

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 64 ▪ June 2020



BirdLife
MALTA



Comment	2
European Storm-petrel	3
News	4-5
Nature at our reserves: Foresta 2000	6-7
Discovering nature at home!	8-9
Campaign	10
Turtle-doves take two!	11
Snorkeller's eye view	12-13
No lockdown for the nature reserves!	14-15
On the trail of the turtle-doves	16

A terrible spring

It was a terrible spring for birds in Malta. Hunters went out on a rampage to kill anything that has feathers, feeling and knowing they have the government's blessing.



Illegal killing has dramatically shot up and there is a reason for this. Hunters felt bolstered by the fact that the Minister for Gozo – a hunter and trapper himself – was made responsible for the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU), even if the law itself states that this unit should fall under the Ministry for Environment. When all Malta was advised to stay inside because of COVID-19, they are the chosen ones who are allowed to practise their blood sport, not to mention the total absence of enforcement. And to top it all, the Government wants to officially give some selected hunters L-Aħrax and il-Miżieb, and effectively ban the majority from being able to enjoy this open space.

Having said this, what COVID-19 has shown is that nothing will stop us in our tireless work to safeguard biodiversity and our environment. Our Spring Watch camp still happened even with COVID-19. On the issue of WBRU we started by advising the Government of its error by means of a Judicial Protest. When we discovered that the spring hunting licences were issued by the Ministry for Gozo, we took the case to the Police Commissioner. And when all that failed we opened a court case against the Government to return WBRU back from Gozo!

In the latest act of intimidation, a member of our staff has been reported to the police on the basis of animal cruelty because he was holding an illegally shot turtle-dove during a press conference! This is the same police force that dismissed our claim that the hunting licences were irregularly issued. The same police force that did not prosecute the hunter who shot this protected bird.

What all this does is make our resolve stronger than ever. And dear friends, with all this happening, this is a moment to be proud that you are a member of BirdLife Malta!

Darryl Grima
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▶ A small raft of storm-petrels as photographed from a boat trip organised by BirdLife Malta and EcoMarine

European Storm-petrel

Maltese name: Kanġu ta' Filfla
Scientific name: *Hydrobates pelagicus*
Length: 15–16cm
Wingspan: 37–41 cm
Conservation Status: Least Concern

Local Status: Common breeder
Call: Long series of purrs and loud squeaks
Behaviour: Active feeder on sea surface, often in small flocks
Habitat: Open sea; breeds in caves and boulder crevices

There is probably no other breeding bird in the Maltese Islands which is as charismatic but also secretive as the European Storm-petrel. It is in fact the smallest seabird species in the world, not much larger than a sparrow. To keep safe it only enters colonies at night, while at sea it flies with incredible agility in between the waves. It is hardly a surprise then that most people have never seen it, even if Malta has over 5,000 nesting pairs!

parents put in a lot of effort, with incubation and chick-rearing combined taking over 100 days.

The storm-petrel's charisma can probably exclude its strong fish smell, which comes from a strictly marine diet, and wafts out to sea from the breeding sites. Apart from a few sea caves, the European Storm-petrel stronghold is Filfla islet. Holding over half the Mediterranean population, it is no wonder that the Mediterranean sub-species of European Storm-petrel is scientifically named *Hydrobates pelagicus melitensis*.

Dare take a guess on how long these tiny birds live. Well, the record locally is at least 32 years! We know this through scientific bird ringing, but a few years ago BirdLife Malta took research one step further and fitted a few birds with geolocators on small backpacks. This revealed some astonishing results on their winter whereabouts. One bird did two round trips to the Balearic Islands, while another flew out of the Straits of Gibraltar and spent some weeks off the British Isles.

A white rump and underwing feathers contrast beautifully with the otherwise dark plumage, but what the species lacks in colour it makes up for in behaviour. On calm nights one can hear choruses of chattering and purring calls from deep inside crevices. You can listen for yourself to the lively song at www.xeno-canto.org/394539. At sea it feeds energetically on the surface often pattering it with webbed feet to stir up plankton prey. The storm-petrel lays only one egg per year, but both

BirdLife Malta has been monitoring seabirds for decades, lately funded through three consecutive EU LIFE projects. The current one – LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija, focusing on the Yelkouan Shearwater – is coming to a successful close in August 2020. You can help seabirds by reducing light pollution from your homes or when visiting coastal areas. Moreover, responsible litter management prevents augmenting invasive rat populations, a major predator of seabird nests. Finally, make sure you become a member of BirdLife Malta and follow us for events such as our annual boat trips which allow you to enjoy seabirds in their marine home.

WORDS **Martin Austad** LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija Project Warden



Aron Tanti

▶ An adult storm-petrel, bearing a BirdLife Malta ring, exiting its nesting crevice on Filfla



Jonathan Pulliano

▶ An adult storm-petrel in flight at sea



Ben Metzger

▶ A weeks-old downy chick on Filfla

A spring hunting season on turtle-dove

The spring hunting season 2020 was supposedly open only for Common Quail but it was purposely made to coincide with the peak migration of the vulnerable European Turtle-dove. This year's season has therefore served again as a less-than-

subtle smokescreen to let hunters target turtle-doves and other protected species. BirdLife Malta and police recovered 50 injured protected birds with many more observed being shot between 10 and 30 April 2020. The highest number of illegal hunting casualties, 18, were turtle-doves.



