

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 65 ■ September 2020




BirdLife
MALTA

The beauty of migration!

When I was very young, my dad took me to Ghadira Nature Reserve when it was still being created. I took his heavy black binoculars and got immersed in a new world. It felt like I was in a documentary. I could see waders inserting their beaks in the muddy patches, and a darting blue bird which I finally managed to focus on...it was a kingfisher!

From then on I was hooked and anything to do with birds interested me. What really fascinated me most was bird migration. Whether it was the majestically soaring birds of prey, or the flapping wings of a V formation of herons, or simply a flock of swallows calling out the moment they arrive at the coast. How do they manage to fly those distances, against all odds: strong winds, rain, and rough seas? I still enjoy birdwatching during migration and can only grumble because I don't have the time I used to have before.

And this enjoyment is what made me respect birds and nature. It was this feeling that made me care because I wanted them to make it to their destination. Within BirdLife Malta as a youth member I joined in the mission to share this enjoyment, the respect and care for migratory birds, with as many people as possible. What about you reading this publication? Did you ever experience bird migration? Heading to our nature reserves could be a start. I would suggest asking the staff there for more information on where and when best to witness bird migration. At BirdLife Malta we want you and your family and friends to enjoy birds. In return birds want you to care and need you to protect them. Look out for our #onthemove campaign and this autumn migration enjoy, care and protect our birds with us!



► 1980s Ghadira - a haven in the making

Mark Sultana
CEO



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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

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European Honey-buzzard by Aron Tanti

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Due to COVID-19 restrictions, BirdLife Malta's Annual General Meeting (AGM) for this year will be held virtually on **28 October 2020 at 6:30pm**.

Please register on

<http://bit.ly/BirdLifeMaltaAGM2020>

by 23 October and you will receive details on how to log on and participate.

We would like to stay in touch with you, **please send us your email address on info@birdlifemalta.org** so we can update your contact details.

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► Five shot protected birds retrieved in just one day during the third week of the autumn hunting season

2020 already Malta's worst year this decade for illegal hunting

The first day of September marked the start of this year's autumn hunting season with over 10,600 hunters pursuing birds in the Maltese countryside for the next five months. Even before the start of the season, the current levels of illegal killing had already reached a record in 2020.

Following the 46 shot protected birds recovered by BirdLife Malta and police during the closed season and the illegal hunting casualties received so far since the start of the autumn hunting season,



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► A Peregrine Falcon (top) and a Greater Flamingo were amongst the illegal hunting casualties of the close season

in spite of the fact we are still at the end of September, we've already retrieved more illegally shot protected birds than in the last eight years, for a total of 152 so far this year. This surpasses the previous record year 2018 when 114 shot birds were collected.

Call for enforcement boost

With the newly rebranded police Environmental Protection Unit (EPU) heavily under-resourced and largely ineffective, we have been calling on the government to boost this unit and to also transfer bird protection enforcement from a weak and biased Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) to the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA). Since WBRU took over, enforcement

deteriorated to practically non-existent leading to the current free-for-all situation. As we do each year, we are organising our annual Raptor Camp to monitor illegalities during the period when the peak of bird migration coincides with the autumn hunting season. We reiterate our call on the general public to continue reporting illegalities and findings of injured birds.

Yet another excuse to trap songbirds

In August, the Maltese Government announced plans to challenge the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling

– which found Malta guilty of opening finch trapping seasons in breach of the EU Birds Directive – and allow finch trapping with the excuse that it will be done for scientific research purposes. The new trapping derogation submitted to the ORNIS Committee and approved by the same committee following a public consultation exercise, will allow trappers

in Malta to catch songbirds while being required to release them back into the wild later. In our reaction we stated that using the excuse of scientific research to create a smokescreen for more birds to be trapped is unacceptable. This, obviously, apart from the fact that challenging the European Court of Justice verdict is, to say the least, absurd and irresponsible.



BirdLife Malta

► The latest proposal by the government to try to permit trapping of songbirds despite the ECJ ruling of 2018 disguises the derogation as a research exercise

Successful migration campaign

Launched in early August, BirdLife Malta's #onthemove campaign encourages people to enjoy, care about and protect migrating birds during their spectacular autumn migration. Being an island between two continents, Malta is a crucial resting place for birds that enables them to build the resources to continue their journey across long distances. As part of the campaign on our social media we are publishing migratory bird profiles and other interesting facts about migration. We also involved the local media, sharing features on newspapers and participating in television interviews, but most importantly, we involved people to play a role in protecting Malta's migratory birds by joining our Raptor Camp and by reporting their sightings on a special online form. We would like to thank all those who have joined us and encourage others to do the same. Read more about the campaign on page 10.

