

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 79 • March 2024





A milestone for nature conservation in Europe

The European Union's Nature Restoration Law has been successfully approved by the European Parliament, marking a significant milestone for nature conservation in Europe. This triumph of science and nature preservation over conservative opposition

represents the first major pro-nature legislation from the EU in three decades.

Despite facing resistance from a coalition of MEPs, including factions from the EPP, ECR, far-right Identity and Democracy, and segments of the liberal Renew Europe group, the law gained enough support to pass the line. The EPP, as the largest group in the European Parliament, expressed concerns about potential bureaucratic burdens on farmers just before the vote, emphasising their preference for allowing farmers to farm without additional obligations.

Fortunately, several EPP members defied their group's stance, supporting the legislation, including our sole voting EPP member (and all Maltese S&D MEPs). Unfortunately, the Nature Restoration Law has been marred by a disinformation and scaremongering campaign falsely claiming it would create bureaucratic challenges for farmers.

In reality, farmers require protection from floods, fires and droughts, which threaten food production.

Contrary to scaremongering narratives, the Nature Restoration Law aims to rejuvenate degraded ecosystems across all Member States, contributing to the EU's climate and biodiversity goals while bolstering food security. To meet established targets, EU countries must restore at least 30% of habitats covered by the new law by 2030, spanning forests, grasslands, wetlands, rivers, lakes, and coral beds.

The invaluable role of citizen engagement in sustaining the law cannot be underestimated. Over one million messages and signatures from citizens urging their EU representatives to support the law played a pivotal role in this unprecedented societal mobilisation. As European Parliament and local elections approach, it is crucial to maintain a focus on environmental issues. Whether advocating for the greening of local spaces or addressing climate change at a European level, let us ensure that environmental concerns remain at the forefront of political agendas and make our voices heard.

Darryl Grima
President



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Jan 2024. A hunter in Nadur (Gozo), who shot and injured a protected Eurasian Collared-dove, which he subsequently killed using his mouth, was acquitted of all charges after appealing his earlier guilty sentence. The incident was filmed by BirdLife Malta in Apr 2022, but the court dismissed the video evidence during the appeal, as it was stated that the footage had not been properly substantiated during proceedings.

No other court case conclusions to report as there is still no Magistrate in place to hear environmental crime cases. We hope court proceedings will resume soon.

Record roost

On Saturday 13 January 2024, a group of BirdLife Malta volunteer birdwatchers gathered in Valletta to take part in the White Wagtail roost count – an annual event that began in 1985. Over the years of monitoring, the numbers of roosting White Wagtails (Zakak Abjad) in the capital city have steadily increased, and this year's count has set up a new record: 16,171 birds. The wagtails spend their days foraging across the country, but as the days approach sunset, thousands of birds stream in over the bastions with one thing on their mind: to find a safe place for the night ahead. The birds roost in the Ficus trees situated in Great Siege Square next to St John's Co-Cathedral. In the trees the birds find safety and warmth in numbers hidden in the thick foliage. White Wagtails arrive in Malta around October and stay until late March, taking advantage of the mild Mediterranean climate. We would like to thank the 18 volunteers who attended the event.



Antoine Monnier

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AG Opinion expected on 30 May

After a lengthy process spanning over three years, the European Court of Justice (ECJ)'s Infringement Proceedings against Malta regarding the smokescreen finch trapping 'scientific research' derogation are finally nearing conclusion. The recent ECJ hearing in Luxembourg resulted in the Court requesting an AG Opinion, expected on 30 May, following which the ECJ will issue its final judgement. Our pre-hearing investigation report revealed that at least 51,400 finches were trapped and held captive during the past season, instead of being released. Video evidence submitted as part of the case exposed widespread derogation abuse, and the *Times of Malta* featured an opinion piece by our Head of Conservation Nicholas Barbara and also an editorial on this issue.

Rehabbed birds released in Sicily

Three protected birds, all victims of illegal hunting during the autumn hunting season, were successfully rehabbed by BirdLife Malta and released in Sicily on 5 December 2023. A Greater Flamingo, a European Honey-buzzard and a Western



Western Marsh-harrier prior to release

Marsh-harrier were released at Saline Di Priolo Nature Reserve, as releasing them in Malta would have risked their being shot down again. This release, with the assistance of WBRU-appointed vets and following clearance by ERA's CITES unit, also underscores our good relationship with LIPU (BirdLife Italy) which runs the nature reserve where the birds were released.

