

# Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 67 ▪ March 2021







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Front cover photo Slender-billed Gull by Aron Tanti

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## Let's not abuse land, biodiversity or science



Springtime is with us and the birds are flying north to their breeding grounds. I would recommend you all experience the beauty of this phenomenon by simply going in nature and observing all that is around you. You are bound to see birds migrating, maybe even some local breeding species carrying nest material, or the males singing out to attract a female companion. This, combined with the colourful carpets of flowering plants, along with butterflies and other insects is not only relaxing, but also indicative of a positive feeling seeing nature re-energizing itself and reproducing a new cycle of life.

I have many times repeated the phrase that we humans are also part of nature and that nature is an indicator of our well-being too. Taking care of nature and observing it can indicate aspects that we need to take action upon for the benefit of biodiversity but also for us humans. Through scientific studies we know of the impacts of climate change, use of plastics and land abuse. We have facts that indicate we need to act and there is a positive movement to live a more sustainable lifestyle. BirdLife Malta and the whole BirdLife Partnership always believed that science is the backbone of all our conservation work and I would also add our education work and people-engagement activities. Science is there to help us understand factually and help us take action for the benefit of nature and us together.

Our natural resources have been used and abused of for so many years and now we are seeing science being abused of too. I am referring to the Government's decision to use science as an excuse to allow people to continue with their abuse of birds. It is a very pathetic and sad attempt to try to allow the unacceptable. The killing and taking of birds from the wild can never be justified with the excuse of a scientific activity. I truly believe we are reaching the end of such bad practices but instead of having it done by visionary leaders, this will be effected through the European Commission.

While birds are migrating to Europe, our calls are also towards Europe. We are asking them to bring Malta back in line with the European Union's Birds and Habitats Directives and to instill in our country respect for the law. I urge you to join us in our requests and to voice your concerns whenever you have the opportunity. It helps us, it helps nature!

Mark Sultana  
CEO



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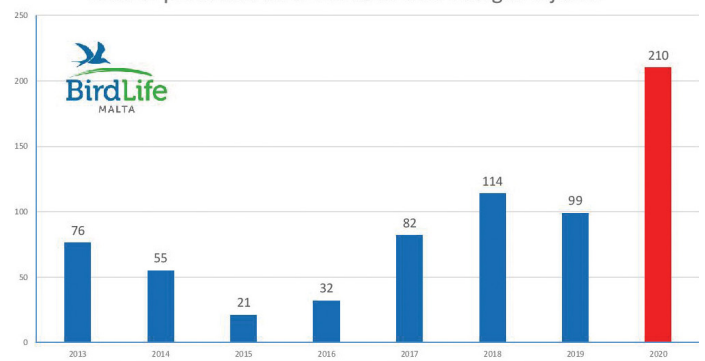
Abbie Ferrar

## 2020 top killing year in recent history

Following the end of the autumn hunting season on 31 January 2021, figures show that 2020 was the worst year in the last eight for illegally shot protected birds recovered by BirdLife Malta and police, with a total of 210 known casualties. Last year had as many illegal hunting casualties as the totals of 2019 and 2018 put together. The numbers for the autumn hunting season (1 September

2020 – 31 January 2021) have also doubled on the previous autumn hunting season's, reaching a total of 101 compared to 53 the previous autumn. These numbers represent only a small fraction of the total of illegally shot protected birds since most birds killed are collected by hunters, mainly for taxidermy, and never recorded. Enforcement and justice for these illegalities remain weak – suspects in 2018 cases have allegedly walked free as they were not being summoned within the two-year period as stipulated by law.

Total of protected birds received with shotgun injuries



## Autumn trapping season ends

The autumn trapping season was closed on 4 January 2021, six days before it was supposed to end on 10 January due to the fact that the national quota was reached. In a statement on the day, the WBRU announced that the overall seasonal bag limit for the Golden Plover had been reached and with immediate effect the autumn 2020 trapping season was closed. This season had been open since 1 November 2020. BirdLife Malta reported numerous illegalities to police, mostly in relation to trappers operating illegally on unregistered sites. The trapping derogations for Song Thrush, Golden Plover and the finch trapping season under the guise of a research study, as well as the



BirdLife Malta

► Finch trapping in Malta is illegal, following the 2018 ECJ judgement

spring hunting derogation for Common Quail, are now the subject of fresh Infringement Procedures initiated by the European Commission against Malta in December. In February, the EC reiterated that Malta has no justification for trapping