Domestic ducks removed from Salina

In July the domestic duck issue at Salina was finally addressed. After several feral Mallard and Muscovy Duck were found dead or dying on a stretch of land adjacent to the nature reserve, the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights removed most of the birds from the area, which is not managed by BirdLife Malta. Following tests, the Environment and Resources Authority confirmed that the birds were infected with avian flu and salmonella. Whilst epidemiological evidence showed that there was no known risk of illness to humans, this virus can be

transmitted to other birds and domestic poultry. The presence of non-native domestic fowl in a Natura 2000 Site causes major imbalance for the native biodiversity and should always be avoided.

► The area outside the reserve where these feral ducks used to live

The ducks were relocated to a controlled site for further monitoring by the Veterinary Regulation Directorate.

Back to the wild

In August, BirdLife Malta released back into the wild a number of rehabilitated birds. These were a Common Kestrel, two Green Sandpipers, a Little Stint and a Little Bittern. The Green Sandpipers and the Little Stint were victims of illegal trapping reported at Siggiewi. After being nursed back to health they were reintroduced to the wild at Salina Nature Reserve. The Common Kestrel, a female, was picked up by the Environmental Protection Unit at Xgħajra in May, having been illegally shot. She was released on Kemmuna. Another bird – a Scopoli's Shearwater – was lucky to survive after becoming entangled in fishing line. The bird was handed over to BirdLife Malta by Nature Trust-FEE Malta's marine rescue team for rehabilitation and later released back to sea.

Mariners required to protect seabirds

BirdLife Malta's LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija has partnered with Transport Malta to reduce the impact of maritime activities on protected Yelkouan Shearwater in the Maltese Islands. Following research carried out under the project, guidelines to minimise the impact of boats at nine sensitive sites that host Yelkouan Shearwater colonies in Malta and Gozo were issued as Notices to Mariners and published in September. Boat-based tourism is highly popular and a source of income to many families in Malta, so the socio-economic impact of this project objective on commercial boat operators had to be considered. To reach a compromise we discussed these guidelines with the operators and also consulted with the Environment & Resources Authority (ERA).



► Project partner Transport Malta's enforcement team patrolling sensitive seabird breeding colonies

Light pollution guidelines released

In the past months our LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project has released a set of guidelines for ecologically responsible lighting in the Maltese Islands. As light pollution is one of the most significant threats for seabirds, the document provides local councils, architects and developers with best-practice guidelines for the design and assessment of sustainable, cost-effective and seabird-friendly lighting. The guidelines were published independently of the light pollution guidelines published by the Maltese Government earlier this year, to which BirdLife Malta contributed with data-driven proposals. We hope that the guidelines we have issued together with the positive steps taken by the Government will finally result in the formation of a policy on light pollution for Malta.



► Light pollution at Buġibba

European Honey-buzzard



The European Honey-buzzard breeds in Europe and winters in tropical Africa. It is a medium-sized raptor. Colour of plumage varies a lot, especially in juvenile birds. The most common colour is reddish-brown.

In autumn adult birds start their journey south from early August with juvenile birds migrating later on. In Malta they are with us mostly in September and early October and most are inexperienced juvenile birds. Sometimes they are seen in big numbers, with flocks of up to 100 birds. Birds arriving in late morning and early afternoon will be migrating very high and difficult to spot with the naked eye and they keep on going, whilst later in the day they fly lower and try to find a place where to roost and spend the night. They will continue their journey to Africa the next morning.

This bird of prey is a specialist feeder, living mainly on the larvae and nests of wasps and hornets, although it will take small mammals, reptiles and other birds. It spends large amounts of time on the forest floor excavating wasp nests. It is equipped with long toes and claws adapted to raking and digging, and scale-like feathering on its head, thought to be a defence against the stings of its victims. Honey-buzzards are thought to have a chemical deterrent in their feathers that protects them from wasp attacks.