► One of the illegally shot turtle-doves recovered during this year's spring hunting season

Compared with past spring hunting seasons, this was the worst ever. In fact, this spring we have received more birds than the last three spring hunting seasons put together (12 in 2019, 18 in 2018 and 15 in 2017). BirdLife Malta gathered all the evidence of the illegalities which occurred during the spring hunting season and sent a formal report and video to the European Commission's Directorate-General for Environment requesting action to be taken.

Spring Watch 2020

A total of 24 people joined BirdLife Malta for Spring Watch 2020 – mostly our staff, volunteers and Maltese friends as this year we weren't able to accommodate international volunteers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists from Newsbook and the Malta Independent also joined us for a couple of morning shifts. An average of two teams of three people each, were deployed every day in the field for morning and afternoon shifts, with a rough estimate of more than 360 hours spent in the field. Overall, our teams detected an unprecedented number of illegalities – 167 incidents. This included the use of illegal hunting methods such as turtle-dove decoys and modified shotguns capable of firing more than three rounds. A staggering 65% of active hunters were observed hunting turtle-doves, with only 21% seen genuinely hunting for quail. Police presence was noticed only in 11% of the hunting hotspots visited. According to WBRU statistics, 86% of licence-holders did not declare catching a single quail!

BirdLife Malta documents illegal trapping sites

In March, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and at a time when enforcement officers were stretched to the limit trying to cope with the emergency situation, BirdLife Malta recorded rampant illegal trapping of finches in various parts of Malta and Gozo. We documented the situation we found across the Maltese Islands over less than two weeks through a video which was released to the media. Trapping at this time of year is illegal, with all finch species being protected following the landmark June 2018 European Court of Justice ruling. The catching of Linnets is especially popular in coastal garrigue areas, with trapping sites typically being cleared of

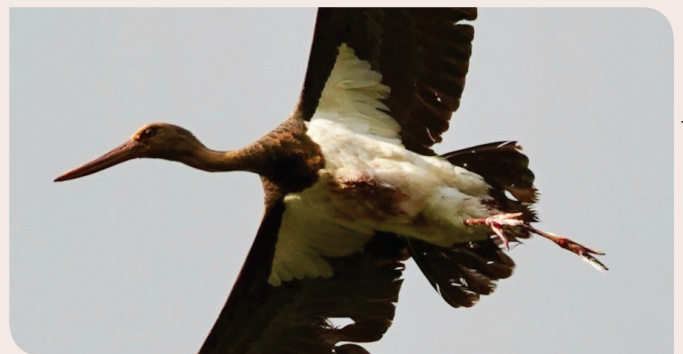
natural vegetation for the laying of nets. Later, the Committee Against Bird Slaughter also reported about the illegal trapping situation – the most blatant case was reported in a



public family park ► An illegal trapping site at Bahrija near Qala, Gozo, where protected Carob trees were cut down to make way for an illegal bird trapping installation.

Hunter taken to court after targeting stork

A hunter suspected of shooting at a protected Black Stork in Żebbiegħ on 23 April was taken to court and granted bail. The 32-year-old from Gżira – who has nine past illegal hunting convictions – pleaded not guilty to hunting and carrying a loaded Beretta firearm outside hunting hours. He was also charged with possessing a modified weapon, breaching licence conditions and other hunting laws. The request for bail was upheld against a deposit of €1,000 together with a personal guarantee of €10,000 and an order to sign the bail book once a week. The man was also barred from hunting. His firearm and vehicle were confiscated. According to media reports, later police arrested another two hunters after they were seen on a roof with guns as the injured Black Stork circled over Girgenti some days later.



► The Black Stork which was illegally shot

Legal battle against Government continues

In April BirdLife Malta took its legal battle against the Government to the next level with the filing of a Court Application (Rikors). The claim concerns the Prime Minister's decision to place the hunting regulator under the Ministry for Gozo, including the supervision of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU). The court action is also contesting the fact that Minister for Gozo Clint Camilleri issued the spring hunting licenses despite not having a legal remit to do so. It is only the Minister for Environment that can administer the environmental legislation and anything that derives from it, including the WBRU. The legal action followed the Complaint, filed by BirdLife Malta on 22 April, asking the Police Commissioner to revoke the hunting licenses issued illegally by the Gozo Ministry. In just 24 hours following the filing of our Complaint, Acting Police Commissioner Carmelo

Magri responded, claiming that the Police did not have any authority to take action in this regard.



Katarzyna Pacon

► Briefing the media following the filing of the Court Application

Keep Miżieb and L-Aħrax free for nature and people

BirdLife Malta has joined the Spazji Miftuħa (Open Spaces) coalition of 60 entities, formed at the beginning of May, in response to a proposal regarding the transfer of the Miżieb and L-Aħrax woodlands to the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK). Just within a month, the coalition received encouraging support from the public with more than 16,000 people signing a petition to keep these open spaces accessible to the public all year round, and over 95% of respondents of a survey it launched disagreed with the restriction of public access to these areas. On 27 May a delegation from the coalition met with Prime Minister Robert Abela and Environment Minister Aaron Farrugia, asking for unlimited access to the sites, proper enforcement to ensure that both hunters and citizens abide by the rules and proposing Ambjent Malta to manage these areas instead of FKNK. The authorities guaranteed that access will remain open to all, at all times, throughout the year.

