

# Wildlife Factfile

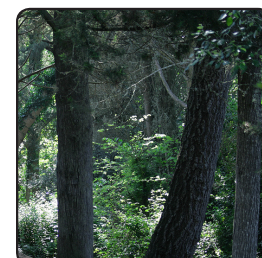
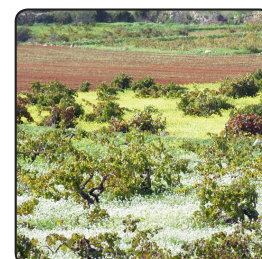
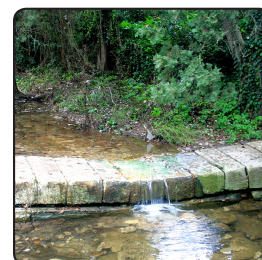
## Habitats and inhabitants

This file contains

1. Information about six habitats in the Maltese Islands

cliffs  
valleys  
farmland  
woodland  
rocky land  
gardens

2. Information about some of the plants and animals in each of them





## CLIFFS

We have two types of cliff in Malta. There is the **rdum**, with sloping irregular sides and lots of large boulders down the side and at the bottom, e.g. around Għajn Tuffieħa, Paradise Bay and San Blas (Gozo); and there is the **sies**, which are very sheer and vertical, e.g. Għar Hasan, Fomm ir-Riħ and Ta' Ċenċ (Gozo). Since they are dangerous and inaccessible, cliffs faces are the least disturbed habitats in Malta, so any plants and animals living there are relatively safe from human disturbance. This is why cliffs harbour some species that are rare in other parts of the country, or even found nowhere else on the Islands.

- **Blue Rock Thrush (Merill)**

The male is blue, while the female is brown. The Blue Rock Thrush likes remote spots on cliffs, and nests in cracks and crevices on cliffsides, sometimes in quarries, in old fortifications and other remote uninhabited buildings. This bird stays with us all year round and you often hear its musical call echoing around cliffs. In the past, this bird's eggs were popular with collectors, and Blue Rock Thrushes were becoming rare because their nests were being robbed. To protect it, the authorities chose the Blue Rock Thrush as the national bird of Malta in 1970, and it became illegal to hunt the bird or disturb its nest.

- **Scopoli's Shearwater (Ċiefa)**

This is a gull-like seabird that nests in our high vertical cliffs. Malta has a big population of Scopoli's Shearwaters, with thousands of pairs breeding in our cliffs. This bird spends all its life at sea, except in the nesting season (May–July), when it raises a single chick deep in a burrow in the cliff face. These birds are called shearwaters because they fly very close to the sea surface, skimming the waves looking for fish, a behaviour you can look out for when crossing the sea between Malta and Gozo. Scopoli's Shearwaters visit their nests at night, and if you go for a night walk near cliffy places like Għar Hasan, Wied iż-Żurrieq, Xlendi and Ta' Ċenċ, you may hear their eerie baby-like wailing. Until a few years ago, this bird was known as Cory's Shearwater. Both Cory and Scopoli were names of naturalists.

- **Maltese Rock-centaury (Widnet il-Baħar)**

This hardy plant is endemic to Malta: endemic means this species is found only here and nowhere else on earth. Its donkey-ear leaves (hence the Maltese name) are fleshy to store water, thanks to which the plant can survive on the dry, bleached and windswept cliffs it grows on. The purple-pink flowers open from May to July and provide an attractive splash of colour in early summer when most other flowers have already dried up. The Maltese Rock-centaury is the national flower of Malta and is a protected species.

- **Common Kestrel (Spanjulett)**

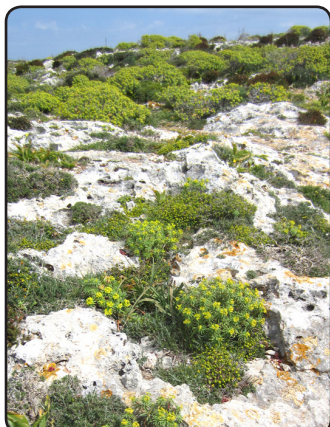
The Kestrel is the most common falcon that visits our islands. It belongs to a group of hook-billed birds known as raptors or birds of prey (tajr tal-priża). The Kestrel has a spectacular way of hovering in the same spot in the air while flapping its wings fast. It does this to focus its sharp sight on its prey (mice or lizards) on the ground, which it then swoops down on and grabs in its sharp claws. In 2009 a pair of Kestrels nested in a cliff in Gozo for the first confirmed time since 1994. If we give them a chance, Kestrels would nest regularly and become again a common sight of our cliffs and countryside. All birds of prey are protected.