FKNK Barn-owl shot down

Not even birds released by the hunters themselves were spared from illegal hunting during the last autumn hunting season! A captive-bred Common Barn-owl that forms part of a reintroduction project managed by the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK) was illegally shot down in December, ending up in the grounds of a school in Ħaż-Żebbuġ. The bird was found by the public and handed over to BirdLife Malta. Following an examination by the government vet, it was confirmed that the owl had suffered a shotgun wound that broke its right wing.



The injured FKNK-bred Common Barn-Owl

Close season

The hunting and trapping seasons are now both closed. The hunting season ran from 1 Sep 2023 to 31 Jan 2024 while the Golden Plover and Song Thrush trapping season (20 Oct 2023–10 Jan 2024) and the finch trapping season under the guise of 'scientific research' (20 Oct–20 Dec 2023) are now also closed. This means that any form of bird hunting or trapping activity using guns, nets or bird callers is currently not permitted, giving our countryside a much-needed respite from bird killing activities.



EP adopts Nature Restoration Law

The European Parliament has adopted the Nature Restoration Law, heeding the calls of over a million citizens, businesses, scientists and NGOs, and paving the way for this first-of-its-kind law to become a reality. Despite last-minute efforts of far-right and conservative groups, and disinformation from anti-nature lobbies, most MEPs (including all Malta's MEPs) voted in favour. The final step in the process is for the agreement to receive the formal approval of EU Member States.



Bugibba trees saved following our pressure

Great news! Thanks to our efforts, plans for a Bugibba regional health centre will be adjusted to preserve 10 mature Ficus trees on site. Health Minister Chris Fearn announced that the Foundation for Medical Services will be modifying the original plans. Our objection to ERA saved the trees that host 800 roosting White Wagtails there in winter.



Another White Wagtail roost saved!

Wied Żnuber under threat again

The Government announced it instructed the Planning Authority to change the designation of land in Birżebbuġa's Wied Żnuber, from an area designated for industrial development to ODZ. However, the public consultation exercise issued by the PA about a partial review of the 2006 South Malta Local Plan (as amended in 2017) specifically for Hal Far was nothing short of a deception exercise clearly done to accommodate a secret February 2022 agreement to build an airstrip for model airplanes on site. This is because the Government also instructed the PA to change part of the industrial designation of that land for "low impact sports", clearly paving the way to build the airstrip, all under the guise of extending ODZ land. In a joint press release with other ENGOS, we condemned this move and called on the general public to show its disagreement with this proposal.



ENGOS protest to save Wied Żnuber

Annual ringers meeting held

In January, the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme held its annual bird ringing group meeting for its ringers, trainees and birders. During this meeting various interesting talks about bird studies in Malta were delivered. Topics covered included genetic studies, tracking studies and seabird monitoring. This meeting also served as an opportunity to look back and review the previous year, looking at achievements, numbers and trends. The ringing committee that runs the ringing scheme shares with ringers and trainees any new and changing policies that the scheme adopts to ensure high quality work and ringing data.



Ringers meeting held at Salina in January 2024

BirdLife Malta founding member awarded

We are honoured that BirdLife Malta founding member Dominic Cutajar (who passed away in August 2023) was posthumously awarded the Midalja għall-Qadi tar-Repubblika for his contributions to nature conservation and cultural leadership during the investiture ceremony held on the occasion of last year's Republic Day. Apart from his involvement in nature conservation and being one of the founders of BirdLife Malta (then Malta Ornithological Society), Dominic was a leading figure in Malta's cultural sector, holding positions of responsibility in various institutions.



Dominic Cutajar's family receiving the Ġieħ ir-Repubblika decoration

European Young Leader

We are proud that BirdLife Malta Council Member Steve Zammit Lupi has been named European Young Leader, making it to the prestigious European Young List curated by Friends of Europe! Steve is an independent local councillor in his hometown of Haż-Żebbug and is a well-known environmental activist who has championed several actions that led to positive change. Well done Steve!



