

“My name is Sonia, I’m the Seabird Conservation Assistant at BirdLife Malta. We are here today because of LIFE PanPuffinus! which is a European project funded by Greece, Spain, France, Portugal and Malta.

The aim of LIFE PanPuffinus! is to improve the conservation status of two natural water species, the Yelkouan Shearwater and the Balearic Shearwater.

The Yelkouan Shearwater breeds here in Malta; in fact, it is estimated that 10% of its global population breeds here, mostly on the west coast of Malta and on Gozo and Comino, Cominotto and on St Paul’s Islands. The Balearic Shearwater breeds exclusively on the Balearic Islands. Today, we are mostly going to be seeing rafts; rafts are congregations of seabirds. The rafts we will be seeing today are pretty close to the cliffs as these birds are waiting for night to fall so as to come back to the land, i.e., their breeding sites and nests, when it’s completely dark. We think that this is because of predator avoidance.

On the theme of predators, seabirds succumb to many threats, both on land and on sea. On land, there are alien invasive species, (species that are not native to Malta), such as rats. They are a threat to seabirds because they eat the eggs and their young chicks. This is especially dangerous for seabirds, especially these seabirds, as the majority that breed here in Malta only lay one egg per breeding season. If that egg is eaten or the chick disappears, then that is the end of their breeding time.

There are three species of seabirds that breed here in Malta; there is the Yelkouan Shearwater, the Scopoli’s Shearwater and a Mediterranean subspecies of the European Storm-petrel. 50% of the global population of the Mediterranean Storm-petrel breeds exclusively on Filfla, a little island on the west coast.

Returning to the threats, there are numerous threats on land, such as light and noise pollution – all from human disturbance. This makes it very important for members of the community to help with the issue. There is a lot of noise pollution, especially here in Malta; lots of boats that blast loud music when approaching cliffs. As for light pollution, most of the Maltese coastline is full of light, which is especially dangerous for the young birds. When flying, the young are attracted by these bright lights which disorientate them and make them unable to find their way back to the sea.

When members of the public phone BirdLife Malta and report that they’ve found a seabird, a member of BirdLife helps retrieve the bird, does an examination, checks for any injuries and when the bird is ready for release, it is sent back to the sea.

As for threats in the ocean, bycatch is the one that affects seabirds the most. Bycatch is the unintentional capture of a seabird or other marine wildlife which is not the target species. It can be very dangerous for the actual population of that species. It also affects the fishermen who take a loss when they catch something they are not directly targeting. LIFE PanPuffinus! is working with fishermen to better understand the issue and also to come up with further mitigation measures.

Today we will be visiting one of the eight marine protected areas in Malta which were established as part of a previous LIFE project.”