- **Yellow-legged Gull (Gawwija Prima)**

As you cross between Malta and Gozo, keep your eyes open for Yellow-legged Gulls: big, grey-and-white seabirds that fly slowly and gracefully on long narrow wings. You can also spot them if you stand on a cliff and look out to sea. Gulls spend most of the day patrolling the sea looking for fish – especially around fish farms – or floating edible matter. Yellow-

legged Gulls are the biggest birds that nest in the Maltese Islands. They nest on cliff ledges where nobody can reach them. Some nest along the southern cliffs Malta and Gozo but the biggest colony (group) breeds on Filfla, which is a nature reserve.

Victor Falzon



## ROCKY LAND (GARRIGUE)

Known in Maltese as **xaghri**, rocky land is typified by largely flat, exposed rock with shallow pockets of soil, low-growing shrubs and hundreds of wild flowers. The vegetation is low and compact, as it is exposed to the wind, and hardly any trees grow because there is little or no soil. Because of the lack of trees, many people think that garrigue areas are lifeless places and so many areas have been built over, quarried or turned into dumping sites. Garrigue is actually very rich in flora and fauna.

- **Ocellated Skink (Xaħmet l-Art)**

Skinks are reptiles like lizards and snakes – indeed, skinks look like a cross between a lizard and a snake, as they have such tiny legs and wriggle when moving about. Many people are scared of skinks, but skinks are in fact clean, harmless animals and very shy of people. Skinks eat invertebrates (minibeasts) like ants and bugs, and scurry to the nearest hole in the wall when humans approach. Your best chance of seeing a skink is when it is warming itself in the sun, as many reptiles do. If you spot one, notice its beautiful brown skin mottled with a black-and-white pattern, so smooth, glossy and clean, which is the opposite of what its Maltese name implies. The Ocellated Skink is the only species of skink in Malta, and it is a protected animal.

- **Black (or Western) Whip Snake (Serp Iswed)**

There are four species of snake in Malta, the most common being the Black Whip Snake. Though phobias and myths about snakes are common, all Maltese snakes are harmless to humans – indeed, it is snakes that should be wary of humans, as so many people persecute them. Snakes form an important part of the garrigue foodchain as they are predators of a variety of animal, such as rats, mice, bird chicks, chameleons and lizards. Where there are snakes, there is usually a healthy habitat flourishing. Snakes are protected by law.

- **Common Stonechat (Buċaq tax-Xitwa)**

The Stonechat is a winter guest in Malta. Despite its tiny size, it is easy to spot for two reasons. First, it likes to perch on top of dry plant stalks where it has a good view of passing insects or approaching danger. So if you're out for a walk in winter and you see a small buff-black-white blob sitting on top of a dry stalk, that is very probably a Stonechat. But the best giveaway is their call: a dry *ssss-cha! sss-cha!* which is the bird's way of proclaiming its territory. Stonechat calls give life to the garrigue in winter.

- **Mediterranean Thyme (Sagħtar)**

If a habitat were identified by a particular smell, the scent of Mediterranean Thyme would certainly be the garrigue's brand smell! The plant's scent is actually a defence mechanism, as it is related to an oil that gives the plant an unpleasant taste to goats. Mediterranean Thyme is a typical shrub of garrigue habitat: small, needly, tightly-packed leaves and wiry, dry stems; these are all ways of making sure the plant doesn't lose water. Its roots spread wide and are very tough, as they make the best they can of the shallow garrigue soil. It is illegal to collect Thyme. This law was passed to protect the honey industry, as Thyme flowers are bees' main early summer source of nourishment. The law helped reduce the habit of collecting (and destroying) twigs of Thyme to decorate Christmas cribs.



