

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

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From big to effective



In a recent interview I had on a radio station programme, I was asked how I compare the hunting and developers' lobbies with that of the people who care for nature and a healthy environment. I was asked specifically "Aren't you also a big lobby?"

In the few minutes I had at my disposal, I answered that yes, we are a big lobby. I truly believe it because as time passes I am seeing, reading and feeling more anger and frustration from individuals and families that want a healthier environment and a nature that is protected and conserved for generations to come. But being big is not enough. Malta needs an effective lobby, a movement, that mobilises people to show that they are ready to stand up and be counted.

We have a disadvantage that environmental issues are many and varied; like pollution, hunting, overdevelopment, unsustainable practices, destruction of trees, and many more. Other lobbies can be more focused and can issue straightforward statements such as "No Hunting, No Vote". Unfortunately, politicians tend to hear and care only about that and disregard the rest. The biggest and most shameful example was when all Maltese MEPs recently voted in favour of a motion to object to the removal of lead from shotgun pellets. Lead is a toxic killer and we have removed it from fuel and from paint and many other areas, but when it comes to hunting, politicians become weak at the knees and forget they have a spine. Thankfully the motion did not go through and we are on track to see positive improvements on this in Europe and Malta.

My point is that we as individuals need to be more direct, more consistent, more focused and united to get the politicians to listen to us. BirdLife Malta will continue working to facilitate this advocacy mission and we need your support by simply inviting others to join us.

Finally I wish you a pleasant and healthy Christmas and may the year 2021 be a good one for all people and nature.

Mark Sultana
CEO

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.



Katarzyna Pacon

EU takes action against Malta

on all active hunting and trapping derogations

On 3 December the European Commission announced the start of Infringement Proceedings against Malta on all active hunting and trapping derogations. It called on Malta to discontinue:

- the spring hunting derogation allowing hunting of Quail (which the Commission termed as a smokescreen for the illegal hunting of protected European Turtle-doves),
- the trapping derogation allowing trapping of Golden Plover and Song Thrush (which it termed as not being properly enforced and resulting in other species being killed),
- the trapping of finches for research purposes – a derogation which was enacted for the first time this year in defiance of the European Court of Justice ruling of 2018 (which the European Commission says is circumventing the ECJ judgement by permitting trapping of finches in similar conditions as before the ruling, even if under the guise of a new derogation).

In two Letters of Formal Notice sent to Malta, the EU has given the Maltese Government two months to remedy the situation, otherwise the Commission may decide to issue a Reasoned Opinion. This would be the second and final warning before legal action is taken, resulting in Malta being again dragged to the ECJ. BirdLife Malta reacted in a press conference and called on the Government to heed the EU's warnings and immediately suspend all ongoing derogations.

With the opening of the trapping season in October, the Maltese Government is not

► The European Commission has initiated Infringement Proceedings against Malta on all active hunting and trapping derogations

only allowing the trapping of Golden Plover and Song Thrush, but also trapping of finches with the excuse of "scientific research." In a press conference outside the Office of the Prime Minister, BirdLife Malta officials explained that this decision defies the ECJ ruling which found Malta guilty of infringing the Birds Directive when it allowed finch trapping from 2014 to 2017. It also goes against Malta's Accession Treaty to the EU where Malta agreed to abolish trapping of songbirds by 2008. Following the press conference, 24 EU BirdLife Partners endorsed a letter signed by BirdLife International CEO Patricia Zurita, BirdLife Europe Senior Head of Policy Ariel Brunner and BirdLife Malta CEO Mark Sultana. The letter was sent to the European Commissioner for Environment Virginijus Sinkevičius requesting a quick and direct intervention against Malta on the new finch trapping derogation. It explained that this would set a precedent and sends the message that countries may get away with illegal killing of Europe's wild birds. The letter was accompanied by a dossier with all the arguments and facts that demonstrate the abuse of the Birds Directive.

Rare habitat restored

BirdLife Malta has completed the restoration of the sand dune habitat at Ghadira Nature Reserve. The project was inaugurated at an event held at the reserve in the presence of officials from The Farsons Foundation, who bought into our vision and provided financial assistance which made this project possible.