WORDS **Antoine Monnier** BirdLife Malta Communication Assistant

Common Teal

This nimble, fast-flying teal is among the smallest ducks. Both sexes have very distinct plumage differences. During the breeding season, drakes have a chestnut head and a broad distinctive green eye-patch that shimmers visibly in the light. From a distance the body may look greyish, but when observed closely one notices its fine vermiculation pattern in its feathers. Other distinguishing features include the horizontal white and black stripe on the wing as well as the yellowish triangular shaped patch under the tail. Like most ducks, the female Common Teal is by comparison rather unremarkable. The uniformly mottled brown and slightly darker back and rump draw less attention during the 21-day incubation period.

Both males and females have very distinctive dark-greenish blue speculums on their wings that are best seen in flight. It is precisely this colour, also seen on the eye-patch of drakes during breeding season, that gives the name to the colour 'teal'.

Like most ducks, teals spend most of their life around water. They are dabbling ducks that find most of their food on the water's surface or just below by dipping their heads and half their bodies. Their diet mainly consists of invertebrates, aquatic

plants and also seeds during the colder months. Their bills can also filter mud to search for food.

Most local sightings are recorded migrating in small flocks off the coast especially during the autumn months when the birds are heading south. On fewer occasions, singles or small flocks land at the Ghadira or Simar Nature Reserves, which offer food and shelter for longer periods. Some teals that arrive in autumn may spend all winter at our reserves until it is time for them to head back north in spring to reproduce.

The breeding season starts in March and the nest is prepared by creating a shallow area on the ground and lining it with leaves and the bird's own down. Females lay and tend 8–11 eggs while the males abandon the nest as soon as the eggs have been laid.

In Malta teals are unfortunately legally huntable and can be hunted both from land and sea. If this were not the case, the numbers we see every year would surely increase and more of us would enjoy sightings of this beautiful bird.

WORDS Ian Balzan Birdwatcher and nature photographer



Aron Tanti



Aron Tanti

MALTESE NAME: Sarsella

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Anas crecca*

LENGTH: 34–38 cm

WING SPAN: 53–59 cm

IUCN CONSERVATION STATUS: Least Concern

LOCAL STATUS: Regular

CALL: Preep-preep!

BEHAVIOUR: Shy. Forms large flocks in winter

HABITAT: Freshwater lakes and marshes. Can winter in brackish wetlands

Nature at our reserves

SIMAR



Opening hours
September to May
Monday, Wednesday & Friday 2pm-7pm
Sunday 10am-4pm
Entrance free (donations welcome!)

More info at
<https://bit.ly/IsSimarNatureReserve>





Blue Emperor

Blue Emperor

Mazzarell Sultan *Anax imperator*

Malta is not particularly rich in dragonflies, main reason being our lack of ideal habitat for these water-loving creatures. Dragonflies love freshwater lakes, ponds and streams but from the way the climate is going it seems we'll soon end up with even less of these than the few we already have. So we're lucky we actually have a dozen or so regular species of these large and spectacular – and mind-bogglingly ancient – insects. Largest among them is the Blue Emperor. Watching this flash of metallic blue zoom past you as it patrols its tiny bit of freshwater habitat is mesmerising to say the least. Dragonflies lay their eggs in water, which is where their young live until they're big and ready to switch to adult flying life. With its pools and canals, Simar is a magnet for these magnificent creatures.

Cetti's Warbler

Bufula tal-Għolliq *Cettia cetti*

You rarely see it but you will often be 'informed' it's there! You see, the Cetti's Warbler is a loudmouth. There may be little visually spectacular about this largely brown bird, but the sudden powerful staccato call coming from a nearby hidden perch is quite literally a conversation stopper, and you can't help peer into the tangle trying to spot what could have given such a loud call. Cetti's Warbler is close to our hearts because it's one of the precious few birds that nest on our crowded rock. The species set up residence in Malta in the mid-1970s and has since spread to most valleys, preferring places with copious vegetation to suit its shy nature, so a spot like Simar is ideal. Cetti was the Italian naturalist who first described the bird for science, and what a strange coincidence that his name echoes so well the bird's unmistakable *chett! chetti-chetti-chetti!* call.