# Government challenged in court over opening spring hunting season in full defiance of EU

BirdLife Malta has challenged the Government in Court over opening this year's spring hunting season for Common Quail without meeting the targets and criteria stipulated by law. In a judicial protest, BirdLife Malta stated that the season could not be opened, since Prime Minister Robert Abela did not have sufficient data to enable him to open it. The law states that a spring hunting season can only be opened if the previous autumn hunting season was not a satisfactory alternative. With the low level of hunters who declared their catches in 2020 (only 292 or 2.7% out of 10,675 licensed hunters declared shooting any birds in the five months of the autumn season), PM Abela was in no position to reach a sound decision and should have therefore been disallowed from opening a spring hunting season this year. The Government, obviously, still decided to go ahead with the season which was opened from 10 to 30 April, following a recommendation by the Ornis Committee: a decision which was also in full defiance of the EU and which BirdLife Malta described as a sad ploy by the Government to allow hunters to shoot protected birds in spring. With Malta already facing an Infringement Procedure on last year's opening of the spring hunting season, the European Commission has warned the Maltese Government that the opening of the hunting season for Common Quail (Summiena) coincides with the spring migration of the endangered European Turtle-dove (Gamiema). Following this decision taken purely for electoral reasons, Malta will once again have to face the consequences on a European level. BirdLife Malta as usual monitored illegalities during the season through its annual Spring Watch camp.



derogations and also made it clear that legal action has in fact been initiated in this regard, insisting that Malta needs to be reminded that it had agreed to phase out trapping within five years of joining the European Union, as stated in Malta's EU Accession Treaty itself. These clear statements were made during a high-level conference on hunting under the Birds Directive which was organised by the European Parliament's Intergroup on hunting in conjunction with the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FACE).

## PN Leader urged to uphold EU nature directives

"The Nationalist Party must uphold the spirit of the Acquis Communautaire and not buckle under pressure from the hunters' lobby. If the PN wants to respect public opinion it cannot backtrack on its commitment to implement EU directives on the protection of nature and birds". This call was made by BirdLife Malta CEO Mark Sultana in a meeting between a delegation of the BirdLife Malta Council and Opposition Leader Dr Bernard Grech which was held at the PN Headquarters on 24 February. The present situation with regard to hunting and trapping was explained, and the PN Leader was presented with the results which show how last year's record illegal hunting casualties were due to poor enforcement and weakening of laws by the Government.

Matthew Tabone

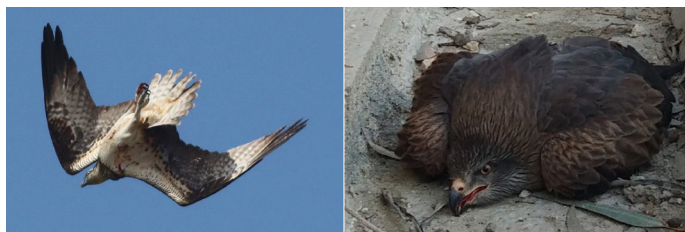


► BirdLife Malta Council delegation met PN Leader Dr Bernard Grech

## Ospreys and Black Kite shot down, illegal finch trappers caught

The start of the spring bird migration over Malta has been marked with hunting and trapping illegalities. Six protected Ospreys were observed on 21 March but unfortunately two of these magnificent birds of prey did not make it further to their breeding grounds when they were shot down by hunters in Gozo and Delimara. Just two days later another highly-protected bird of prey – a Black Kite – was found by a member of the public at Mtarfa after being shot down. The police were called on site and

BirdLife Malta



► Shot Osprey (left) and Black Kite

collected the bird to hand it over to the government veterinarian. Stuffed bird collections are the main reason for such rampant illegalities in Malta. Another illegal activity witnessed at the start of spring was illegal finch trapping which has never been so widespread during springtime. This is mainly due to the message sent by the Government that it intends to reopen a finch trapping season in autumn against the will of the European Commission. Through the good work of BirdLife Malta and the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS)

teams, over 140 finches were confiscated by police since the beginning of March. Most were released back into the wild while others are being rehabilitated and will be released shortly once they gain back their strength.



BirdLife Malta

► Birds confiscated by police include all seven species of protected finches

## Another vandal attack on Foresta 2000

During a routine survey of the site on 12 February, our managing warden discovered that recently fixed handrails in a part of our Foresta 2000 Nature Reserve had been senselessly stolen and broken down. The handrails were fixed to the ground along the clay slopes, along a path used regularly by visitors. A police report was filed, and we will not let such incidents get us down as we seek to ensure a safe and green environment for the public to enjoy. We urge visitors to report any irregularities encountered on site on our Facebook page or else via email to [info@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:info@birdlifemalta.org).