BirdLife Malta has long earmarked this area for habitat restoration especially in view of the presence of the very rare Burrowing Sand Cricket, which is protected also at European level. The species has declined due to habitat loss.



Katarzyna Pacon

► Inauguration of the Ghadira sand dune restoration project

Nature reserves receive funding

BirdLife Malta received €60,000 in funding for Ghadira and Simar Nature Reserves to continue managing the two Natura 2000 sites. During a visit to Ghadira by Environment Minister Aaron Farrugia, an agreement was signed between the Environment Ministry, BirdLife Malta and the Environment & Resources Authority (ERA) which will see the implementation of a number of initiatives and projects improving accessibility and security at both sites. These include a research laboratory, new security cameras, new sanitary facilities and new machinery for tree-planting.

BirdLife Malta



► The Government has opened a finch trapping season in defiance of the ECJ 2018 ruling

Trapping season in breach of ECJ ruling

With the opening of the trapping season in October, the Maltese Government is not

Protest against Mizzieb and Ahrax handover

In strict observance of social distancing measures, protesters gathered in front of the Prime Minister's Office in Valletta on 31 October to voice their objection to the Government's decision to hand over Il-Mizzieb and L-Ahrax woodlands to hunters. The sit-down protest was organised by Spazji Miftuħa, a coalition of 60 organisations which include BirdLife Malta. A message was read out by Josianne Micallef. The event was held a day after the group of eNGOs launched a legal challenge to the deed through which the Government granted guardianship of these two large woodlands to the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK).



► Sit-down protest in Valletta

Nathaniel Attard

Illegal hunting continues

By the end of October BirdLife Malta and the police had recovered a staggering 193 shot protected birds so far this year, with 75 of these retrieved since the start of the autumn hunting season. Naturally, a large number of birds of prey were targeted as soon as

the autumn raptor migration started, with no less than 52 raptors illegally shot down since 1 September. Amongst these we recovered a rare Short-toed Eagle, one of a flock that was met with gunfire as they reached Gozo.

The illegal hunting



► A Short-toed Eagle was amongst the illegal hunting casualties recovered this autumn

casualties also included a Short-eared Owl which was shot down at L-Ahrax which is now a territory managed by FKNK.

Katarzyna Pacion

More birds released

In October and November, BirdLife Malta successfully rehabilitated and released 15 birds, most of which were confirmed illegal hunting casualties, while some others were found exhausted or weak. In early November, we released four birds – a Short-eared Owl, a Honey-buzzard, a Hobby and a Marsh Harrier. Earlier, we released a Hoopoe, a female Marsh Harrier, a Stone Curlew and a Hobby which were all found with gunshot



► A Short-eared Owl shortly after being released back into the wild

Alvin Farrugia

injuries by members of the public, together with a Short-eared Owl that had been recovered weak from migration by the police. Some days before, another six birds were released. Three of them – a Honey-buzzard and two Marsh Harriers were confirmed shot while another two Honey-buzzards and a Yellow-legged Gull were rehabilitated after being found exhausted. The birds were all released on Kemmuna, a bird sanctuary.

Virtual AGM

BirdLife Malta's 58th Annual General Meeting was held virtually via Zoom on 28 October. We were happy to host a considerable number of our members online and discuss with them our Financial Report for 2019 and the operational report highlighting the work we did last year. Participating members approved a number of small changes to the statute, and also a motion moved during the meeting with regard to our nature reserves. We also shared with our members a video summing up our LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project, which has now come to an end.

Dinja Waħda Awards 2020

The annual Dinja Waħda Awards ceremony was this year held online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The awards celebrated the commitment of the schools to implement our Dinja Waħda environmental education programme during the 2019–2020 scholastic year. This has been a challenging year for everyone, but schools have adapted to the circumstances and performed incredibly well once more! This year 31 schools were awarded gold, 6 silver, 14 bronze and 29 certificates. Three schools also received a special award for nature-based learning initiatives. BirdLife Malta is grateful to Bank of Valletta for its continued sponsorship of Dinja Waħda.