Illegally shot birds rehabilitated

In the past months BirdLife Malta rehabilitated and released seven birds, five illegally shot during the spring hunting season and two that were found exhausted and disoriented. A Black Kite, recovered at the end of March, was found weak from migration and following a couple of weeks' rehab, the raptor was ringed and released. Likewise, a Baillon's Crake was found disoriented in a courtyard. The bird was ringed and released at Ghadira Nature Reserve, from where it could continue its journey. The other five birds were lucky

to survive after having been shot in spring. After weeks of rehab, two turtle-doves were released at Ghadira on 15 May while three birds of prey (Common Kestrel, Lesser Kestrel and Marsh Harrier) were released on Kemmuna, all of them ringed.

BirdLife Malta joins international campaigns

BirdLife Malta joined the #1Planet1Right and #FutureofCAP campaigns to plead for a change in environmental policies. #1Planet1Right was launched by BirdLife International on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, calling on the United Nations to take a bold and unprecedented step by declaring a healthy natural environment a fundamental human right and include it in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights as 'Article 31.' On a more European level, we joined the BirdLife Europe campaign #FutureofCAP, which raised the issues of harmful farming and the need for proportionate funding for biodiversity and conservation. While we fully support the Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies, unveiled by the European Commission on 20 May 2020, the reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as the main agricultural and conservation budgetary framework is now becoming as urgent as ever.

WORDS **Maria Dyrdenkova** BirdLife Malta Communications Assistant



Mario V Gauci

► A spell of bad weather at the end of March brought to Salina Nature Reserve three Greater Flamingos. The Greater Flamingo is the largest species of flamingo and, averaging a height of 1.5m, they are the tallest and largest species of bird to stop over in Malta

COLLABORATION FOR CONSERVATION OF THE YELKOUAN SHEARWATER

LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija Project Closing Webinar
9 - 10 July 2020

Our 5-year-long LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project is nearing the end. To celebrate this, together with the project partners Transport Malta and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), BirdLife Malta will be organising a closing webinar entitled "Collaboration for Conservation of the Yelkouan Shearwater." This will be held on the Zoom online platform on 9-10 July. The webinar will kick off with a keynote speech on seabird conservation in the Mediterranean, followed by the presentation of the results obtained in the conservation of the Yelkouan Shearwater in Malta and online workshops on monitoring light pollution and seabird breeding colonies.

For more details and to register visit the project website at <https://birdlifemalta.org/arcipelagugarnija>.

Nature at our reserves

Foresta 2000



Foresta 2000
nature reserve

Opening hours

**Open all year round
and accessible 24 hours a day**
Entrance free

More info at

<https://bit.ly/Foresta2000NatureReserve>

Sardinian Warbler

Bufula Sewda *Sylvia melanocephala*

Malta is not blessed with a long list of breeding birds, so nesting species like Sardinian Warbler are very precious to bird lovers. The bird is easy to love: small, perky, active, smartly 'dressed' and making rather free with its scolding chatter, and it often turns up in gardens. Males and females are easy to tell apart – that black head in the photo clearly indicates a male, the female is a more subdued grey. Sardinians also live in wooded areas, especially if there are thick shrubs and berry-bearing plants. Both are available at Foresta, so it's no wonder that several pairs of Sardinians nest there. A hundred years ago Sardinian Warblers were just winter visitors to Malta – now they live here all year round. We're not complaining.



Aron Tanti

► Sardinian Warbler

Striped Shield Bug

Spallut Irrigat *Graphosoma lineatum*

If looks are anything to go by, the Striped Shield Bug is a dyed-in-the-wool Milan FC fan! Many of our bugs are liveried in black and red but only this one comes in the correct stripey pattern. While 'bugs' is a term most people use to refer to creepy crawlies in general, there is actually a large group of insects that even entomologists call bugs. Many of these (the bugs, not the entomologists!) feed by sucking sap from plant stems or leaves, and for this they have a syringe-like beak to pierce the plant. Several bugs are partial to particular plants: for the Striped Shield Bug the sap of the Fennel is headiest ambrosia. And since no zealous roadside cleaners are allowed inside Foresta, there is Fennel aplenty to keep the Striped Shield Bug happy.



Victor Falzon

► Striped Shield Bug

Sea Scabious

Skabjoża/Kuxxinetti *Scabiosa maritima*

Some plants are showy, others not so much. The Sea Scabious is one of the less conspicuous species – it's relatively low, not dense in foliage and its flowers are pale and easy to overlook. Indeed, I often learn there are scabious around because butterflies like to land on them. Then you notice the delicate pale pink flowers and you wonder how on earth you missed them! Sea Scabious grows in several habitats, including garrigue, steppe and disturbed habitat. It flowers in spring and many insects find it irresistible. As BirdLife never planned Foresta as a blanket woodland project, the habitats are varied and in many places the Sea Scabious grows in profusion, not least along the footpath near the main entrance.