- **Orchids** (Orkidi / Hajja u Mejta)  
Orchids are beautiful flowers and their domestic varieties fetch high prices at florists. Like most garrigue plants, our wild orchids are small and very few of them grow taller than about 12cm. We have over 30 species of orchids in Malta, varying from pyramid-like flowerheads to single flowers with furry petals that look like flies or bumblebees. The Maltese name *Hajja u Mejta* refers to the orchid's roots, which are divided into two small bulbs, one of which looks healthy and full, while the other looks withered (switching from year to year). These unique plants have many secrets and are very difficult to cultivate. Most orchids flower in spring, making the garrigue the richest of Maltese habitats for flora.
- **Wild Rabbit** (Fenek Selvaġġ)  
Rabbits are prolific breeders and though they are hunted in summer, their numbers are quite stable. It is not easy to see rabbits in the wild as they are wary of humans and prefer to stay in their borrows by day and come out to feed at dawn or dusk. But they do leave telltale signs of their presence: small piles of droppings among the stone. These droppings often mark community boundaries. Such territory markers are important to ensure that the rabbits in a community get enough food: roots, leaves and flowers that grow in the garrigue. Look for scrapings at the base of a shrub: these would be the marks of a rabbit digging to get at the roots. There are many wild rabbits on Kemmuna.

Desirée Falzon



## FARMLAND

Not all fields are farmed every year: it is good farming practice to let fields lie fallow for some time to give the soil time to regenerate its nutrients. Fallow fields are good places for wildlife, especially if they are bordered by rubble walls, which create another habitat-within-a-habitat. Many wild flowers – like poppies or White Mustard (Ġarġir Abjad) – grow in such places, which attract insects that feed on them. Insects in turn attract birds, spiders, other insects and reptiles to feed on them, and a whole foodchain is formed. Some fields are abandoned for good, and these often turn into a habitat known as steppe (steppa).

- **Algerian Hedgehog** (Qanfud)  
Fallow fields are great places for hedgehogs. For starters, the land is unworked, so nobody disturbs this shy animal. Then there are the rubble walls, under which hedgehogs can dig their burrows to sleep in winter or hide during the day. Rubble walls are also good places for them to forage for snails, slugs and insects that nestle among the stones. Hedgehogs are active at dusk and throughout the night, so they are not often seen. Unfortunately many hedgehogs are killed when they wander onto country roads at night and get run over by cars. Contrary to what some people think, hedgehogs are not rats with spines: they belong to a group of mammals known as insectivores, while rats and mice are rodents.
- **Spanish Sparrow** (Għasfur tal-Bejt)  
You will find Spanish Sparrows practically everywhere in our islands, from home ventilators to caves in remote seacliffs. Even though they live around humans, sparrows are still wary and will fly off if we get too close. As they are so common, we often overlook the male's striking pattern – at its best in spring when colours are brightest and sharpest. The sparrow's short, thick beak is a sturdy tool that helps the bird crush any food it picks up. In winter, when they are not nesting, sparrows gather in large groups to sleep in sheltered, leafy trees: such gatherings are known as roosts, and they do this because they feel safer from predators when they are in a group. Contrary to what many people think, birds don't actually *live* in nests, but only use them to raise their young in the nesting season. For the rest of the year, sparrows perch and sleep on branches, hidden and sheltered by leaves.

- **Zitting Cisticola** (Bufula tal-Imrewħa)

This is a tiny bird, but one that certainly makes itself heard! In the nesting season, the male Zitting Cisticola establishes a territory – usually a few fields – and dialy patrols this area, calling out *tsipp! tsipp! tsipp!* repeatedly and doing an unusual looping flight, dropping and ascending to a peak with every *tsipp!* he makes. He does this to keep off other males, as well as to attract females to nest in his territory. Zitting Cisiticola males can have more than one female nesting at the same time. The nest is usually built among tufts of long grass, and is shaped like a long-necked jar. Uncultivated field and borders are excellent breeding ground for this bird, which has spread in recent years. The Zitting Cisticola is protected.