Alice Sicali

► The latest vandal attack on Foresta 2000

## 10,555 White Wagtails counted!

BirdLife Malta's annual White Wagtail Roost Count took place in Valletta on Saturday 23 January 2021. We had 20 volunteer birders join us this year, who were situated in pairs at designated watchpoints along the bastions. A total of 10,555 wagtails were counted, which is slightly more compared to 2020 by 189 birds. White Wagtails are winter visitors and are present from October to early spring. Their roosting sites have been monitored by BirdLife Malta since 1985, and numbers of roosting White Wagtails have steadily been increasing over the years. In 2019, volunteers counted the highest number yet – 14,475 birds!



Katarzyna Pacon

► White Wagtail roost count held in Valletta

WORDS **Belinda Hodder** BirdLife Malta Communications Assistant



# Slender-billed Gull

**Maltese name:** Gawwija  
Munqarha Rqiq  
**Scientific name:** *Larus genei*  
**Length:** 37–42 cm  
**Wingspan:** 90–102 cm  
**Conservation Status:** Least Concern  
**Local Status:** Scarce  
**Call:** Vaguely recalling Black-headed Gull  
**Behaviour:** Often seen with other gulls at roosts or resting places  
**Habitat:** Locally, is best found at Salina Nature Reserve where large flocks of gulls of various species congregate from November to February, especially in strong winds

Many concur that the Slender-billed Gull is the most elegant and dainty of our gulls. It gets this attribute from its long and pointed bill, long neck and when in adult breeding plumage has a lovely pink wash to its underside.

The Slender-billed Gull is a small gull which breeds around the Mediterranean and the northwestern Indian Ocean on islands and coastal lagoons. It breeds in colonies, nesting on the ground and laying up to three eggs.

Most of the population is somewhat migratory, wintering further south and that's when they visit Malta. Like most gulls, it is gregarious in winter, both when feeding or in evening roosts. It is not a pelagic species, and is rarely seen at sea far from coasts.

Overall, it resembles the much more common Black-headed Gull in wing pattern and general appearance but is fractionally larger. In juveniles, it has paler upper-wings with fainter markings. In winter plumage, the Slender-billed Gull has a very small or completely lacks the dark ear spot typical of the Black-headed, and has a yellowish iris. Unlike similar gulls, it lacks the dark hood in all plumages. Its bill and legs turn from yellowish/orange in juveniles to dark red in adults.

The best combination of features that distinguish this bird is the combination of bill length and shape, the elongated forehead and long neck.

Locally, it is a scarce migrant, mostly seen in singles or small flocks. In December 2005 an individual with a ring from Spain was present at Għadira Nature Reserve, giving a hint of the origin of some of our birds.

Slender-billed Gulls are mostly seen from the coast as they migrate in spring (March/April) in small flocks. Salina, on the other hand, is arguably the best spot to find this species from November to February, amongst the large flocks of gulls of several species that at times number in the thousands of individuals.

The scientific name of this bird commemorates the Italian naturalist Giuseppe Gené.

WORDS **Manuel Mallia** Salina Nature Reserve Manager



# Nature at our reserves

# Simar



#### Opening hours

**September to May**  
Tuesday 2pm-6pm  
Friday 2pm-6pm  
Sunday 10am-4pm

#### Entrance free

Please check COVID-19 restrictions!  
More info at  
<http://bit.ly/SimarNatureReserve>



## Moorish Gecko

Wiżgħa tal-Kampanja *Tarentola mauritanica*

Two species of gecko occur in Malta, and the larger of the two is the Moorish Gecko. As its Maltese name suggests, it occurs mostly in rural areas, so nice sheltered spots in the countryside, e.g. the birdwatching hides at Simar, are ideal for this beautiful reptile to shelter from the elements, and to keep the birders company! The Moorish Gecko is usually brown-black in colour but can be a pale mottled brown or even dull yellowish. It is strictly carnivorous, feeding mainly on insects, especially moths (so much for the stories that geckoes have eaten nanna's precious indoor plants). Although mainly nocturnal, it often basks by day on nice sun-warmed surfaces. Like all our other reptiles, the Moorish Gecko is protected in Malta.



Victor Falzon

► Moorish Gecko

## Purple Heron

Russett Aħmar *Ardea purpurea*

A flock of Purple Herons sailing overhead is as eye-catching as any aircraft display. But it's a different story on the ground: for all its large size, the Purple Heron virtually disappears if it chooses to stand still near a bunch of reeds. The reddish brown plumage on the head, neck and front, and the streaky patterns on the body blends the bird perfectly with the background. For bird lovers, seeing a Purple Heron is a precious experience, as the species has dwindled considerably in Europe in recent decades. This is largely due to the destruction of its reedbed and wetland habitats – and trigger-happy hunters certainly do not help the situation. Which is why protected wetlands like Simar are vital for Purple Herons and other species.