Desirée Falzon

► Sea Scabious

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

Discovering

NATURE

Did you know that even when you are at home you can connect with nature?

Due to the recent circumstances we all had to adapt and we managed successfully! In the past months, BirdLife Malta’s education team has developed a variety of resources and fun activities families could do whilst in lockdown to connect with nature, support it, and take care of one’s well-being.

We focused our effort into supporting both teachers and families into experiencing local wildlife from the comfort of their own homes, through online media, whilst still contributing to their curriculum plan.

The activities and ideas proposed were not only a source of information to learn about nature, but they were also interactive, entertaining and engaging! In this article you will find out some of the fun we had, things we learnt and where you can find the resources.



St Paul’s Missionary College, Rabat

► Barn Swallow and Bee-eater masks

Dinja Waħda LIVE sessions

To begin with, we were looking forward to Thursdays to participate in the weekly Dinja Waħda LIVE sessions organised by our field teachers Desirée and Victor Falzon. In these episodes, different topics about nature in Malta were presented and wildlife secrets revealed. Fascinating themes were addressed such as bird migration, pollinators and pollination, nests, ideas people took from nature, how animals use their senses and Maltese habitats.

at home!

With a weekly audience of more than 250 students, teachers and parents joining together, the sessions were full of jokes and quizzes, sparking creativity and increasing the suspense of children!



St Dorothy’s School, Sliema

► Orange bird feeder activity

“Very well done for another informative and entertaining session! :) I have to say my seven-year-old boy and I think Dinja Waħda LIVE sessions have been the best thing about lockdown!”

Veronique Vella – parent, Stella Maris College, Gzira

“Please keep on doing the LIVE sessions because you make them very interesting, leading to the fact that I am enjoying them so much that I wait for the day, then I wait for the time!”

Ilaria Pace – student, St. Dorothy’s School, Sliema



St Dorothy’s School, Sliema

► Bird feeder activity

Virtual field visits

Even though schools missed their regular field visit at BirdLife Malta’s nature reserves, the nature reserves still came to their homes. Our field teacher Jason Aloisio organised virtual field visits which enabled students to watch local wildlife

and answer questions related to their curriculum. Other topics linked with the syllabus were also produced: Nocturnal Nature, The Living Soil, Plant Adaptations, Extinction.

Did you know that dwarf elephants once lived in Malta? Or that large leaves are an adaptation of plants striving in environments with low light in order to produce food?

Family activities

Although families could not visit our nature reserves and take part in events, they learnt how to create wildlife spaces and habitats at home. Whether they have a garden or not, by using simple steps and guides they could plant bee-friendly flowers, herbs and vegetables, create bird or butterfly feeders and bird boxes. They discovered how to identify trees, birds, flowers and minibeasts in their urban area or watch for spring migration from their windows or gardens. With fun games and activities they explored more the wildlife they might see from their homes and how to protect it.

Did you know that 93 species of bees have been recorded in Malta? Or that there are 23 species of butterflies found on Malta?



Laura Vicuna School, Victoria Gozo

► Barn Swallow mask



De La Salle College

► Working together to build a bird box

Moving forward

We are coming to the end of the scholastic year, but we have some good news! You can go to BirdLife Malta's YouTube Channel and find all the interesting LIVE episodes and virtual visits that will enable you to discover and understand more about the hidden life of nature! You can also find all the family activities on our Dinja Wahda Facebook page.

Did you know that the Chinese came up with the papermaking technique simply by observing the work of Paper Wasps? No wonder they got this name!



Avon Tanti

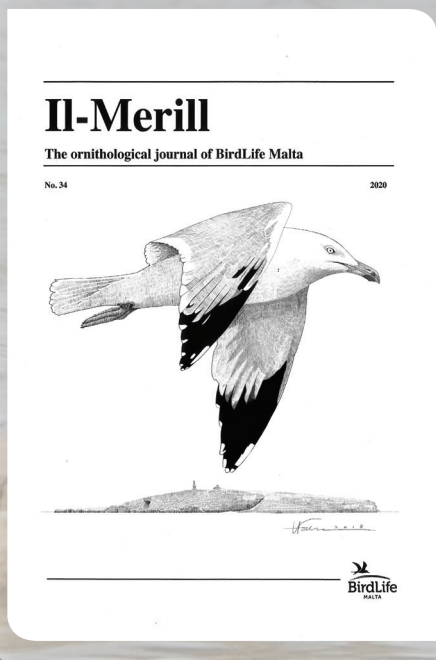
► Paper Wasps nest

The isolation did not prevent us from continuing to provide environmental education resources for teachers, parents and students stuck at home. We used the most visual and engaging materials to support everyone! Thank you to everyone who took part and showed their support! Keep up the good work with protecting our environment!

WORDS **Ştefania Papadopol** BirdLife Malta Education Coordinator
Abbie Ferrar BirdLife Malta Education Officer

Il-Merill is out!