LIFE PanPuffinus! is here

After 15 years of uninterrupted seabird research BirdLife Malta will continue protecting Malta's seabirds on land and at sea with the launch of a new Mediterranean-wide collaboration for the conservation of two endemic and threatened Mediterranean seabird species: the Yelkouan Shearwater and the Balearic Shearwater. Through the new LIFE PanPuffinus! project, BirdLife Malta has joined forces with its BirdLife partners from France, Greece, Portugal and Spain to share knowledge and investigate further the whereabouts of these elusive birds, their interactions with fisheries, and the perils these sea voyagers face.

European Parliament votes to #BanLead

At the end of November, the European Parliament voted to ban the use of lead ammunition in wetlands. MEPs rejected two motions tabled by far-right groups in the European Parliament requesting amendments to the original proposal. Following this, the European Commission will now adopt the proposal. It is estimated that every year, over 20,000 tons of lead shot is deposited in our natural environment. Lead is poisonous to plants, soil, water, animals and people. BirdLife Europe, which led a campaign to ban lead shot, hailed this as a victory for nature and for birds.

WORDS **Maria Dyrdenkova** BirdLife Malta Communications Assistant

Common Stonechat

Maltese name: Buċaq tax-Xitwa

Scientific name: *Saxicola torquatus*

Length: 12.5 cm

Wingspan: 18–21 cm

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Local Status: Common autumn migrant and winter visitor

Call: Typical call sounds like two stones being knocked together

Behaviour: Likes to perch on top of bushes and wires, sometimes flicking wings while perching. Feeds on the ground eating insects, seeds, worms and spiders

Habitat: Garrigue, open spaces, grassland and coastal areas



The Common Stonechat is a common wintering bird normally arriving in mid-October. Bird ringing records confirm its frequent occurrence. Over a decade (2006–2016), more than 2,000 birds were ringed in the Maltese Islands. Sometimes, influxes are recorded in autumn.

The main breeding grounds stretch from western to east Europe and North Africa. In order to avoid the freezing temperature in the northern hemisphere, these birds migrate to Mediterranean countries (including North Africa) and the Middle East which have milder winter temperatures.

As its name suggests, it has loud call sounds like two stones being tapped together. The males have distinct black heads whereas the females lack the black head but have brown backs and an orange tinge to their chest. Unlike the closely related Whinchat, the Common Stonechat does not have an eye-stripe.

Unlike most passerine species, stonechats are relatively easy to observe – they often perch conveniently on tops of bushes, and sometimes electricity cables. They usually feed on insects, worms and spiders.

Għadira, Xrobb l-Għagin, Salina, Simar and Il-Majjistral are among the prime sites where to spot this beautiful bird. The runway fields are also important wintering grounds for this little bird despite the continuous aviation activity. In late winter, they leave the Maltese archipelago to return to their breeding grounds in Europe.

During the breeding season they build their nest in open areas with low vegetation, using moss, lichen and grass.

Normally, a nest contains 3–8 eggs which take up to 15 days to hatch.

Over the last two decades, scientific bird ringing has shown how stonechats return to regular wintering grounds. In 2002 a bird ringed in Lunzjata Valley (Gozo), was captured again two years later. In early March 2013 a stonechat was ringed at Simar and recaptured almost two years later in the same place. Another interesting retrap was logged in February 2004. This particular bird was originally ringed at Għadira Nature Reserve and the following autumn it was found on Kemmuna at Wied l-Aħmar.

WORDS James Aquilina BirdLife Malta licensed bird ringer and bird photographer

Nature at our reserves

Ghadira



Opening hours

September to May

Monday & Thursday 2pm-6pm

Saturday & Sunday 10am-4pm

Entrance free (donations welcome!)

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

Wild Rabbit

Fenek Selvaġġ *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

The Wild Rabbit is not really native to Malta. It was imported from mainland Europe long ago – possibly in Roman times – but it has been here so long that today we regard it as part of our fauna; it is in fact our largest wild land mammal. While smaller than the closely related hare (which does not occur in Malta), rabbits are nonetheless strong diggers, digging both to make their burrows as well as for roots and bulbs to eat, along with various grasses and flowers. They are most active at dawn or dusk to avoid detection, although the protected population at Għadira is regularly seen by day. In Malta their only predators are weasels and humans but at Għadira at least, the human factor is not a threat.