- **Common Poppy** (Peprin Aħmar)

This well-known red flower grows abundantly in wheat fields, but not so much in natural countryside. It is human activity that gives the poppy its chance to take root: soil that has not been recently turned becomes too hard for the poppy's roots to penetrate, and other, hardier, plants replace it. Look out for poppies in spring, and remember to also check them out after the petals have fallen, because the dry seed head has a neat way of releasing the seed: it opens slits around its 'cap' and as it sways in the breeze, it sheds its fine seed like a regular pepper pot!

- **Snail** (Bebbuxu)

Snails are very dependent on water: they need to be wet in order to breathe! In fact most snails live in the sea, and the ones that live on dry land have had to devise tricks to keep their skin from drying out. This is why a snail's body is covered in a thin layer of slime, through which the animal breathes. This is why we see more snails moving about in the wetter seasons, when their skin won't dry out. In summer we often see clusters of snails wrapped around plant stalks or fence poles. They do this to be as far as they can from the ground, where it is hottest. Towards the end of the wet season, snails seal themselves inside their shell with a special flap over the shell opening, so as to trap moisture inside. It is important not to pull snails off their summer perch, as this will cause them to dehydrate and die. After the first rains they emerge to feed on the new vegetation that comes with the rainy season. This is also the time that many people invade the countryside, unfortunately toppling rubble wall in their hunt for snails.

- **Swallowtail** (Farfett tal-Bużbież / Farfett tal-Fejġel)

One of our most spectacular butterflies is the Swallowtail, with its large size and striking yellow-and-black pattern. The Maltese names refer to the caterpillar's foodplants. Fennel (*Bużbież*) grows in fallow fields, steppe and along road verges and can nourish many Swallowtail broods, but unfortunately the increased use of weedkiller to 'tidy up' the road verges turns a rich source of food into a dead zone. The Swallowtail caterpillar aslo feeds on Fringed Rue (*Fejġel*) which grows in garrigue areas, making this another habitat where this butterfly is found. Other Maltese names for this butterfly are *Farfett tar-Reġina* and *Farfett tal-Lira*. The Maltese Swallowtail is slightly different from other swallowtails.

Victor Falzon



## GARDENS

It may seem strange to think of gardens as a habitat for wildlife. But many animals are opportunists and learn to live close to people because they find food and shelter. Apart from trees and flowers, large public gardens often contain mini-habitats likes ponds and rubble walls. Unless 'manicured' to an extreme and rigorously sprayed with pesticides and herbicides, private gardens too can host wildlife, so look out for the beasts in your green patch! Adding things like bird tables and bird baths, and choosing plants that produce nectar-rich flowers or juicy berries, will enrich your garden wildlife.

- **Maltese Wall Lizard** (Gremxula)

The Maltese Wall Lizard is endemic to Malta: in other words, it is found nowhere else on earth. The females are brown, while males carry the colour: yellow throat and emerald green back, often speckled with black. Lizards are easy to watch: early morning sunning on a stone or a wall, males fighting over territory (a bit of garden) in spring, and scouting around for ants and other small insects. In recent years, lizards are becoming less common in some parts of the countryside and more common in gardens, possibly because there are more flies to eat (although domestic cats kill a great many of them). The ability of lizards to drop their tail is not a hobby they enjoy doing, but a painful, last-ditch defence trick to escape predators.

- **Sardinian Warbler** (Bufula Sewda)

This is a year-round resident bird whose numbers have increased in Malta also thanks to gardens. Although small, the Sardinian Warbler can make its presence felt very well, especially in spring and summer when it is nesting and vigorously defending its little territory. If you're in a garden and hear a scolding staccato *tch-tch-tch-tch-tch!* coming from a shrub, that would be a Sardinian Warbler asking you to back off its patch – it very probably has a nest or chicks nearby. Sardinian Warblers have grown quite used to people and often visit bird tables, especially in winter when insects are harder to find.

- **Common Starling** (Sturnell)

Starlings visit our island in autumn and many stay here for the winter. They are gregarious birds, staying in groups sometimes over a thousand strong. This keeps them safe from predators. Public gardens often have Olive trees or tall Norfolk Island Pines (*Awrikarja*) which is good news for Starlings, as Olives provide food and the pines a good place to sleep in. Starlings are noisy birds and they can also imitate other birds, so if one day you hear a hen clucking from a tree in a public garden, don't be alarmed: it's probably a starling!