Denis Cachia

► Purple Heron

## Common Reed

Qasbet ir-Riħ *Phragmites australis*

Don't worry, it's not from Australia! *Australis* simply means southern, the Common Reed is quite native to Malta and its presence at Simar perfectly appropriate. Indeed, this giant grass creates a habitat there – namely reedbed – that has declined in our country, and that's because we lack the wetlands where this species flourishes. Thankfully, the Common Reed can live in saltmarshes, so it has thrived at Is-Simar. A reedbed may look monotonous, being a swathe of the same plant species. But the reed's undergrowth provides excellent cover and breeding ground for shy birds like herons and rails, and harbours a rich community of invertebrates. And that's always good news for many hungry birds out for a snack.



Aron Tanti

► Common Reed

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



# Enjoying spring bird migration

This spring we've launched once again our #onthemove campaign. This time we're celebrating the spring bird migration when birds travel from their wintering grounds to Europe in search of a place to nest. But what does this entail?

## WHAT

Bird migration is that spectacular journey many birds make. Some of these journeys are short – like coming down a mountain to spend winter in the lowlands – and some are seriously, mind-bogglingly long. Whether or not you believe that the pigeon-sized Arctic Tern does a 70,000 km round trip from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back in one year, the facts are there. And undisputed.



► European Turtle-dove

Of course, birds don't take on these feats of endurance for fun, nor even to wow us ground-bound humans. They do it to survive, basically to escape bad weather and to look for milder climes where food is plentiful. It's a good strategy for survival but the journeys are fraught with dangers, not least some formidable geography – like a sea. Most birds can't swim so they avoid lengthy sea crossings. Many find a route strewn with islands along the way where they can stop for the night.

And that's where Malta comes in. Birds crossing between Africa and Europe find places like Malta a convenient motel where to crash for the night, so to speak. Happily for us nature-lovers, Malta is on what we call a migration flyway. And that's the reason no less than 400 species of birds have so far been recorded in this arid, overpopulated rock.

So no, it's not just sparrows. Far from it. But where do I find all these birds?



► Birdwatching at Buskett

## WHERE

Malta is so small that migrating birds can turn up anywhere. I've been stuck fuming in the Marsa gridlock, looked up, and wow – a line of 80 Grey Herons sailing languidly overhead! I've been in class, looked out of the window and wow – two Black Kites circling over the netball court! And it's not just birds flying. There are places where you stand a better chance of spotting birds on the ground (or in the water). Tired birds can really turn up anywhere, but they will still look for suitable habitat if they can find it. Many birds love trees: great places where to hide and rest unseen. Places like Buskett are therefore a natural magnet for woodland species like Honey-buzzards, Night Herons,



► A flock of Night Herons at BirdLife Malta's Simar Nature Reserve



► Ghadira Nature Reserve

Nightjars, turtle-doves, and thrushes, warblers, flycatchers and finches by the score. Although still young, Foresta 2000 – BirdLife Malta's reforestation project – is fast coming into its own: the low canopy already attracts hobbies, cuckoos and Marsh Harriers to roost; and Robins and Common Starlings to gorge on the many berry-bearing shrubs planted there.



► A Marsh Harrier at the airport

Not all birds favour trees. Some, like chats, wheaters, larks, pipits, dotterel, Stone Curlew and Short-eared Owl, prefer open country. For a swipe at these, head for rocky places like Fawwara, Majjistral, Ras il-Pellegrin and Ta' Ċenċ. Such spots are also cliffy, which is the haunt of the Blue Rock-thrush or, if you're really lucky, Peregrine Falcon or Eleonora's Falcon.