Maltese name: Kuċċarda

Scientific name: *Pernis apivorus*

Length: 52–60 cm

Wingspan: 125–145 cm

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Local Status: Common autumn migrant from mid-August to late October (mostly mid-September to early October). It occurs in smaller numbers in spring from mid-March to early June (mostly late April to late May)

Call: Typical call a clear, drawn-out, melodious, melancholy 'whee-oo'

Behaviour: In Malta it is mostly seen flying and soaring, sometimes in big flocks. Also roosts in groups in big trees such as Buskett

Habitat: When breeding, forests with clearings or open ridges. On migration over open country. Unlike most larger raptors, will routinely cross wide stretches of sea

Although fully protected, as all other raptors visiting the Maltese Islands, honey-buzzards are still illegally gunned down by hunters, especially late in the evenings when these birds fly very low trying to find a place where to roost. BirdLife Malta is still working hard to protect such beautiful creatures that visit our islands on their migration journeys.

WORDS Ray Galea Field Ornithologist and Naturalist

Nature at our reserves

Salina



Opening hours

Nature Reserve:

Daily 7am–8pm (Apr–Sep), 7am–6pm (Oct–Mar)

Visitor Centre:

Mon–Fri 8am–12pm, Sun 10am–2pm

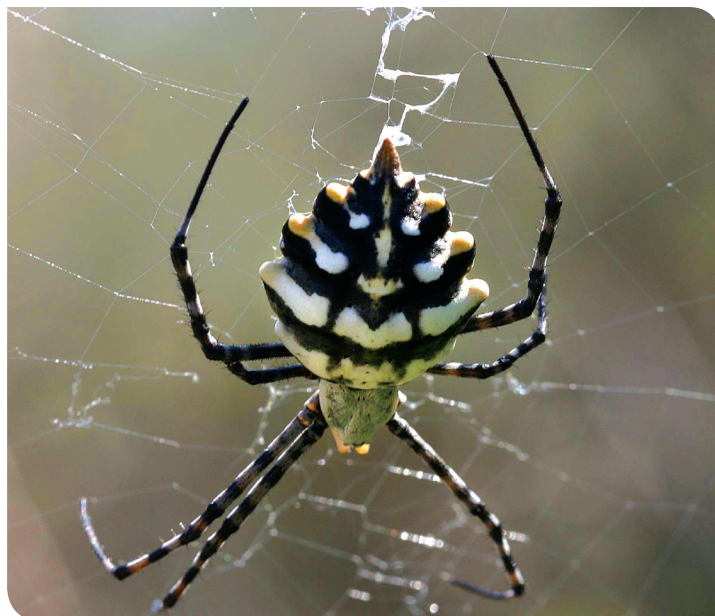
Entrance free (donations welcome!)

More info at <http://bit.ly/SalinaNatureReserve>

Lobed Argiope

Brimba Kbira tal-Widien *Argiope lobata*

People often ask whether spiders are venomous. Strictly speaking, virtually all of them are but most spider fangs can't pierce our skin so we're largely safe – at least here in Malta we are. Still, we do have a few impressive types, one of which is the Lobed Argiope. Its relatively large body (we're still talking an inch here), knobbly abdomen and long striped legs render it quite a looker. But for all her fearsome appearance, this lady (it's the lady we see, the male is minuscule) is no threat to us. The argiope generally builds its large orbweb across gaps in low shrubby vegetation, where all kinds of insects bundle into her trap. Her favourite, however, seem to be paper wasps, which often feature among its tightly-wrapped for-later victims.



Victor Falzon

► Lobed Argiope

Cattle Egret

Agrett tal-Bhejjem *Bubulcus ibis*

If birds were into sports, herons and egrets would dominate the basketball world, on account of their long legs and tall lean body. Ten species of herons have been recorded in Malta, one of which is the Cattle Egret, a white bird with dark legs and a snazzy chrome yellow bill. The reference to cattle is because the bird often follows herds of cows and other large grazers and feed on insects and other small animals disturbed by the big beasts as they walk or wallow. The Cattle Egret is mostly a bird of tropical and subtropical regions, and 20 years ago was a rarity in Malta. In recent years, however, they have become regulars, and one or two often grace the pans at Salina, adding to the colour and variety of life at the reserve.