Victor Falzon

► Wild Rabbit

Common Coot

Tigieġa tal-Baħar *Fulica atra*

Despite its name, the Common Coot is not at all common in Malta. Although a regular annual visitor in autumn and winter, it is nonetheless a scarce bird. The main reason is we don't have its favourite habitat, ie lakes – the best on offer are Għadira, Simar and Salina. Coots also rest in bays and creeks but these all get shot by hunters, which is the second reason coots can never be common here. At our nature reserves coots are relatively safe – a few pairs have even nested at times, though not at Għadira so far. The rainier the season, the more chance there may be of a few coots turning up and wintering at the reserve, bobbing about in the water and diving for vegetation. Do pop down for a look, you may get lucky.



Victor Falzon

► Common Coot

Wood Blewits

Faqieġh Vjola *Clitocybe nuda*

Traditionally fungi have always been lumped with the plants, but they are actually very different, and today they are considered a separate kingdom of living organisms. The main part of a fungus lives underground as a network of threadlike structures, and the familiar smurf-friendly mushrooms are only its fruiting body. Many of the ca 500 species of mushrooms that occur in Malta look rather alike but some are easy to recognise. The lovely Wood Blewits is one of these, on account of its delicate lilac colour, which is not common in mushrooms. It grows under trees on various leaf litters, and it's never very common. But I have been lucky to spot it on various occasions at Għadira, always growing in the shadier parts of the site. Magical.



Victor Falzon

► Wood Blewits

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

Teach, Inspire and Protect!

In September 2018, BirdLife Malta's education team embarked on an exciting three-year journey to develop a beautiful **Erasmus+** project, aimed at early years' educators and children. The project is being piloted in Malta with the support of the Ministry for Education and Employment and St Nicholas College Mġarr Primary School, and with international expertise from Learning Through Landscapes Trust in the UK, BirdLife Spain and INAK from Slovakia.

The project concept arose from the need of connecting early years children with nature and the outdoors environment.

Why?

- Early childhood plays a vital role in the formation of values and skills of individuals. Young children also require a different approach to learning which is exploratory, sensory and interactive. Luckily, nature and outdoor spaces provide the perfect setting for this!
- Nature offers a stimulating environment and contributes to their healthiness, cognitive and emotional growth, wellbeing, enhanced skills and appreciation of nature, supporting the holistic development of the child.
- Spending time in nature is not only beneficial for children's development, but also contributes to nature's sustainability. Establishing a connection between children and nature from early years, will increase the chances for having future adults more responsible towards the environment. Now more than ever we need people who love and take care of nature. Climate change and loss of biodiversity is



► Upcycling, balance and play



► Learning outdoors and exploration

continuing at alarming rates, whilst technology has replaced the traditional and more engaging ways of children's play.

In a nutshell, **"children need nature and nature needs children!"**

How?

The project is building the confidence of educators to explore new teaching approaches, enhance their school grounds and offer more stimulating opportunities to children.

Currently, the Ministry for Education and Employment is also heralding a new innovative approach to education called the Emergent Curriculum which aligns nicely with nature-based learning.

Children have an innate curiosity, showing interest in their surroundings and eager to experience new things. Therefore, learning should be less restrictive and more enjoyable for children. The Emergent Curriculum is promoting listening to children's voices, observing them, and choosing activities that spark their interest and creativity.

Children's ideas and interests are a valuable source of what the curriculum should look like. When they are engaged in what they do, the learning process is more effective and most importantly enjoyable! At this early stage in their life, children have the right to play, have fun, allowing them to decide on their own, whilst also encouraging them.

A nice illustration of children's creativity and interests is wisely presented by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his book *The Little Prince*.

“Once, when I was six years old, I saw a magnificent picture in a book called *“True Stories”*, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a Boa Constrictor swallowing a wild beast. Here is a copy of the drawing.



In the book it said: *“Boa Constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it.”*

I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a coloured pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing. My drawing number 1. It looked like this:



I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them.

They answered me: *“Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?”*

My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a Boa Constrictor digesting an elephant. Then, I drew the inside of the Boa Constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. They always need to have things explained. My drawing number 2 looked like this:



The grown-ups’ response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of Boa Constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. I had been disheartened by the failure of my drawings. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”

The Little Prince (1943), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



► Experiential learning through nature

Therefore, the project aims to train teachers to integrate contemporary teaching approaches, to inspire and make them feel confident to carry out outdoors education with their pupils!