- **Red Admiral** (Farfett tal-Hurrieq)

Gardens are often planted with flowering bushes, and flowers attract butterflies. Butterflies can only drink, which they do by thrusting their tube-like tongue (proboscis) into flowers to gorge on the sweet nectar, after which they roll their tongue back neatly. Butterflies are an important part of foodchains, as they and their caterpillars are around in spring and summer when birds need juicy insects to feed their young. As the Maltese name implies, the caterpillar of the Red Admiral feeds on nettle leaves, so if you are weeding your garden this winter, remember the Red Admiral and leave a little patch of nettles for his kids!

- **Dragonfly** (Mazzarell)

Public gardens often have ponds, and ponds are good for dragonflies. You can see red, blue, violet, green, orange, yellow and brown dragonflies flying and hovering near ponds for two reasons: feeding and egg-laying. Dragonflies often feed by cupping their hairy legs together to form a sort of net in which they catch small insects as they zoom around on their four strong wings. Near standing water there are always plenty of insects like mosquitoes, which are excellent snacks for dragonflies. Dragonflies also need water to breed: females dip their abdomen in the water and lay eggs. Dragonfly larvae live underwater and feed on small water creatures such as mosquito larvae, sometimes even tadpoles.

- **Gecko** (Wiżgħa)

Reptiles have the misfortune of being the subject of many phobias and myths, and geckoes are no exception. Their warty skin, bulging eyes and nocturnal habits have generated a lot of old wives' tales, none of which are true. In reality, geckoes are fascinating climbers, with special pads on their feet that lets them climb vertical walls and even run upside down across ceilings, hoovering up flies, moths, silverfish (*kamla*), spiders and mosquitoes as they go. They do this 'cleaning' job all night long and free of charge, and all they ask of us is to let them live in peace. If you stroll through a garden close by a wall on a summer evening, listen for their creaky mating calls, which sound like tiny barks.





## VALLEYS

We have many valleys in the Maltese islands, many of them cut out by ancient rivers that dried out long ago. Very few of our **widien** today contain freshwater streams. Those that do are rich little habitats, but they are constantly under threat of drying up through overpumping or a drying climate. In places like Buskett, streams only run down Wied il-Luq and Wied l-Isqof during the rainy season. Because of this tenuous situation, the creatures of this habitat also lead a precarious existence. We should be very careful to protect these places rather than use them as dump sites or, worse, destroying their ecology by well-meaning but ill-advised ‘management’ or ‘tidying’ schemes.

- **Common Chiffchaff** (Vjolin tax-Xitwa)

A small, greyish-green, skulking bird, the Chiffchaff is easier heard than seen. Chiffchaffs travel down from Europe in autumn, looking for a mild-weather place where to spend winter. Many of them stop around the Mediterranean basin, and we get may stopping here in Malta too, taking up winter residence in valleys with nice big trees. Chiffchaffs are very active birds, constantly flitting among branches, looking for small insects among the foliage. Their call is a thin *huitt* but on a sunny winter day they often break into their sweet *tsi-tsiu...tsi-tsiu...tsi-tsiu...* song (hence the bird’s English name) that faintly resembling a repetitive two-note violin (hence the Maltese name). In spring, Chiffchaffs migrate back north to breed.

- **Painted Frog** (Żring)

Frogs are favourites with children. They all know their amphibian life-cycle from egg to tadpole to adult. Unfortunately, frogs live in one of our rarest habitats – freshwater – and though the adults can survive summer buried in mud, they need rain, streams and ponds for their eggs to hatch and for the tadpoles to survive. Because of their fascinating metamorphosis, children sometimes catch tadpoles to keep in jars or aquaria. Worse still, they are encouraged by adults. Unfortunately, tadpoles often die in captivity, deprived of their natural food and conditions. Because frogs’ habitat is so threatened by human activity and now also by climate change, it is even more urgent that we educate children to enjoy frogs and tadpoles in their natural habitat, rather than catch them. It is illegal too.