Victor Falzon

► Cattle Egret

Sea Squill

Għansar *Urginea pancrati*

If you walk along the rocky north side of Salina at this time of year you may notice a few weird stalks growing a metre tall straight out of the ground sporting this lovely plume of pale flowers: welcome to the Sea Squill. The squill is a bulb plant, and the magic of bulb plants is they survive like a medieval castle. The squill grows its food (= large fleshy leaves) in times of plenty (= winter and spring) but with impending hardship (= summer) it draws all produce into the bunker fortress (= the underground bulb), shuts all exits (= withers leaves) and survives on its stored goodness. And then, in late summer, it flowers during a period when few other plants are in bloom. So the Sea Squill gets all the insects to itself. Neat!



Victor Falzon

► Sea Squill

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



As our schools seek ways of keeping our children and staff safe during the COVID-19 new scholastic year, schools abroad are turning to their grounds as a solution. But can we do the same in Malta?

Mirrors of society

The way we build our schools is a true reflection of our culture through the ages: from wartime parade-ground-ready designs such as the Birkirkara or Marsa Primary Schools to today's hotel-like structures, our schools mirror society in a big way. A glance at the plans of four of our more recent schools compared to schools over the preceding 60 years reveals our falling out of love with nature. As our lives become more urbanised, so too the structures that house us.



► Nature-based learning programmes are associated with improved motivation for learning

But now that we are faced with a new reality that is forcing us to think outside the box, the inadequacy of our school grounds hits us squarely in the face: we have no spaces

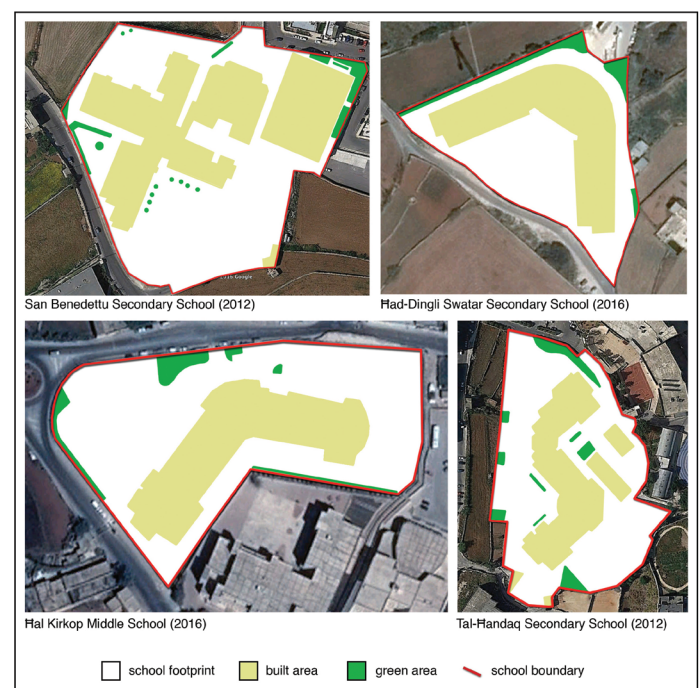
to conduct lessons in nature. We cannot reap the rewards of leaving room for ecological diversity in our lives by taking lessons out of the classroom and into nature's healing openness.

Nature-based learning

The International School Grounds Alliance is a global network of organisations, seeking to enrich children's learning by changing school grounds into fertile places for learning and for nature. Backed by a growing body of research that supports learning through nature as a teaching approach that enhances

learning, schools are re-designing their grounds to create 'learning landscapes'. The concept is based on the belief that children's and nature's wellbeing are intrinsically linked. This belief is backed by a number of studies that show improved academic performance in specific subjects and higher motivation to attend school in children attending nature-based learning programmes.

For NGOs like BirdLife Malta nature-based learning is the light at the end of the tunnel. The world has been in a tailspin of biodiversity loss that can only be curbed by a slowing of population growth and a drastic change in our lifestyles. Connecting children with nature from an early age has been





- Children's and nature's wellbeing are intrinsically linked

linked with motivation to act in environment-friendly ways in a number of studies. While it seems an overwhelming task to change entrenched behaviours, education can provide the long-term solution if we simply take children out into nature regularly. And what better place to do this than on the school grounds and through subject learning?