At St Nicholas College Mġarr Primary School, educators participated in different workshops, they put into practice the new approach, they observed children’s interests and needs, followed by changes on their school grounds that also benefit nature. The parents and the local council were also involved, thus enhancing collaboration in the community. The journey is long and exciting, but the results are fantastic, and the children’s enthusiasm is contagious.

The project is going through the last year of implementation, creating resources for teacher training and aiming to involve more schools in Malta and in the partners’ countries. Thanks to the **Erasmus+** funding scheme and to the dedication of all partners involved in the project, we are contributing to a more sustainable future and children’s holistic development.

WORDS **Štefania Papadopol** BirdLife Malta Project Coordinator
PHOTOGRAPHS **Mġarr Primary School**



► Enhancing school grounds for motor skills and floor games



► Enhancing school grounds for nature

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Happy Christmas & Happy New Year
to all our members

Nature benefits our mental health



Did you know that one in four of us are affected by a mental health problem at some point in our lives? Have a look around you and think about all the people you know. The chances are a few of them will have a mental health problem, if you don't have one yourself.

In Malta, 96.2% of the population are living in an urban area. This alone increases the risk of suffering from depression by 40%, and the risk of suffering from anxiety by 20%. In fact, more than one in five young people aged 18 to 24 are at risk of suffering from depression, this is the third highest rate in Europe.

Now more than ever, after the struggles we have all faced this year with COVID-19 and self-isolation, it's important we find ways to reduce these risks. Recent research has shown that spending as little as two hours a week

outside connecting with nature can help to reduce levels of stress and improve happiness.

This is because nature is a sensory, calming and inspiring environment. Did you know that in the UK nature has actually been prescribed by doctors to help with mild to moderate mental health issues? Spending time in nature really is that beneficial!



► Spending time in the wild: one of the therapeutic sessions led by BirdLife Malta and the Richmond Foundation as part of the Blooming Minds programme

Last year we launched our **Blooming Minds** programme. This was an ecotherapy programme piloted in Malta that we designed alongside the Richmond Foundation to help people living with mental health problems in Malta. Ecotherapy sessions are inclusive outdoor activities that connect us with nature. This campaign was very well received with some amazing feedback from participants. Sadly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ever-changing restrictions throughout 2020 we were not able to provide this service as we had wished. But now we feel more than ever this programme is needed to help people after the negatives we have all faced this year. Because of this, we will be relaunching our Blooming Minds programme in the new year.

"To kick off the relaunch of Blooming Minds in 2021, we are excited to announce a lovely new partnership with Walk and Talk – a charity organisation aimed at raising awareness, reducing the stigma and supporting those suffering with a mental health illness"

To kick it off, we are excited to announce a lovely new partnership with '**Walk and Talk**', a charity organisation set up by Rachael Hollwey aimed at raising awareness, reducing the stigma and supporting those suffering with a mental health illness. Rachel organises monthly walks in nature that take place on the first Sunday of every month. The walks are a great way to connect with nature and talk with like-minded

individuals. These monthly walks are followed by coffee and cake and offer a great place to open up; or, if you aren't feeling ready to talk, a safe place to listen and realise you aren't alone.

The next 'Walk & Talk' will be held on Sunday 3 January 2021 (location and time still to be confirmed) – a much-needed event after the Christmas and

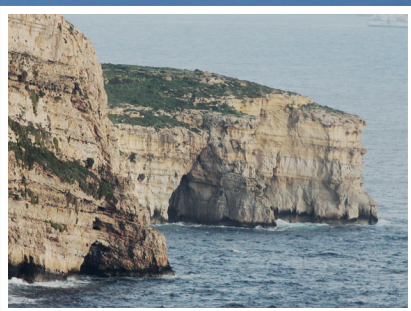
New Year period, which can often be difficult for those who suffer with mental health illness!

Follow us on Facebook to find more information at [@BloomingMindsMalta](https://www.facebook.com/BloomingMindsMalta).