Then there are birds that love to stay in the water or close by it. Coastal places are best for these, so bays and creeks can turn up gulls, grebes and the occasional cormorant. The coast is also

Jonathan Caruana



► Little Grebe at BirdLife Malta's Ghadira Nature Reserve

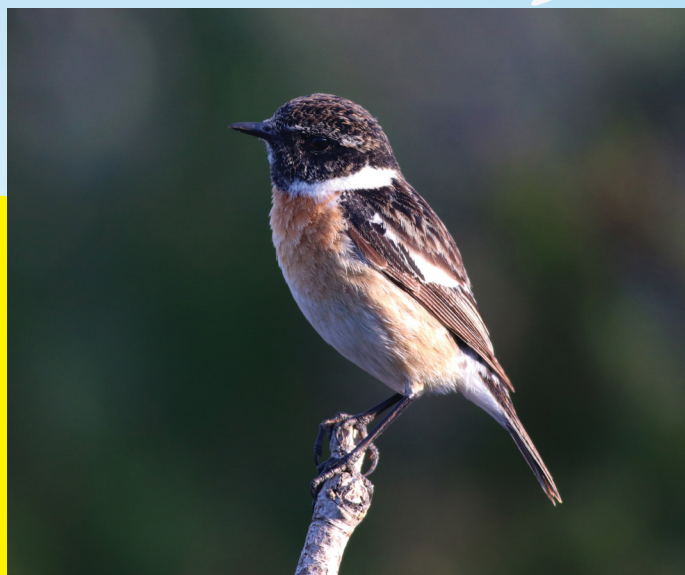
where BirdLife's three wetland reserves are sited: Ghadira, Simar and Salina. While the deeper pools attract the grebes, the gulls and the ducks, the shores and shallows can produce anything from stints, sandpipers, shanks and rails to bigger fare like egrets, herons, spoonbills and flamingos. BirdLife's sites also have the added advantage of having birdwatching hides – purpose-built huts where you sit and observe birds in relative shelter and comfort.

BirdLife Malta's nature reserves are also regularly 'worked' by several birders, an added boon as these people are always willing to point out what's around.

## WHEN

You can go birdwatching every day of the year and something will always turn up. But by far the bonanza periods are spring and autumn. Why? Because that's the time migration happens, so that's when you'll get most variety and most surprises. In spring, birds are travelling north from their wintering grounds

Aron Tanti



► Stonechat

to their breeding grounds, and that's precisely what tens of millions of them are doing right now. They'll be crossing from North Africa – that's more than 300 km of open sea to the nearest land – and heading for Europe.

Many will be tired and only too happy to drop in for a few hours' kip, and maybe a snack. March, April and May are the best months to go roaming and spotting your species. In autumn, birds clock the same journey in reverse, giving us a more-or-less repeat performance of the spring rush.



Aron Tanti

► Hobby at Buskett



Aron Tanti

► Honey-buzzard

The best time of day is usually as early as you can make it. Birds try to avoid the early afternoon heat as much as we do, so many tend to keep to the shade in the hours of brightest sunshine. Many birds are in fact up even before sunrise – as are many hardened birders. But it's all right to start later.

## HOW

What do you need to enjoy the spectacle of migration? Well, your eyes and ears should suffice really, but as many birds are small, fast, shy and restless, it's always a good idea to aid your vision with a pair of binoculars. Binoculars are the birdwatcher's single most important piece of equipment. Good quality models are nowadays available that don't cost a limb – €100 should get you a decent pair. There are even cheaper bargains, just don't go for the toy you shook out of your cereal packet.

Make sure you have suitable clothing: not too little, not too much. I personally wear layers that I can peel off or put on as required. Birds are shy, jumpy creatures, so leave that psychedelic jacket with sequins at home. Go for greens, greys and browns. Avoid swishy fabric that gives your presence away the moment you swing your arm or take a step. And wear sturdy, comfy no-nonsense footwear, especially if you're going off the beaten track.

That's about it really. Don't expect to log all 400 species, of course – many of them are mega rarities that may only have been seen once since records began. So, go easy on the expectations front. What ultimately makes the experience is that you are out there taking part in one of the great spectacles of nature: bird migration. Good luck!



Aron Tanti

► Birdwatching hide at Salina Nature Reserve



# Birds are #onthemove again!

Why is spring migration protected across the EU?

What threats do birds face during their migratory journeys?

Why should birds not be killed during spring?

Where do I go to see birds migrating?

Why do birds change their plumage in spring?

Why do we see birds of prey soaring in circles?

Do adults lead the way during migration?

#onthemove  
enjoy care protect

Join us this spring to explore bird migration and enjoy the spectacle provided by thousands of birds on their journeys north to their European breeding grounds!

Visit <https://birdlifemalta.org/onthemove> to learn more.

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

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

✂ Become a member

<http://bit.ly/join-BirdLifeMalta>

✂ Become a supporter

<http://bit.ly/Becomeasupporter>

✂ Volunteer with us

<http://bit.ly/volunteerwithBLM>

During our #onthemove campaign we want you to enjoy, care about and protect migrating birds, and we think our annual **Walk for Nature** is the perfect way for you to do this! This year's event is being held virtually and you can win some amazing nature experiences, by purchasing one of our 'Walk for Nature' packs on our online shop. The funds will go towards the purchase of a satellite tag for a rehabilitated bird of prey!