Influencing change

BirdLife Malta's Education Team have been hard at work advocating for better designed school grounds that would



- Experiential learning through nature has yielded higher academic results in certain subjects

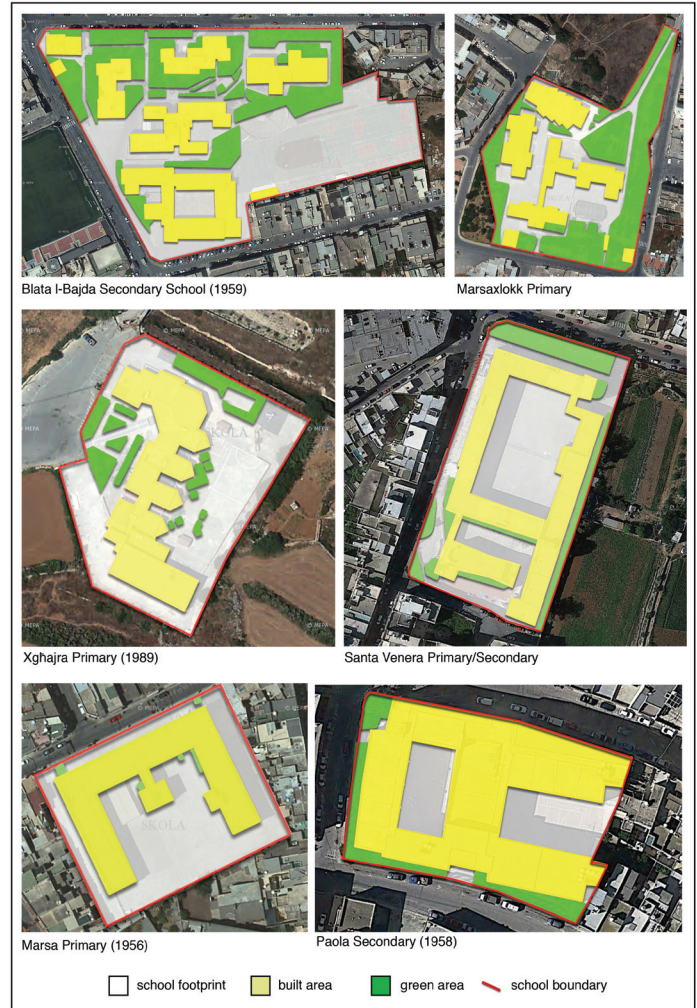
increase urban biodiversity while providing grounds for a teaching approach that benefits children. FTS, the foundation in charge of state school design and building, have been repeatedly approached with suggestions for incorporating nature in our spatially-challenged schools. While this door remains a challenge to open, more success has been achieved with individual schools.

A nature-based programme at Blata I-Bajda Middle School transformed a derelict area into a Reading Garden through the Dinja Waħda Programme. At St Michael School in Pembroke,



- BirdLife Malta has created gardens with indigenous wildlife for outdoor learning in a number of schools

our design and education team have joined forces with the school administration to produce a garden where learning outdoors takes place with primary-aged children. At Fgura Primary, a nature space BirdLife Malta created in the 1980's is now being used for outdoor classes while teachers at Lija Primary await fixing of an unsafe boundary wall to get into regular teaching-through-nature gear. At Mrieħel Secondary School, a now-mature indigenous garden planted largely in 2003 is home to a flourishing mini wildlife haven. Staff training in nature-based teaching is ongoing in all schools that have taken up nature-spaces initiatives.



- Adapting to the COVID-19 reality: learning through nature outdoors in schools with grounds for nature

BirdLife Malta support for nature-based learning includes design of spaces, fixtures and planting advice.

Looking forward

Many of our schools, and sadly most of the recent ones, have missed the opportunity of designing school grounds that support nature-based learning and we now face the consequences by not having adequate outdoor space to take the COVID-generated pressure. Will this be a wake up call to our designers? BirdLife Malta will certainly not be relaxing its efforts to change our sterile school grounds.

WORDS **Desirée Falzon** BirdLife Malta Field Teacher

Birds are #onthemove!

Why do
certain birds
fly in V
formation?

Where do
birds migrate
to in autumn?

Why is
Malta important
for birds during
the autumn
migration?

#onthemove
enjoy care protect

Do all bird
species migrate
at the same
time?

Why do we
see birds of
prey soaring
in circles?

And do
all birds
migrate?

Join us this autumn to explore
the autumn bird migration and enjoy the spectacle
provided by thousands of birds on their journeys
south to spend winter in Africa!