Il-Merill 34 is now available! This is BirdLife Malta's ornithological journal, and it features a number of scientific papers and short notes relating to various ornithological subjects relevant to the Maltese Islands and the Mediterranean. This edition features seabird papers provided by our LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija team, a paper based on citizen science, as well as a number of short notes highlighting first records of species for the Maltese Islands. This issue also includes the third report from the Malta Rarities and Records Committee, and the Ringing Report for 2017-2018. You can purchase your copy from our online shop.



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Turtle-dove migration this year has kept us on the edge beyond the end of one of the worst spring hunting seasons on record. In the days that followed the notorious derogation, our attention turned to contributing once more to an international study – led by the Justus Liebig University of Giessen – that tracks the migration of the European Turtle-dove. Three new turtle-doves were satellite-tagged in May 2020 as part of this cutting-edge research into the bird’s habits and movements – a key tool in the race against time to save the species from extinction.

Turtle-doves migrate like clockwork and if there is something we have learnt from Francesco – a turtle-dove satellite-tagged on Kemmuna in April 2017 – it’s that turtle-doves keep to their appointments back home. Blame

A few days of silence reignite our fears that he might have stopped over for a rest in Malta, and met the fate of many of his similars.

His tag transmits in cycles – collecting GPS coordinates as the bird moves along, and only communicating them when the transmitter happens to be on and aligned to one or more orbiting satellites.

This is programmed to save battery life, which is powered by a tiny solar cell on the device. So far Francesco has missed



Nicholas Galea

► ‘Marija’ was the first of three turtle-doves tagged in spring 2020. The name Marija was chosen as it is one of the most common names in Malta, and is also the name of the patron saint for Kemmuna, and the popular Santa Marija beach, metres away from the place she was tagged

The tagging of Marija, Hope and Virginijus was made possible thanks to the kind support of our BirdLife partners in Germany NABU who are sponsoring this research work. All three birds were tagged in the beginning of May.

Marija’s transmission went dead almost immediately – with the bird probably being shot dead illegally on Gozo. Hope and Virginijus made it to Italy. Virginijus has settled for the coast of Tuscany, while Hope surprised us by crossing to Libya for a short period before making it back to Sicily! We’re still waiting to see whether she’ll settle down to breed

Turtle-doves take two!

it on his Italian roots, but Francesco has for the past three springs made it religiously back to the outskirts of Avellino in the Campania region of southern Italy roughly within the same

Malta, at times by a few kilometres, opting to make landfall in Sicily before heading further north. Francesco is one of only a few other turtle-doves that have been satellite-tagged in the past



Tim Micallef

► Francesco being satellite-tagged on Kemmuna in April 2017

few days in early May, and following widely the same route through. The satellite tag fitted to his back has kept us abreast of his movements. Every year as the end of April brings Francesco to the North African coast, we find ourselves refreshing the webpage which translates his last GPS positions on a map.

– and clearly the luckiest of all as he has kept transmitting for so long. Two other tagged birds in April 2017 stopped transmitting after reaching Hungary and the Bulgarian/Romanian border. So far ringing studies

have revealed that turtle-doves migrating through Malta may originate from at least eight countries: Italy, Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, Poland, France, Croatia and Austria. Clearly this is not all – as our latest tagged European Turtle-doves continue to reveal.



Nicholas Galea

► Hope was the second of three turtle-doves tagged on Kemmuna in May 2020. The name ‘Hope’ was chosen as a token to the work conservationists across Europe are doing to save this vulnerable species

here. Is this revealing some interesting behaviour in the Mediterranean populations of turtle-doves? We have as yet to see what fate will befall these birds, who seem to be closer to Malta than we ever thought!

Follow the birds’ movements on <https://bit.ly/FollowtheTurtleDoves>.

WORDS **Nicholas Barbara** BirdLife Malta Head of Conservation

Snorkeller's eye view

The stretch of northeast coastline between Daħlet il-Fekruna and Rdum il-Bies holds a wealth of marine life in its variety of niches. Much of this variety may not reveal itself in a first casual snorkelling, but visit a shore regularly and you will be rewarded with a gradually unfolding tapestry of animal and plant life. This brief tour of the shore leading to and away from Mistra Bay shares some shallow-water highlights.

