Today three teachers work on BirdLife’s education programme in collaboration with the Directorate, leading a total of 40 to 150 students a day at different reserves on most days during the scholastic year. Collaboration between the Directorate’s Education Officers and the field teachers has led to a programme of syllabus-related visits with accompanying worksheets, largely focused on Social Studies, Science and Biology and spanning from Year 3 to Year 11.

At Ghadira and Simar, students experience a wetland habitat. The Visitor Centre of both reserves is a new experience for most children who are fascinated by the view of the lake. A few minutes of patience at the window at Simar will often reveal a Moorhen striding out onto the water’s edge from its reed-covered

hideout. During the spring migration Swallows swoop down to take a swipe-drink from the water’s surface. In winter, a stately Common Coot flashes its white-fronted head as it swims between



► Field teacher Jason Aloisio counting bird calls with students along the Simar footpath



► Field teacher Victor Falzon showing children how to use a field guide for plants at Ghadira

Desirée Falzon

San Anton Junior School





islands to a chorus of “cute coot!” from admiring children. These experiences bring the school syllabus to life as students understand the link between habitats and inhabitants. Unlike TV documentaries, the drama extends through break time while children sit on mats and eat surrounded by trees, fresh air and the calls of the Sardinian and Cetti’s Warblers.

The Black-necked Grebe at Għadira gives students a live show of two of the seven vital functions, as it stays underwater for an average of 20 seconds, chasing after Malta’s national fish – the killifish. Students fill in their worksheet with ‘respiration’ and ‘nutrition’ after the grebe resurfaces with its prey. Along the footpath food chains come to life in the wintering Chiffchaffs and resident chameleons who pick off insects from among the tamarisk branches. The warden supports the field teacher in creating different habitats which showcase action for biodiversity. Many students will see our native Painted Frog for the first time in their life in the freshwater pond. In another purpose-built habitat, children peek at hibernating bees sleeping off the winter in their bug hotel.

At Foresta 2000 the experience follows the same pattern but here nature is more unpredictable. Students stare fascinated at a Lobed Argiope catching bees feeding on the Sticky Fleabane just



► Chameleons at Foresta 2000 are a natural magnet for student curiosity



► Field teacher Desirée Falzon showing students the lie of the land at Foresta 2000

Desirée Falzon

Blata l-Bajda Middle School

behind the entrance gate in October. A month later, these characters are gone but mushrooms with snail bites take their place. The morning after a rainy night turns into a tracker-like experience as students look for weasel prints in the mud. Foresta 2000 is a young woodland lacking the resilience of mature forests: if the season has been dry the resident wildlife immediately shows signs of distress. This in itself is textbook sustainability education.

The field teachers’ full calendars and an annual average of 5,000 visiting students at the nature reserves are testament to the success of BirdLife’s education programme and collaboration with the Education Directorate. Most importantly, through these school visits BirdLife Malta is engaging children with nature and generating awareness and appreciation of wildlife and habitats in the Maltese Islands.

WORDS **Desirée Falzon** BirdLife Malta Field Teacher



## Are you a BirdLife Malta member? Of course you are!

You're reading this magazine because  
you're one of our precious members ☺

*Help BirdLife Malta by encouraging others  
to become members too ...  
and both of you will get a free gift!*

*If you enrol a relative or a friend today,  
as a new adult or family member  
they will benefit from our special offer\*,  
receiving our Birds of Malta memory game for free.  
And you get a free game too on your next renewal!*

Apart from learning about 25 species of bird  
that were recorded breeding in the Maltese Islands,  
with their membership they would also  
be supporting BirdLife Malta's conservation work!

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)

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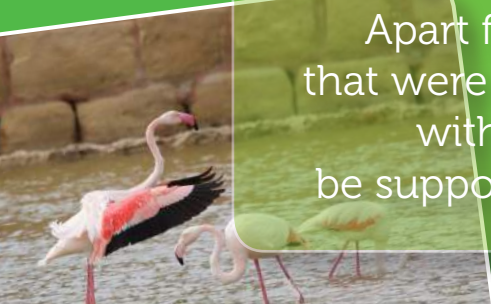
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New applicants need to provide an existing member's BirdLife Malta membership number to benefit.

The game can be purchased separately for €9.75 from our online shop: <http://bit.ly/BirdsOfMalta>.





# Listening to the sky

## The fascinating world of Nocmig

In Malta we get many migrating birds both in spring and in autumn with most “European” birds making the trip from Europe to Africa and then back in a single year. Observing migrating birds during the day is relatively easy but we know that most birds migrate at night. Migrating at night helps birds avoid predators such as birds of prey and also avoid the heat of the sun. But how can we observe birds migrating at night? We cannot see them, but we can listen to them. Not all species, but a good number of those that migrate at night, often call whilst on migration.