By purchasing one of our packs, apart from getting a selection of nature walk maps, your name will be entered into a prize raffle for these truly amazing experiences:

- ✂ A private tour of Simar Nature Reserve,
- ✂ A private bird ringing session with a licensed ringer,
- ✂ Attending the release of our satellite-tagged bird in Kemmuna, and getting the chance to name the bird yourself!



Take your pick from one of our three packs here: <http://bit.ly/WalkforNaturepacks>.  
For more details about Walk for Nature 2021 visit <http://bit.ly/WalkforNature2021>.



# Over 23,000 birds ringed in a year!

## A very busy year for the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme

The BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme was active throughout 2020 with ringing sessions carried out every month with intensity increasing during passage periods in spring and autumn targeting migrant species. Breeding species and wintering species were also monitored through ringing.

The total number of birds ringed in 2020 was 23,733. This is very much higher than average and this was partly because some ringers had more free time due to the COVID-19 situation. This was also aided by a very good spring migration of passerines.

A slightly higher than average number of wintering birds were ringed in 2020 with 1,153 birds ringed in January and February. A total of 9,202 birds were ringed between March, April and May, of which 6,573 were ringed in April. The most common spring migrants were Wood Warbler (1,671 birds), Common Whitethroat (1,109 birds) and Garden Warbler (890 birds), all ringed from March to May. Spring 2020 was an exceptional year for the black and white flycatchers, with a total of 583 Pied Flycatcher, 290 Collared Flycatcher and one Semi-Collared Flycatcher ringed.

In the summer months, efforts were directed towards breeding birds and early autumn migrants such as waders. A good number of Common Swift and Pallid Swift were also ringed with some interesting insight on the breeding behaviour of these birds that recently started colonizing our islands. Seabird studies continued in the final year of the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project, which apart from ringing of all four breeding species (Yelkouan Shearwater, Scopoli's Shearwater, Mediterranean Storm-petrel, Yellow-legged Gull), also included tagging with GPS loggers and geo-locators. This will enable us to study both foraging trips and also wintering areas of such birds.

Autumn migration continued where spring left off with good numbers of both Trans-Saharan migrants (birds that winter south of the Sahara Desert) and non-Trans-Saharan ones (birds that winter north of the Sahara Desert and in the Mediterranean) ringed.

From September to November, a total of 10,772 birds were ringed, with Common Chiffchaff (2,657) and Robin (2,968) together accounting for more than half this amount.

Rare birds ringed in 2020 included two Olive-backed Pipit, one Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, two Moussier's Redstart, one Savi's Warbler, one Dartford Warbler, one Moltoni's Warbler, one Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, two Western Olivaceous Warbler and one Radde's Warbler. Constant effort ringing continues from previous years in the BirdLife Malta-managed reserves of Għadira and Simar. In total, over 7,000 birds were ringed in 2020 at these two reserves. Regular sessions were also held in other sites including Salina Nature Reserve, Buskett and Kemmuna. In Kemmuna, migration monitoring ringing projects were held successfully with ongoing standardized ringing done in April-May 2020 and in October-November 2020 with around 4,500 birds ringed.



*Radde's Warbler (Phylloscopus schwarzi) – this rare bird was ringed on Kemmuna on 20 October. This is only the 4th record of this species in the Maltese Islands, all records are of ringed birds with the most recent one prior to this in 2007. This bird breeds in Siberia and migrates to southeast Asia where it spends the winter. It can be identified from similar looking warblers by its dark, olive-toned colour, heavy bill, long supercilium and bright, thick legs.*

Various interesting local re-captures were made in 2020. Interesting longevity records included a 20 year-11-month-old Scopoli's Shearwater, a 19-year-old storm-petrel, an 18-year-old Yellow-legged Gull, a 13-year-old Yelkouan Shearwater, an 8-year-old Little Ringed Plover, two almost-8-year-old Spanish Sparrows, a 7-year-old Sardinian Warbler, a 7-year-old Common Chiffchaff and two 5 year-old Blackcaps. A number of foreign ring controls from various EURING partners were processed by BirdLife Malta. Some were colour-ringed birds that were observed or photographed whilst others were also injured birds collected for rehabilitation.

The BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme also satellite-tagged three European Turtle Doves in May 2020 on Kemmuna as part of its ongoing study to better understand how this vulnerable species can be protected. An attempt was also made to satellite-tag a rehabilitated Honey-buzzard in October, however the bird was lost within a few hours of release, possibly due to illegal hunting.