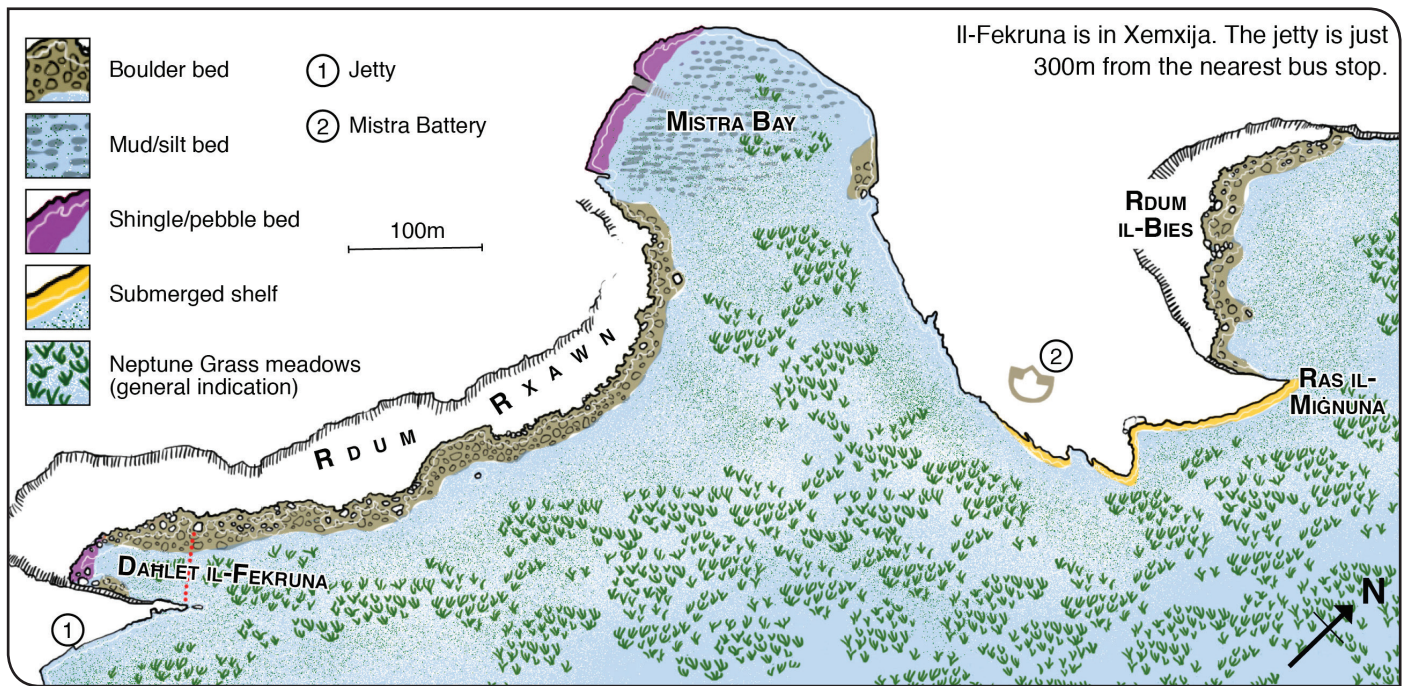
Daħlet il-Fekruna

Cracks in a vertical rock face such as those on the jetty on the Fekruna side are perfect for small sea slugs. In early morning check the mooring side for the little purple jewels of the *Felimida* species having their last graze of the night. Snorkel along the same side while looking closely at the shallow-water shoreside: where not covered with algae the rock is a kaleidoscope of colour from the sponges, bryozoans and ascidians siphoning water to filter out their food. *Botrylloides* is arguably the most striking of these, with its orange crochet-like network of tiny animals living together. Do not shy away from dark overhangs – the cave-like rock faces abound with a range of striking red algae and pretty orange corals.

Daħlet il-Fekruna itself is conveniently shallow, making it easy for a snorkeller to discover life between the fallen boulders where gobies indolently await prey and young fish live safely away from the mouths of large predators. The water's edge slopes onto shingle that hides invertebrates small enough for the shallow-water blennies that live there to eat, while the boulders on the north side are rife with triplefins that seem to multiply if you stare long enough at an algae-covered rock. The bay seabed offers refuge for small fish escaping predators in its carpets of Neptune Grass, whose rhizomes anchor the sandy bottom in place.



▶ Orange-fest with (left) *Astroides calycularis* and *Botrylloides leachi*



Boulders, shingle and caves

Swim past mullets, shoals of Salema and the occasional young Barracuda on the Rdxum Rdxawn side and scour the submerged rock tops for blennies – small, colourful fish that occupy holes gouged by bivalves. Moving forward you will need to cut across Mistra Bay, once a shingle-bed snorkeller’s delight but now a thick carpet of old fish-farm residue that chokes algae and fish alike. The rock formation at Ras il-Mignuna creates several shallow caves where cuttlefish can be spotted skulking and changing colour in nanoseconds. Boulders gradually give way to a rock shelf – the perfect destination for shallow-water snorkelling among sea bream, mullets and wrasses, most of which prowl the rock face in search of molluscs. Here, Spotted Sea Hare emerge in the evening to scrape away uninterrupted at the encrusting algae covering the shelf.

Rdxum il-Bies

The last lap take us to the Rdxum il-Bies area, also accessible from the karst surface near the Mistra Battery. Dark, shallow caves are home to large numbers of beautiful red Cardinalfish. In early summer it is common to see males with their fry safely in their mouths. This area holds a large spectrum of life, from predatory Moray Eels that emerge in the evening to scavenging Bearded Fireworms and shoals of Damselfish with their electric-blue fry. Here you can easily see ten blenny species in three metres’ depth, some – like the Molly Miller and the Mystery Blenny – abundant on little shelves hugging the shoreline. For clear-water snorkelling always check wind direction and avoid a coastline that is downwind. Make sure to use sea-friendly lotion and to take a net for litter-gathering as a small thanks to the enriching experience the Fekruna-Rdxum il-Bies coastline will certainly provide.