A new technique, known as nocmigging, has been recently put to use by birders around Europe to research birds migrating at night. Noc (nocturnal) migging (migration) involves leaving a sound recorder recording an entire night and then analysing the recording at a later stage. No extremely sophisticated or expensive equipment is needed but the more sensitive the microphone is makes it more likely to pick up faint and distant calls.

Analyzing over eight hours of mostly silence might seem like a huge task but such analysis is not done aurally but is done visually. What we do is

generate a visual representation of the sound, known as a spectrogram, using computer software and then analyse it looking for shapes caused by bird sounds. Once you spot an interesting sound, you listen to it and identify it. With experience, an eight-hour night can be inspected in less than two hours.

I started nocmigging from my home town of Birkirkara less than a month ago. At first I was welcomed with a lot of skepticism, but as migration started to pick up, every night revealed amazing surprises of interesting species migrating over Malta. From one of the busiest towns on the islands I already had 19 species of birds and spring migration has still a long way to go. I managed to record interesting species including seldom seen ones such as Moorhen, passerines which are rarely known to migrate at night in our region such as Chaffinches and birds which are typically only observed close to the shore like the Whimbrel.

The beauty of nocmigging is that it is a new and innovative way of studying birds. No one has ever done this study in Malta so every night I am learning new things and sharing with the



Nicholas Galea

► The setup used is relatively simple. A parabolic microphone mounted on a tripod facing upwards and a sound recorder powered through a portable power-bank in a waterproof container

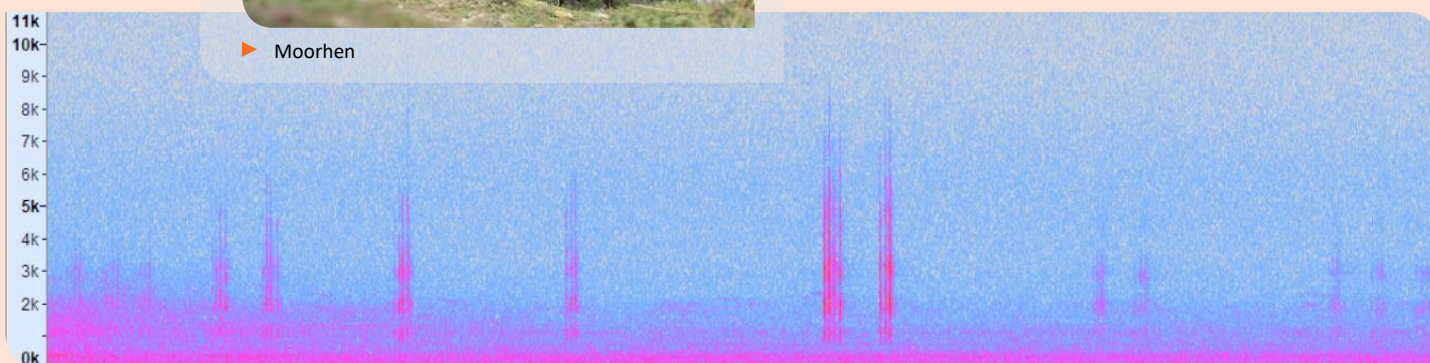
local birding community. Some birds I expected to hear, like herons and waders, whilst others, like crakes and rails, left me amazed. Furthermore, nocmigging allows me to enjoy migration even when other commitments do not spare me enough daylight. Local interest is picking up and every day I get messages from friends asking me what I had “heard” the previous night. Hopefully we can turn this interest into a standardised study with nocmigging stations all across the islands in the near future!

WORDS **Nicholas Galea** BirdLife Malta bird ringer

Aron Tanti



► Moorhen



► A migrating moorhen as seen on the sonogram. Calls become stronger and stronger as the bird approaches, peak in volume when the bird passes overhead and then fade away as the bird continues migrating.



# Kemmuna

Exploring a tiny but rich island in spring

Spring is with us again, and with it another seasonal cycle. A season full of life, full of plants and wildlife, and a perfect time to go for a nice walk in the countryside. Malta and Gozo are tiny islands that have some spectacular views but between them there is the smaller island of Kemmuna (Comino) with a population of only three people, no roads and few buildings... just nature paths one can explore, especially in spring when everything is full of life.

## Start at the Blue Lagoon

When arriving at the Blue Lagoon by ferry follow the path up the hill which will be the beginning of your easy-to-moderate walk and you should already start noticing some Wavyleaf Mulleins and Cardoons in flower along the way. On your way towards Comino Hotel you will see Għar Għana and other smaller caves where some scenes from the famous 2002 movie *The Count of Monte Cristo* were filmed. Once you pass by the hotel and the Bajja ta' San Niklaw then you start walking towards the beautiful Bajja ta' Santa Marija where one can have some relaxing time in a place which is not so crowded.