WORDS **Jasmin Hinwood** BirdLife Malta Events Assistant



- Mid-winter garrigue at Ta' Ċenċ, with Branched Asphodel (Berwieq) dominating the flora in this area. Note the prehistoric dolmen in the middle distance



- Ras in-Newwiela from Sanap Cliffs



- Aerial photo of Mgarr ix-Xini



- Aerial view of Xlendi Bay, with the tower at the entrance

Exploring the majestic southern cliffs of Gozo

This walk on the sister island of Malta is a pleasant winter day trip that encompasses scenic limestone cliffs, rich garrigue flora and a landscape that shaped local history. The 8km walk starts from Mgarr ix-Xini Bay, proceeds to Ta' Ċenċ plateau, then on along the coast towards Sanap Cliffs and ends in Xlendi Bay. The walk takes two to three hours, leaving enough time for a well-deserved rest at the end.

Start at Mgarr ix-Xini

The adventure begins from the picturesque sea inlet of Mgarr ix-Xini. This small bay tucked between sheer cliffs on both sides was a notorious pirate shipping hub at the time of the Knights of St John. From this bay Ottomans invaded Gozo several times, particularly the famous raid of 1551 when, according to historians, the whole Gozitan population was carried off into slavery.

The bay is also rich in biodiversity. In winter one can observe Blue Rock-thrush on the clifftops, and Common Chiffchaffs busy feeding in the tamarisk trees that shelter the bay. White Wagtails and the odd Grey Wagtail can be seen collecting scraps of food in the bay. A pair of Common Kestrels and one or two Common Kingfishers often spend the winter in this bay too.

From the bay to Ta' Ċenċ

Start by walking part of the steep uphill road from the beach, then take a rugged path on the left (that leads to Kantra Beach) and continue up the asphalt road that runs past a number of villas and crosses the pleasant scenery of Ta' Ċenċ. The road is about 2km, but for the adventurous there are hidden paths to explore among the fields along the roadside.

The reward after a long walk is to be embraced by the immense beauty of the typical Maltese rocky garrigue on top of Ta' Ċenċ plateau. In winter the scenery is mostly green, which contrasts with the grey limestone. The place is engulfed with Mediterranean Thyme, and on the cliffside the national plant, the Maltese Rock-centaury is present. As for birds in winter, Ta' Ċenċ surely does not disappoint, with





▶ A male Linnet (Gojġin)



▶ A male Blue Rock-thrush (Merill)



▶ A young Common Kestrel (Spanjulett) from the breeding pair at Mgarr ix-Xini

small wintering flocks of Sky Larks, and the much more common Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails; Common Stonechats and Black Redstarts too are in their favourite habitat here. Yellow-legged Gulls glide along the cliffs, where a significant breeding colony is present. Common Kestrel and the scarce Peregrine Falcon are a possibility, the latter being a bonus. A sizeable flock of Linnets tend to winter here every year, and in the past Corn Buntings were a common sight.

Coastal cliff walk towards Sanap Cliffs

Head back to the same road you took to enter Ta' Ċenċ and walk towards the entrance of the hotel, whereupon you now enter the village of Ta' Sannat. Turn first left until you reach a roundabout with a statue of three farmers. From there, head downhill a few metres, then take first left and at the end of that road take left again. You will soon come to a rusty gate on your right that gives a slightly unwelcome greet, walk past it, but keep to the path as the land around is private. Walking roughly parallel to the cliff edge, this path will take you more than 3km past an area known as Iċ-Ċnus, on to Tal-Bardan

cliffs and then to Is-Sanap cliffs. Along this stretch of cliffs, one particular spot known as Il-Pinnur marks the highest cliff point in Gozo. The flora and fauna is very similar to Ta' Ċenċ. Spectacled Warblers are common resident birds here, unlike Malta, where they are less common. Red-throated Pipits are scarce but yearly winter residents here. Common Starlings tend to feed in the arable land around. The endemic Maltese Stocks is abundant on these cliffs, but very scarce elsewhere. Another purple-flowered plant that is also abundant in these parts but scarce elsewhere is the Coastal Viper's Bugloss.

Xlendi Tower and Bay

The walk starts to conclude close by Xlendi Tower, an incredible spot for sunset lovers, dominated by the Wardija cliffs – but that will be a different walk for another time. This walk ends in Xlendi Bay which, although heavily developed, is still a favourite spot for locals and tourists alike.