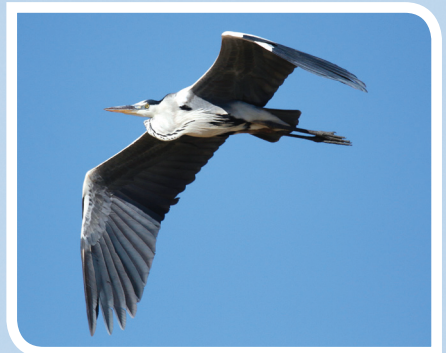
- ✈ <https://birdlifemalta.org/onthemove> to learn more.
- ✈ <https://bit.ly/reportasighting> to tell us what you've seen.

Since we launched the campaign in mid-August more Maltese citizens have increased their understanding of bird migration and joined us to watch migrating birds and record their sightings whilst recording and reporting illegal activities and injured birds. A number of local volunteers have also joined us for this year's Raptor Camp to monitor illegal hunting of wild birds during the period when the peak autumn migration coincides with the hunting season.

We want the public
to **ENJOY, CARE** about,
and **PROTECT** migrating birds.

You too can give your support in protecting
migratory birds and their natural
environment!

- ✈ **Become a member**
<http://bit.ly/join-BirdLifeMalta>
- ✈ **Become a supporter**
<http://bit.ly/Becomeasupporter>



► Grey Heron



► European Bee-eater



► Marsh Harrier

Aron Tanti

Aron Tanti

Aron Tanti

This autumn marks the end of another successful seabird conservation project for BirdLife Malta – LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija. The project started in 2015 focusing on the long-term recovery of the Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) in Malta. Yelkouans are endemic to the Mediterranean and as 10% of their global population breed in Malta, protecting them here is important to sustain their global population.

JuanSa Santiago



▶ As seabirds nest in cliffs, many of the breeding colonies can only be accessed by abseiling

The project combined research and on-site conservation to protect this threatened seabird. After handling almost 1,500 individual adults (1,050 of which we ringed for the first time) and over 500 chicks, as well as analysing thousands of camera trap and thermal images, plus lots of hard work in the field, we now have an improved understanding of the distribution, population size of the species and how to manage the threats at each colony. The presence of rats at most breeding colonies across Malta was one of the biggest threats. Light pollution, disturbance from boat-based tourism and disturbance by site-users were also identified as prevalent threats across many breeding colonies.

A main focus of our conservation actions has been reducing rat populations at breeding colonies. Rats raid yelkouan nests and eat eggs or young chicks. This is especially problematic to the reproductive success due to yelkouan pairs only laying one egg a year, and if this egg or chick is destroyed the breeding pair will not attempt to breed again until the following year, so population recovery is slow. The many hours spent in the field in an effort to suppress rat populations at six breeding sites across the Maltese Islands have therefore been well worth it, increasing average reproductive success and saving many Yelkouan chicks each year.

Martin Austad



▶ A Yelkouan Shearwater chick being monitored and ringed

The project also worked on influencing policy to reduce the threats of light pollution and human disturbance. Light pollution can disorientate seabirds (especially fledglings), and together with other human disturbance, can discourage adult birds from visiting their

Closing another successful seabird conservation project

chicks. Working with many stakeholders, we have successfully reduced point sources of light pollution at many specific areas hosting yelkouan colonies. We published a set of *Guidelines for Ecologically Responsible Lighting* and have also submitted our policy recommendations to relevant policy decision-makers. We also proposed guidelines to regulate boat-based tourism at certain colony sites to reduce the disturbance to breeding Yelkouan Shearwaters. Transport Malta, our partner in the project, has published these regulations in the form of Notices to Mariners.

In addition to helping conserve the Yelkouan Shearwater, the project has had wider positive effects on other seabird species in Malta too, as often the threats affecting different seabirds are similar, especially rat predation.

Although this project is ending, seabird conservation in Malta will progress under a new project, LIFE PanPuffinus! This project will continue important work in the Maltese Islands to ensure that yelkouans raise their chicks successfully, and to work with fisheries to understand the scale of incidental capture in fishing gear as a threat to seabirds and possible mitigation. We look forward to starting this new phase and continuing to work with our amazing Mediterranean seabirds!

WORDS **Hannah Pepe** BirdLife Malta Seabird Conservation Assistant



LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija

▶ Finding and accessing nests to monitor eggs and chicks can be a bit of a challenge and a squeeze!