Raymond Vella

▶ Cardoon (Qaqoċ tax-Xewk)



Victor Falzon

▶ Seaside Ox-eye Daisy (Għajn il-Baqra tax-Xatt)



Alvin Farrugia

▶ Song Thrush (Malvizz)

▶ Northern Wheatear (Kuda)

## On to the bird observatory

After crossing Santa Marija bay take the gently uphill path. Along the path you can see a mixed type of habitat with plants such as Tassel Hyacinth, Mallow Bindweed and Common Mallow. By then you'll be approaching the BirdLife Malta Kemmuna Bird Observatory station where BirdLife researchers study bird migration in spring and autumn. On the way there you may spot some interesting spring visitors such as Northern Wheatears and Hoopoes, or residents such as Sardinian Warblers and our national bird, the Blue Rock-thrush, which will be in full song at this time of year. At the ringing station you'll probably meet some BirdLife members carrying out their bird studies, and they will be more than happy to explain what they do at the station.

## Towards Fortizza Santa Marija

After visiting the BirdLife Malta Observatory station follow the path and start making your way to the historic Fortizza Santa Marija which is also known as the Comino Battery, St Mary's Gun Battery or *It-Trunċiera*. On the way you will see a cluster of abandoned buildings that may provide good shelter for reptiles such as Maltese Wall Lizard, Moorish Gecko or Black Whip Snake. Never forget to look up at the sky for birds of prey such as Marsh Harriers, or Common Kestrels hovering above you looking for something to eat. On reaching the battery, which is always open, you get a good view of Malta's northern end, with some stunning views of Il-Ponta tal-Aħrax as well.



## Now to Torri Santa Marija

Once you take a good look at the fortress, take a leisurely half-hour walk towards Torri Santa Marija (also known as the Comino Tower or Torri ta' Kemmuna). On the way you may spot wild rabbits and enjoy several native Maltese flora such as Pyramidal Orchid, Olive-leaved Germander and Shrubby Kidney-vetch. As you approach the tower never stop looking out for birds such as Common Nightingales, Meadow Pipits, Common Redstarts, Song Thrushes and also Barn Swallows and House Martins carrying on with their migration. Once you reach the tower you can enjoy spectacular views from the cliffs next to the tower, and if the tower is open you can explore its history and get a 360-degree panorama of most of Kemmuna and its surroundings. Spend some time around the tower area – look out for the low but lovely Seaside Ox-eye Daisy around your feet – then follow the path that will slowly start taking you back to the Blue Lagoon (Bejn il-Kmiemen) – the time to get there from the tower will be around 20 minutes.

## Back to the starting point

On your way to the Blue Lagoon keep scanning the sky for birds of prey. Throughout your walk around Kemmuna make sure to keep to the paths, especially in spring when the resident birds will be preparing to nest. Enjoy the beautiful scenery that Kemmuna has to offer and good views of the smaller island of Kemmunett – you may spot a number of caves, which can be explored as well. On the last leg of your walk you should pass by good stands of the endemic Maltese Ferule. You may also see butterflies such as Large White, Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow. At the end of your walk you will be back where you started: the Blue Lagoon. Sit and relax while you wait for your ferry, and reflect on the wonderful walk you just had around the island.

WORDS Alvin Farrugia BirdLife Malta birder



▶ Maltese Wall Lizard (Gremxula)



▶ Maltese Ferule (Ferla)



▶ Large White (Farfett tal-Kaboċi)



A walk on Kemmuna is a must for anyone interested in nature. For such a small island it surely provides a lot of attractions when it comes to wildlife and nature in the Maltese Islands!





Svitlana Shevchuk

- **14 December 2019.** Families gathered at our Simar Nature Reserve to celebrate the holiday season during a special Christmas event. Despite the wind, children and parents alike had a great time creating bird feeders and Christmas tree decorations. We also explored the wintry reserve and were given a brilliant show by a Grey Heron, swooping down just in front of the bird hide. This was the last event for 2019.



Svitlana Shevchuk

- **23 November 2019.** Our second exclusive members' day for 2019 was held in November at Salina Nature Reserve. During the Autumn Members' Afternoon we had the chance to learn all about the wonderful birds that visit Salina, do some relaxing birdwatching before a guided walk, and were even joined by a number of Avocets which happened to visit the park during the event! By becoming a member, you too can be a part of our community, enjoy these exclusive events, and so much more!