- **White Poplar** (Luq)

The White Poplar is a beautiful tree: tall and imposing, with striking silver-white bark, and unmistakable leaves that are rich dark green on top and velvety white on the underside. But there is an added spectacle: since the leaf stalks are long and weak, it takes only a breeze to set all the foliage fluttering, which transforms the tree into a shimmering green-and-white spectacle. White Poplars are deciduous, and shed their leaves in autumn, but their leafless silhouette is no less imposing in winter. Poplars are not very common in Malta as they do not grow in dry conditions, so you mostly find them in valleys growing right out of the valley floor, like at Wied il-Luq (Buskett), Wied il-Fiddien (near Rabat) and Wied Qlejgħa (Chadwick Lakes), where their runners (underground stems) follow the water stream, sprouting new poplars.

- **Freshwater Crab** (Qabru)

Even rarer than the frog is the Freshwater Crab. The reason is that it is a stream-dweller, not an amphibian that can take advantage of living on land. It does not have the frog’s trick of surviving the dry spell by burrowing in the mud. Since they are totally dependent on a stream, you will only find Freshwater Crabs where freshwater runs all year round. We have very few such valleys, including Wied il-Baħrija and Wied il-Lunzjata (Gozo). Crabs eat snails, tadpoles, etc. As predators, they are important to maintain a balance of life within the stream. The Maltese Freshwater Crab is slightly different from the ones in other regions. Like the frog, it is protected and cannot be disturbed in any way.

- **Moorhen** (Gallozz Iswed)

This shy secretive bird likes places with freshwater and vegetation where it can hide. The Moorhen looks and walks like a little black hen, with long green legs and long toes. They like to walk and skulk among rushes and reeds, popping out momentarily from among vegetation and swimming like a duck. The white patches under the Moorhen's tail serve as a warning for other Moorhens to keep away. Moorhens are very territorial, and during the breeding season, males often fight when they enter each other's territories. Apart from wet valleys, you can also see Moorhens at BirdLife's nature reserves at Is-Simar and Ghadira, where they also nest in good numbers.

- **Giant Reed** (Qasba Kbira)

The Giant Reed (or Great Reed) is a giant species of grass! It is a strong plant that will grow rapidly where there is water and enough mud for it to spread its roots. It spreads fast because it is a rhizome, where roots throw out runners from which new shoots grow. Because of its tall, thin shape, the Giant Reed may not look good for wildlife, but a dense reedbed provides excellent shelter to migrating birds like Barn Swallows (*Huttafa*) and Yellow Wagtails (*Isfar*). Reeds are also home to many invertebrates (minibeasts) like spiders, crickets and grasshoppers, which are irresistible to a number of birds. If they grow along a stream or near a pond, they provide good hiding from where larger birds like Little Bittern (*Russett tas-Siġar*) and Purple Heron (*Russett Aħmar*) can hunt for frogs while under cover. Some birds, like the Reed Warbler (*Bufala tal-Qasab*), also nest in reeds.

Aron Tanti



## WOODLAND

In the distant past, Malta was probably largely covered with woodland of some kind, but when man arrived 7000 years ago he gradually cut them all down, as people cleared the land for agriculture and pasture, and used the wood for cooking fires. All the trees we see today – except maybe two or three tiny groves – were planted by people in much more recent times: Buskett, our oldest man-made wood, is less than 500 years old. Still, some of the recent woodlands are slowly becoming naturalised and they too can attract wildlife and become rich in biodiversity, not least Foresta 2000, BirdLife's very own woodland project. Woodland is called **bosk** in Maltese.

- **Robin** (Pitirross)

It is easy to see why the Robin is so well known and well loved: it is small and chubby, has a striking orange breast and can be quite bold and approachable. It lives in gardens, parks and woodlands, singing lustily from its perch in the trees. Why do Robins sing so much? The reason is because they are very territorial, and Robins sing to proclaim their property. Unlike Starlings and Sparrows, Robins don't do things in groups: they prefer to defend a territory for themselves and in this way secure enough land where to find enough food, especially if a pair are raising a family. Robins do not nest in Malta, as the weather gets too hot and dry for them in summer. However, they visit in October and stay throughout the winter, so we still get to hear their lovely song in our woodlands for six months of the year. There is more information about the Robin in your Action Guide.