Northwestern promise

didn't, and one of the most scenic and diverse corners of Malta is now a protected park where nature can thrive. Our autumn trek takes in evocatively named cliffs, garrigue, vernacular architecture, and a cast of plants and animals.

Majjistral very nearly never was: had ignorance had its way, the place would be a golf course. Fortunately it

Xagħra l-Ħamra and Ras il-Waħx

A good place to start is the Visitor Centre. Housed in a sensitively restored Modernist building, it's the perfect foreword to what the park has to tell. From the Centre, take the path through a cluster of colonial buildings, a reminder of the final chapter of Malta's British past. The path is lined with Fennel, and you're quite likely to come across the Swallowtail. It's our largest butterfly, and Fennel is one of its foodplants. Red-veined Darter dragonflies can be abundant here in autumn, and Robins and Black Redstarts make the most of the overgrown corners. Both species can be heard singing in October and early November as they carve out territories for the winter.

The gentle uphill to the right takes you past a crumbling farmhouse and on to Xagħra l-Ħamra. Once a wasteland of trapping sites, it is now a prize exhibit of what a decade of gentle self-healing can do to garrigue. While spring is the best time to find orchids

among the profusion of colour, autumn is not to be discounted. The helpings of red soil nourish delicate Autumn Narcissus and Mediterranean Meadow Saffron. Garrigue is a magnet for birds that prefer open ground. Look out for small flocks of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits, Common Stonechats, Northern Wheatears and the occasional Stone Curlew and Dotterel. The westernmost and highest point of Xagħra l-Ħamra, Ras il-Waħx, overlooks the boulder cliffs of Rđum Majjiesa, as well as a vast and empty horizon. 'Waħx' means 'horror', but the Italian poet Ungaretti came closer: 'M'illumino d'immenso' ('I flood myself with the immense').

Ras il-Waħx to Pillbox

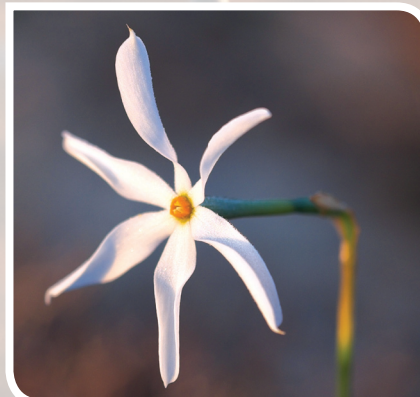
From Ras il-Waħx, follow the track down along the cliff edge. Autumn in Malta may be parched, but the boulder screes that lead down to the sea are mottled with the intense green of Sea Samphire. The pillbox was built – to a golden ratio, unwittingly no doubt – in



► Common Stonechat



► Red-veined Darter dragonfly



► Autumn Narcissus

the later years of World War II, when the threat of invasion felt real enough for the northern part of Malta to be turned into a obstacle course of barbed wire, anti-tank walls and ditches. The pillbox is now an altogether more peaceable home to geckoes and sparrows, and to Blue Rock-thrushes that use it as a vantage post. The garrigue and cultivated fields that surround it are excellent habitat for the late summer broods of Wall Brown and Bath White butterflies. The Pygmy Skipper, too, is a fairly frequent flyer. Nectar, a rare luxury in autumn, is provided by the purple flowers of the Ground Thistle. This beautiful species has massive and highly toxic taproots that help it survive the summer drought.

Għajn Żnuber

The track that passes by the pillbox winds up to Għajn Żnuber, landmarked by an old building that may have served as a lookout post. The view extends from Baħrija to the south, to the St Agatha Tower and L-Aħrax to the north. On clear days, it includes Mt Etna and the southern coast of Sicily. This is an excellent birdwatching perch from where to watch migrating birds. In autumn, it's particularly good for birds of prey, finches, thrushes and larks. The cliffs and boulders of Rđum id-Delli far below add to the rugged drama of the place. It's also where you stand a chance to observe a behaviour of butterflies known as 'hill-topping'. As the word suggests, it is the tendency of butterflies to concentrate on high ground. If you're lucky enough to find yourself surrounded with Painted Ladies, watching a Honey-buzzard head north towards a misty Etna, the world will have fallen into place.