BirdLife Malta

- **8 December 2019.** Our Events and Activities Group held its last walk for 2019 in December. Around 50 members and friends joined for a circular walk passing through Lunzjata hamlet, the Carmelite Church, Ghajn Tajtes, Wied ir-Rum, the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Mtaħleb, Wied il-Fiddien and back to Rabat. It was a lovely sunny day enjoyed by all the participants.





Jose Luque Montero

- ▶ **11 January 2020.** This year's annual organised White Wagtail roost count at Valletta, carried out by a group of BirdLife Malta volunteer birders led by Denis Cachia, resulted in a total of 10,366 birds. The volunteers counted the wagtails which came streaming in over the bastions, heading towards the centre of the capital city where the roost is located. The birds seek the Ficus trees situated at Great Siege Square and beside St. John's Cathedral, where they eventually settle down and sleep through the night. This was the third year that the count exceeded 10,000 birds since the Valletta roost has been monitored since 1985. It follows an exceptional record count last year when 14,475 birds were recorded. The other top counts were all registered in recent years – 10,786 in 2016 and 10,323 birds in 2018.



Ben Chircop

- ▶ **19 January 2020.** The first BirdLife Malta nature walk for the new year was held at Il-Ponta tal-Munxar. It was an 8km trek led by the BirdLife Malta Events and Activities Group and around 50 members and friends participated. The walk began at Tas-Silġ Chapel and proceeded to St. Paul's Battery, Bettina Tower and Chapel, Il-Ponta tal-Munxar cliffs, Xrobb l-Ghaġin, It-Taqtiegħa, Il-Hofra l-Kbira, Tas-Silġ Fortress, Il-Hofra ż-Żgħira, Ras il-Fenek and back to the starting point. It was a nature and educational walk visiting some of the historical places on the island's south coast, enjoyed by all on a perfect winter's day.



Jose Luque Montero

- ▶ **15 February 2020.** Bats racing overhead and a close-up look at amazing moths! This is what Klabb Huttat members got at our exclusive night-time members event held at Ghadira Nature Reserve in February. It was the first of five Klabb Huttat events for 2020. Walking through the reserve at night we heard bats whizzing over our heads on our bat detectors. We tried our best to give everyone a go with the bat detectors, and moths were attracted to a sheet near the visitors centre using a bright mercury bulb. Our young members then got the chance to study these animals close up! These are events for junior and family members only. To participate you can become a BirdLife Malta member. Pick between junior or family membership.



Ben Chircop

- ▶ **23 February 2020.** In February the BirdLife Malta Events and Activities Group led another nature walk, this time on beautiful Gozo. The walk started from Sannat parish square and proceeded to Ta' Ċenċ Cliffs. One could admire the beauty of this site which is home to several breeding seabird species. The walk then passed through Sannat village and onto Sanap Cliffs trekking down all along the coastline to Xlendi Valley. The walk was attended by some 50 participants.



Stefania Papadopol

- ▶ **6 March 2020.** BirdLife Malta's education team held the Dinja Waħda Coordinator Day at Salina Nature Reserve. The event served to inform coordinators from Malta's primary schools about the new Dinja Waħda Plus programme we are trialling and how this updated programme expands upon our current Dinja Waħda programme. Involving a series of group discussions and a chance to trial some of the programme's activities in the field, education professionals from Malta's primary schools gained a great opportunity to connect with the natural world and provide feedback that will be critical for the Dinja Waħda's continued success.



Maria Drydenkova

- ▶ **12 March 2020.** Originally planned for November 2019 but postponed due to inclement weather, in March employees of the Mellieħa Holiday Centre dedicated a morning to assisting the managing wardens at our Ghadira Nature Reserve with some management work. After a brief tour of the reserve it was all hands on deck as the group removed alien vegetation from the nature reserve in order to restore the habitat and later plant adequate species. The collaboration resulted in this task well completed.



# Saintly Stork!

A flock of rare White Storks visited Malta in March. One of these majestic birds (the one on the left in the main picture) was spotted carrying a German colour ring with number A1G60 that enabled us to identify it. Thanks to the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behaviour – our EURING partner in Radolfzell (Germany) – we traced the bird to Ipsheim in Bavaria, where it was ringed as a nestling on 5 June 2018 by bird ringer Erwin Taube. During their stay in Malta some of the storks, including this one, spent most nights roosting on the bell tower of St Theresa Church in Birkirkara. And no wonder they felt at home here: from information we obtained about Stork A1G60 we learned that at least this particular bird was raised in a colony on another church tower: St Johanns in Ipsheim! The photo on the right shows the church tower with White Stork nests. A1G60 is one of the young storks on the left nest (arrowed), pictured together with its siblings.