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

PHOTOGRAPHS **Desirée** and **Victor Falzon**

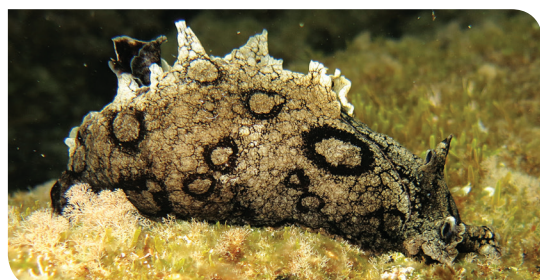
MAP **Victor Falzon**



▶ Cuttlefish have an amazing variety of colour and pattern tricks up their skirts



▶ The Rock Goby quietly waits for prey to come close



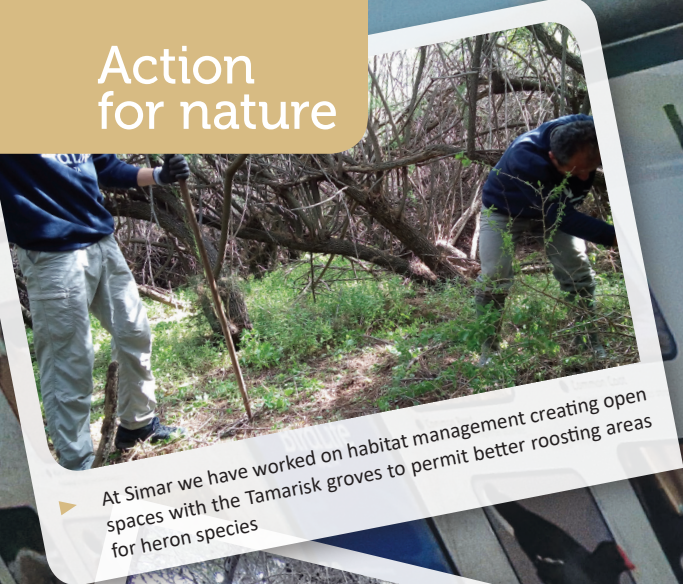
▶ Spotted Sea Hare emerge in the evening for a quiet graze



▶ Two *Felimida* species graze the algae on the jetty’s rock faces



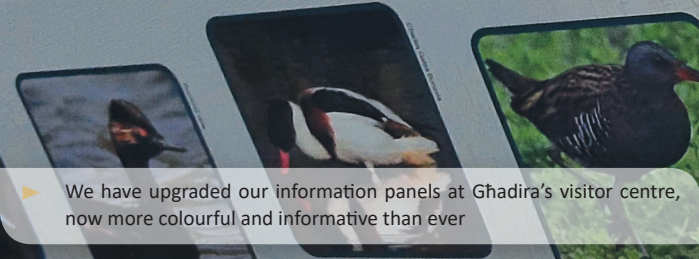
Action for nature



▶ At Simar we have worked on habitat management creating open spaces with the Tamarisk groves to permit better roosting areas for heron species



The brackish lagoon at Ghadira receives seawater by seepage, which fills the parts that are below sea level. In the wet season the lake is augmented with rain that drowns most of the islands and reduces salinity. A reed-rich canal borders most of the reserve, acting both as deterrent to human intrusion as well as being a habitat in itself.



▶ We have upgraded our information panels at Ghadira's visitor centre, now more colourful and informative than ever



▶ Improving the visitor experience at Simar Nature Reserve: Work on the nature trail to create pockets of open space for the visiting public to enjoy

No lockdown for the

The areas managed by BirdLife Malta – namely Ghadira, Simar and Salina – are subject to a management plan which is basically a plan purposely devised to manage the sites during the summer months. The reason why some of the sites are closed for the summer is to ensure that the sites are as the less disturbed the better. This year was particular since the pandemic situation, and whilst we missed our visitors we used the management plans. Here you will find snippets of what we managed to witness and experience the work first hand!

WORDS **Mark Gauci** BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves Manager
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 PHOTOGRAPHS BirdLife Malta and **Aron Tanti**



▶ Along the nature trail at Simar we added some hands-on, fun information for our younger visitors



▶ Setting up of birdwatching hides at Salina for the public to enjoy the birds present on site without causing disturbance



▶ Visitor experience at Salina improved with hands-on visuals which are sure to appeal to all





Mediterranean Killifish
Buzaqq • Aphanius



Regular checking of the site is carried out at Foresta 2000, together with recording of the avifauna there and also planning work for the winter months



We continued working on the restoration of the sand dune habitat at Ghadira Nature Reserve. Thanks to a sponsorship from the Farsons Foundation we built a boardwalk so visitors will not trample on this delicate habitat and its fragile ecosystem

the nature reserves!