WORDS Mark-Anthony Falzon Anthropologist with a passion for nature

MAP Victor Falzon



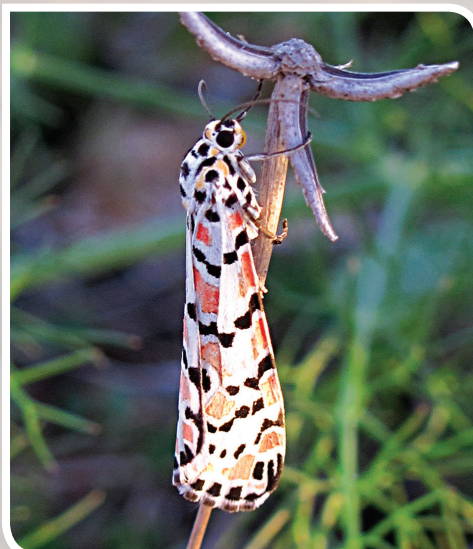
► Mediterranean Meadow Saffron



► Common Kestrel



► Blue Rock-thrush



► Crimson-speckled Flunkey moth

Back to life

The mission of BirdLife Malta is to conserve wild birds, their habitats and biodiversity, working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. Here is a first-hand account of how we used our resources to improve habitat and biodiversity by restoring a rare and delicate habitat at Ghadira Nature Reserve. The sand dune restoration project is another feather in our cap and another example of how we work to give present and future generations more nature to enjoy.

WORDS Mark Gauci BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves Manager

Joe Sultana



- Sand dunes arguably qualify as the most endangered natural habitats in the Maltese Islands due to the small size of the dunes, the low proportion of sandy shores (just 2.4% of the entire islands' coastline), the intense human impact, and the lack of public awareness and information about these ecosystems. The best preserved and most iconic sand dunes are those at Ramla Bay in Gozo.

BirdLife Malta



- In the early 1970s when environmental awareness about habitats was not present, parts of the Ghadira Bay sand dunes were heavily planted with acacia and eucalyptus trees. The trees matured and created shade. They also shed masses of foliage, which smothered the sand in a thick carpet of leaf litter. These changes altered the delicate ecology of the site and sealed the fate of rare dune flora. The situation was made worse when in the mid-1980s the existing main road leading from Mellieħa to Ċirkewwa was constructed, effectively isolating the dunes on the reserve's side cutting off new supply of sand.

BirdLife Malta



- Despite the limitations imposed by the main road, BirdLife Malta was always intent on restoring this habitat and help regenerate dune flora, and recreate habitat for dune fauna such as the elusive Burrowing Sand Cricket, for which this site is a last stronghold. Over three years ago work was started on the removal of the alien tree species which was no easy task, considering that the roots also had to be removed.

- ▶ Work on the restoration of the sand dunes took a significant boost when The Farsons Foundation stepped in to sponsor this exciting project. Apart from habitat restoration, this project aims to make the site accessible to the public and to students through the construction of a boardwalk across part of the site.



- ▶ The next arduous tasks involved the removal of organic material which was resulting in the growth of invasive annual plants that every year hinder the spread of the dune species. To expose the sand over 400 sacks of leaf litter were removed. Naturally this did not go to waste and it was used in other parts of the reserve.



Birdlife Malta

- ▶ With the clearing of the material completed it was time to turn our attention to the building of the boardwalk. The sand dune habitat is fragile and dynamic at the same time, so it is imperative it is not trampled upon. The boardwalk will grant access to the site without causing any damage. Recycled material was chosen to set up the boardwalk.



Birdlife Malta

- ▶ The job is largely complete and we await nature to take over this newly restored habitat. Over the past weeks we already had encouraging and unusually high records of Burrowing Sand Cricket, seemingly testament to the good job carried out. We also await to welcome our first (human) visitors back to the reserve to be able to share with them this small but important success story!



Aron Tanti

- ▶ Burrowing Sand Cricket



Aron Tanti

- ▶ Sea Daffodil

Birds are #onthemove!

As an island between two continents, Malta is a crucial stopover for migrating birds to rest and refuel before resuming their journey across long distances. For this year's autumn migration BirdLife Malta has launched for the first time the #onthemove campaign to encourage people to enjoy, care about, and help protect migratory birds. During their long flights, birds – such as this flock of Purple Herons – face multiple challenges and dangers that can jeopardize their safety. Many of these hazards are the result of human activity, and range from habitat loss, pollution and climate change to direct persecution from hunters and trappers. With your help we can combat these threats and ensure the birds' survival.

*More information
and ways to help
on page 10.*

#onthe
move
enjoy care protect