- **Weasel** (Ballotra)

The Weasel is the only carnivorous land mammal in the Maltese Islands. It is very hard to see Weasels as they are shy of people and have secretive habits. They are avid predators of rodents, rabbits and nestlings. Weasels are scarce and should be treasured where they occur. Contrary to what many people think, Weasels pose no threat to humans: indeed, they are excellent rodent control agents, and they are in fact protected by law. Pictures give the impression of a cat-sized animal but the Weasel is actually little longer than a pen!



- **Marsh Harrier** (Baghdan Ahmar)

Marsh Harriers are birds of prey that look like small eagles. In Malta we see them only on migration. Marsh Harriers are not really woodland birds – they prefer reedbeds and marshy places – but during their long migration journeys south or north, they often stop over in Malta for an overnight sleep in the pines and oaks at Buskett, or the pine plantation at Mizieb. On a late September afternoon it is a great spectacle to see a flock of 30 or more Marsh Harriers circling over Buskett, waiting for dusk so they can land in the trees and rest. In the morning, they take off again as the day warms up, and continue their journey.

- **Ivy** (Liedna)

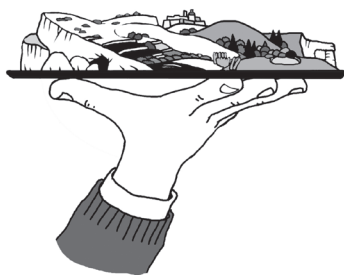
The Ivy is an expert climbing plant. It has special, sticky roots that sprout from its stems, which cement it to vertical walls or tree trunks. In a woodland, there are three levels of vegetation: the tall trees with the canopy of leaves at the top, the undergrowth at the bottom, and the climbers and creepers taking up the middle part. The Ivy climbs from the ground all the way up to the canopy, thus creating a corridor for small creatures to travel up or down trees under cover of the thick foliage that never dries out and falls. A mature Ivy is an entire habitat in itself, with creatures that never leave their patch of Ivy throughout their lives. Others, like small birds, gorge on the Ivy berries (poisonous to humans!) and move on. Climbers like Ivy should never be removed in a woodland habitat, as this will destroy a vital part of woodland ecosystems.

- **Aleppo Pine** (Żnuber)

This is one of the most characteristic trees of our woodlands. The Aleppo Pine bears its fruit in the shape of cones, so well-loved by teachers for craft activities! A pine cone takes three years to form before it opens and releases its seeds. If you are under a pine in summer, you may hear a cracking noise from overhead as the sun's heat opens the ripe cones. The seeds will then slip out of the cone and spiral to the ground, borne by the 'wing' on each seed. The resin that runs in the pine (and which gives the tree the fresh piney smell) protects it from disease and insect pests, but it also renders the tree vulnerable to fire. Unlike some other Mediterranean trees, the Aleppo Pine will not recover after a forest fire.

- **Holm (or Evergreen) Oak** (Balluta)

A small number of majestic Holm Oaks at Wardija are close to a 1000 years old, which makes them among the oldest living things in Malta. The Holm Oak is tough and can survive the dry conditions of our islands and its rough trunk makes a good habitat for minibeasts. In Mediterranean woodlands the Holm Oak is a dominant tree; its wide canopy of evergreen leaves gives great shelter to birds and other wildlife, and its large acorns are good foodstores for squirrels (not in Malta!), birds and insects. In afforestation projects like Foresta 2000, planting oaks is a good idea as they are great for biodiversity. Acorns are easy to germinate – even by children – and make a great lesson on how seeds grow.



There are several other habitats in the Maltese Islands which have not been covered here. These include **maquis** (makkja), **clay steppe** (steppa tat-tafal), **rocky steppe**, **sandy shores**, **rocky shores**, **sand dunes** (gharam tar-ramel), **caves**, **saltmarshes** (bwar salmastri), **reedbeds**, **rock pools**, and **posidonia meadows** (wesghat/merghat tal-alka) – the latter a very important (and protected) marine habitat.