**WORDS Nicholas Galea** Head of the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme



# Il-Ponta tal-Munxar



► Bettina Tower

This 6.7 km walk, which is ideal for the spring season, starts near the small Knisja Tas-Silġ and proceeds down the road on the left, turning first right by the existing building. This area is known as Ta' Lombardi.

Keeping right and walking down a country lane between agricultural fields, if you walk quietly you might observe several birds perching around or hunting for food. These would include resident species like Tree Sparrows and Spanish Sparrows, Cetti's Warblers and Sardinian Warblers, but also spring migrants like Yellow Wagtails, Hoopoes, Common Kestrels and other larger species. If you're lucky you might spot the occasional Marsh Harrier soaring above – these raptors migrate through the area in spring. Honey Bees are abundant too in this area.

On reaching a T-junction, keep left and the trail leads you to St Paul's Artillery Battery. This is an old fortification built between 1881–1886 by the British Forces to help Fort Tas-Silġ in defending St Thomas Bay.

Keep walking down the trail, always to the left, and you will pass by St Paul's Tower – also known as Torri Bettina – and which is adjacent to a small chapel dedicated to St Paul's Shipwreck. Both were built around 1740 by the family of Elisabetta Muscat Cassia Dorell.



► Knisja tas-Silġ



► Aleppo Pine



► Maltese Ferule



► Hoopoe



► View of Il-Hofra l-Kbira



From here, head towards Il-Ponta tal-Munxar to admire the fascinating white limestone cliffs that stretch between Il-Munxar and Xrobb I-Għagin Park. Pay special attention when walking along the edge of the cliffs which can be dangerous, especially in wet and slippery conditions. If you have binoculars, do make frequent scans of the sea along the cliff walk for Yellow-legged Gulls or Scopoli's Shearwaters, maybe even dolphins!

Following the pathway round and below on your right, you can view St Thomas Bay. At the end of the pathway, there is a gate adjacent to a walking passage, go through and turn left, and the walk takes you back to Bettina Tower and St Paul's Chapel.

From here, at the crossroad, turn left and take the road that leads down to Xrobb I-Għagin Park. Go through the gate and walk towards the park's centre until you reach a viewing point area. From here you can admire the lovely views of the cliffs and perhaps take a break at the same time. Heading back out on the road and keeping left, you pass by a villa and the road leads to Fort Tas-Silġ.

This fort was built between 1879–1883 by the British Forces and was still in use up to 1960. Today it serves as The Island Sanctuary, an area for the care of dogs.

Walking straight down and keeping left around the fortress, walk back to the starting point from the public road. Please beware of traffic on your way back to the Knisja tal-Madonna tas-Silġ.

This is a very pleasant walk where all along one comes across various flora species including Spiny Asparagus, Prickly Pear, Golden Samphire, the endemic Maltese Ferule and the rather invasive Sisal; there are also trees like Carob and Aleppo Pine, and shrubs like African Tamarisk and the endemic Maltese Salt Tree. Enjoy your walk!

**WORDS** Sivie Cauchi BirdLife Malta Events & Activities Group  
**PHOTOGRAPHS** Bernardette Chircop, Denise Grima, Aron Tanti  
**MAP** Victor Falzon



▶ Marsh Harrier



▶ Common Kestrel



▶ Yellow Wagtail







**Small panels along the nature trail.** As one walks further along the trail, a number of interactive panels help children learn about life cycles and foodchains.



**The start of the migration route along the Simar Nature Trail.** Part of the nature trail has been widened to accommodate new benches and information panels. A set of educational boards are planned for this area, which will introduce bird migration and highlight Malta's importance in this spectacle of nature.

## Highlighting migration at our reserves

At some point in our life we must have all watched one of the fantastic David Attenborough documentaries with some legendary ones featuring the largest migration on earth which occurs when millions of mammals including wildebeests, gazelles, zebras and impalas migrate from the Serengeti plains in Tanzania to the Masai Mara in Kenya.

What many people don't know is that much closer to home, our Maltese Islands too are lucky to witness such a migration spectacle twice a year. This happens when birds are on the move south in autumn, seeking warmer climates and food and then fly back to Europe in spring to breed. How does this happen? What triggers it? Why undertake such dangerous, life-threatening journeys?