Salina Nature Reserves together with Foresta 2000, are all subject to improve the sites for flora and fauna and for the general public. For months is purely because most works on improving the sites are done in winter as breeding birds would be busy tending to their young and therefore the sites were closed for three months in spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time to work relentlessly at ticking off more tasks from our list – we hope to welcome you to our sites shortly so that you can



Installation of nest boxes for breeding Spanish Sparrows at Ghadira



Habitat management at Salina Nature Reserve through the collection of marine pollution, mainly plastic, which would be dangerous for the avifauna of the park



Research on our breeding birds was ongoing. In this particular case we were monitoring breeding Sardinian Warblers at our Ghadira Nature Reserve



through the creation of... appeal to the younger visitors



On the trail of the turtle-doves

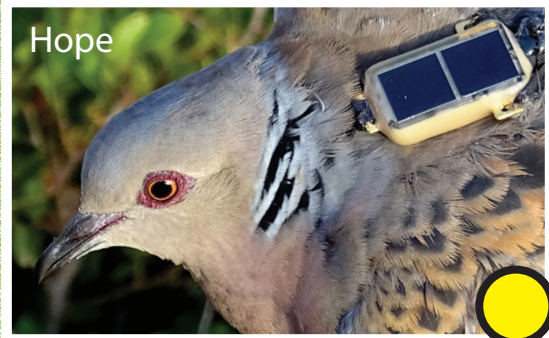
Nicholas Galea



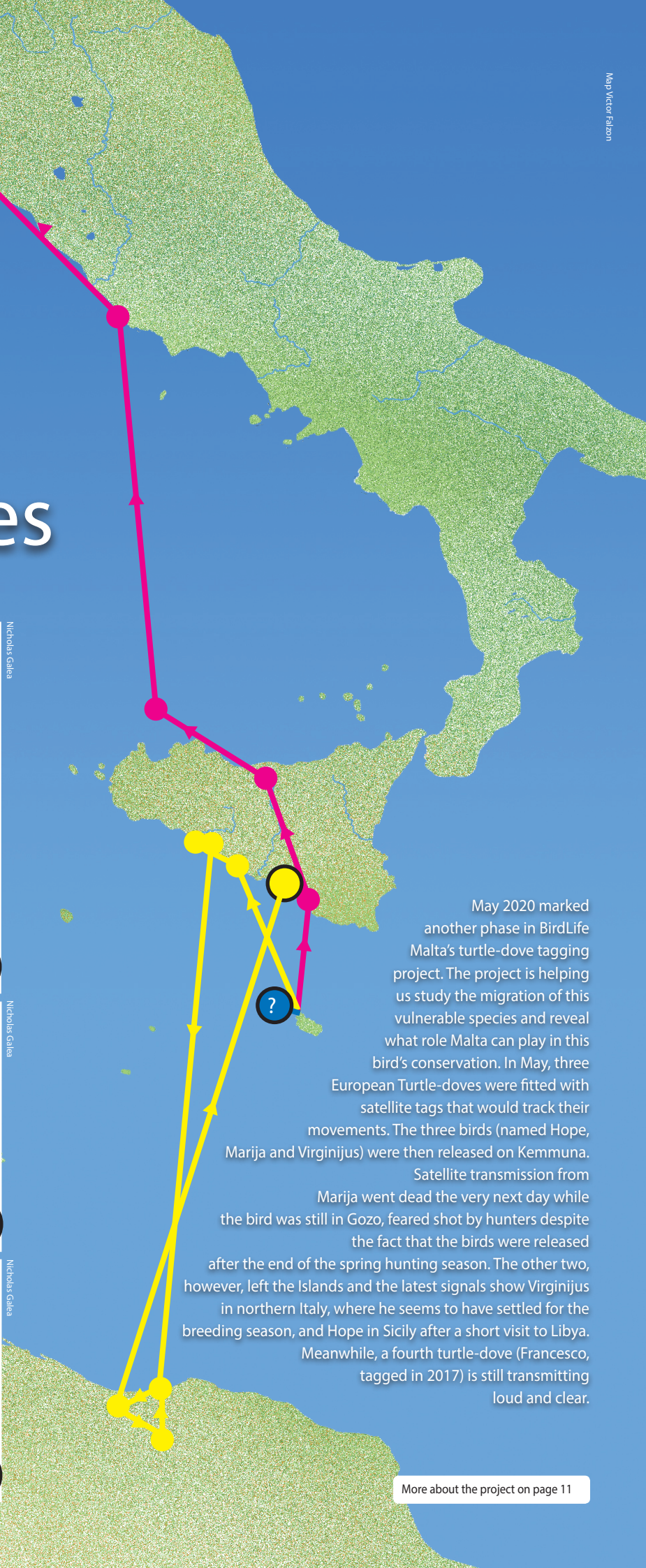
Nicholas Galea



Nicholas Galea



Nicholas Galea



May 2020 marked another phase in BirdLife Malta's turtle-dove tagging project. The project is helping us study the migration of this vulnerable species and reveal what role Malta can play in this bird's conservation. In May, three European Turtle-doves were fitted with satellite tags that would track their movements. The three birds (named Hope, Marija and Virginijus) were then released on Kemmuna. Satellite transmission from Marija went dead the very next day while the bird was still in Gozo, feared shot by hunters despite the fact that the birds were released after the end of the spring hunting season. The other two, however, left the Islands and the latest signals show Virginijus in northern Italy, where he seems to have settled for the breeding season, and Hope in Sicily after a short visit to Libya. Meanwhile, a fourth turtle-dove (Francesco, tagged in 2017) is still transmitting loud and clear.