WORDS **Adin Vella** BirdLife Malta licensed bird ringer

MAP **Victor Falzon**



▶ The Maltese Rock-centaury (Widnet il-Baħar) is Malta's national plant



▶ Mediterranean Thyme (Sagħtar)



▶ Maltese Stocks (Ġiżi ta' Malta)

Making Kemmuna green again



► Kemmuna with its Blue Lagoon

The Maltese archipelago has not always had the appearance with which it presents itself today. During prehistoric times the territory of Malta and its two smaller islands, Gozo and Kemmuna, was mostly covered by trees. With the arrival of the first settlers the woods were gradually razed to the ground to use the timber as fuel and the new open spaces as pasture ground for cattle and for agricultural purposes. Nowadays the isolated woodlands mainly consist of the results of sporadic afforestation projects. BirdLife Malta is committed to making the Maltese Islands greener as can be witnessed by the Foresta 2000 project and other initiatives undertaken.



- The land where the rows of young planted trees and shrubs are growing during the winter months is covered by Cape Sorrel, an alien species in Malta but that provides a lot of nectar for different pollinators during the cold season



- The long rows of indigenous species of tree and shrubs planted on Kemmuna in order to re-establish the pre-existent Mediterranean woodland ecosystem



At the end of 2017 the Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change in collaboration with the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) started a very ambitious afforestation project on Kemmuna. The area, located between the Blue Lagoon (Bejn il-Kmiemen) and the cemetery, has been planted with a wide mix of native trees and shrubs. Around 3,600 trees and shrubs were planted.

Once they grow, these trees and shrubs will form a self-sustaining mature wood re-establishing the pre-existent ecosystem. The dry and rather arid Kemmuna will have its own small woodland which will become a haven for birds resting during their migration.

Last year Ambjent Malta, who to date had done a fantastic job in ensuring the trees and shrubs were regularly watered and maintained, roped in BirdLife Malta to take over the management of the afforestation. Given the opportunity to assist in making this tract of greenery on Kemmuna a reality, BirdLife Malta came on board at once!

The area managed by BirdLife Malta has been divided in seven pockets and around 3,000 trees and shrubs are growing healthily. During the dry summer months BirdLife Malta staff taking care of the site visited regularly in order to irrigate the trees. Management work includes the replacement of dead saplings, weeding when and where necessary, and ensuring tree guards are in place so that the young trees won't fall victim to the voracious rabbits on site.

The most common planted species present on site is the Lentisk (Deru, *Pistacia lentiscus*) along with Carob (Harruba, *Ceratonia siliqua*) and Strawberry Tree (Imbrijaġla, *Arbutus unedo*). In less quantity there is also Araar (Għargħar, *Tetraclinis articulata*) – which is Malta's national tree, and Evergreen Oak (Balluta, *Quercus ilex*).

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS Alice Sicoli Kemmuna Project Managing Warden



► The warden collects broken plastic nets used to protect the young trees from the wild rabbits present on site



► A young Araar is growing healthy and strong. The Araar is the national tree of Malta, unfortunately nowadays it is very rare and listed as a threatened species



► During the dry summer months this little natural rock pool was kept filled up with the freshwater used to irrigate the planted vegetation. This helps sustain different species of fauna



► The sign that warns the public not to walk on the area, so as not to trample on any small growing plant



► The area is frequently attended by a resident species, the Sardinian Warbler. This photo shows a beautiful adult male with its black head



► The Black Redstart loves to perch on the poles that support the young plants. This species comes to Malta to spend the winter season

Learning their secrets

Tim Micallef

Bird ringing is an important scientific tool that helps us study birds. It lets us monitor their movements and other aspects of their lives: how far they go, how long they live, how faithful they are to their habitat. Our licensed bird ringers carry out regular ringing sessions through the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme, which is the only official partner in Malta of EURING – the European Union for Bird Ringing. EURING promotes and coordinates scientific and administrative cooperation among national ringing schemes so that shared data can be used for more effective bird and nature conservation. To inform the general public about this scientific activity, we recently organised an online bird ringing demonstration. The special Facebook Live broadcast – which garnered quite an audience – also celebrated the end of our #onthemove campaign, which encouraged people to enjoy autumn bird migration.



Katarzyna Pacon



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