These are just a few of the questions we wanted to answer with our new project "The Spectacle of Migration". To do this we have been transforming part of the nature trail at Simar into a "migration route" full of facts about this spectacle of nature.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **Mark Gauci** BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves Manager

PANEL DESIGNS **Victor Falzon** Naturalist and BirdLife Malta Field Teacher

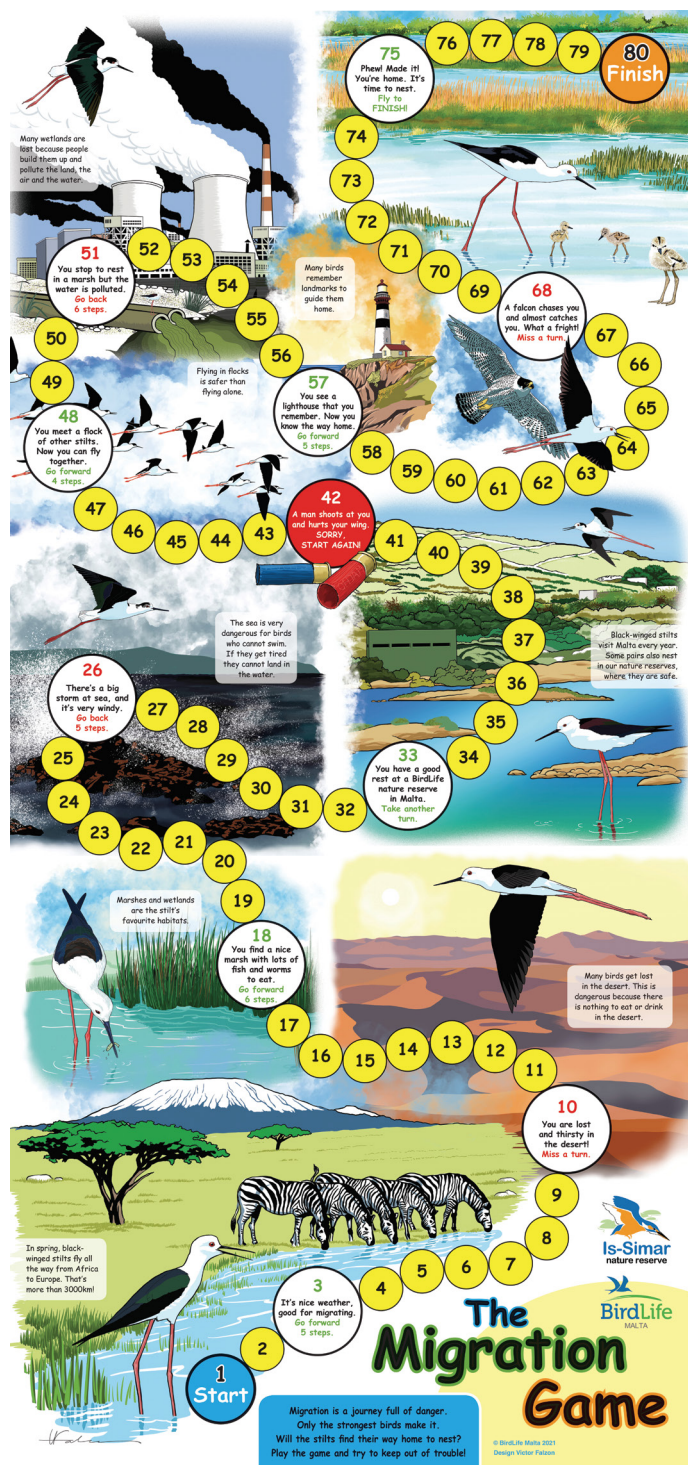


**Kingfisher panel along the nature trail.** We could not resist giving our mascot species, which features on the reserve logo, its due importance! This set of panels captures the life stages of this fantastic bird from hatching to finally coming over to Simar where it spends winter feeding on the abundant killifish.





**The migration games.** Play is an important part of learning, which is why we are setting up two picnic tables with large-format board games (sample at right) for our younger visitors to enjoy. The area has been heavily planted with trees which will offer shade and a pleasant environment to our visitors.



**The bird ringing station.** BirdLife Malta plays an important role in scientific research through bird ringing which provides us with invaluable information about the routes taken by different species. In the bird ringing station, visitors can learn about the many birds that visit Simar Nature Reserve and also the different countries they come from.





# Giving them another chance!

Over the past months, BirdLife Malta released more rehabilitated birds into the wild. In February, nine birds of prey were released together on Kemmuna after successful rehabilitation. Eight of the birds were Common Kestrels, all illegal hunting casualties from the 2020 autumn season. Most had been found by members of the public between October and December. The ninth bird was a Short-eared Owl, which was found weak from migration by staff of the Malta National Aquarium.