Cetti's Warbler



Olive

Olive

Żebbuġ *Olea europaea*

Wherever in some foreign field an olive grows, that corner is forever Mediterranean. While apologising for mangling Brooke's famous verses, what I'm trying to say here is that the Olive is so typical of the Mediterranean region that wherever it grows – be it South Africa or California – the climate there must surely be like ours, with mild winters, hot summers, a bit of rain and little or no frost or snow. And humans, whose civilisation too dawned around the shores of the Med, soon found plenty of uses for the tree and its fruit. One such use employed in the Xemxija area was to act as windbreak for the farmland inland from the bay, a wall of foliage to protect from the savage *Grigal*. This accounts for the lovely olive grove that today dominates much of the east side of the nature reserve, where a rich ecosystem has developed in the dappled light under its canopy.

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

Nurturing future leaders of nature conservation



Jonathan Pullicino

BirdLife Malta's Falko youth group re-launched

Hiking together

Time for youth to step up

Today we live in a world where people don't appreciate the beauty of nature, and we are stuck in time where there is constant pollution and endangerment of biodiversity. At BirdLife Malta we are constantly working on our primary objective of conserving birds and habitats which is achieved through our work in a variety of fields including research, education and campaigning.

This year, we have decided to provide a space to young people to also do the same and take the first steps in action. These young people will have the opportunity to become influencers themselves and make a change for our planet. That is why thanks to the *It's Time* project that is co-funded by the European Union we are re-launching our Falko youth group.

This new community will consist of a friendly and safe space in which YOUTH can improve their communication, organising,



Jonathan Pullicino

A Falko event in Gozo

management and many other soft and career skills that will help them advance in a personal and professional growth. To better understand what Falko is and why it is important, we have to delve a bit into the past when some of our most beautiful flowers bloomed and decided to become part of the BirdLife Malta community!

What was Falko?

Falko was originally set up in 1993 and was a group of passionate young people willing to take the matter of protecting the environment into their own hands. It was a community full of laughter, joy, hard work and commitment, consisting of young people full of passion and motivation. Some of them even ended up working as part of our dedicated team and are now regular BirdLife Malta staff and professionals with expertise and years of experience that will help influence and motivate the next generation.

Mario V Gauci



Be the changemakers

As urbanisation continues, the need for the Planet Protectors of the next generation will be even more urgent and so will the need to take action. The time has come for us too to pass the torch and put our trust in the next generation as we acknowledge their unique perspective, boundless energy, and sense of responsibility towards the planet they will inherit. With this in mind, we aim to harness their passion and drive to create meaningful impact in our communities and beyond. Our mission is clear: to cultivate a community of young environmentalists equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources to address pressing environmental issues head-on. Through education, advocacy and hands-on involvement we will empower our members to become changemakers!

Time for youth to step up



Power and importance of youth

The new Falko youth group will offer young people aged 17 to 25 an opportunity to become part of an active community. They

will build friendship and trust among themselves and participate in team-building events, youth advocacy and active citizenship.



A 2017 nature walk for Falko members

The future is decided by the youth. Everything depends on their fostering, as they are humanity's most precious treasure. Youths often tend to be underestimated and are told that they do not have experience and don't understand things as deeply and clearly as adults. However, that's exactly why we are here – to guide them and foster them, to teach them about how they can make an impact. By becoming part of Falko, they will see the challenges of engaging people with nature and they will experience the true essence of it from different perspectives.

They will learn to pass that passion to others and with guidance and support they will overcome challenges and have a better understanding and awareness of the importance of the environment, because in order to care about something you first need to experience it!

As Sir David Attenborough once said: "No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced".

Don't wait for change, be the change

Registrations for Falko are currently open and we invite you to apply and take the first step to protecting the environment yourself. You can scan the QR code to register, or visit the link bit.ly/JoinFalko; more details on the Falko page on our website.

All those registered will be invited to then start the process of becoming change-makers in April. Not only with words... but with action!

For more info contact us on falko@birdlifemalta.org.



Register to join Falko today!

WORDS Nua Đonaj BirdLife Malta Events & Outreach Assistant

Visit our sites!

In terms of nature, spring is one of the richest and nicest seasons to enjoy. So it comes as no surprise that our suggestion to you is to head to one of our nature reserves. Entrance to the reserves is free (donations welcome!) and services include nature trails, birdwatching and photography hides, even a tiny nature shop. Despite their small size, you are spoilt for choice.

Simar Nature Reserve is packed with activities for the family – several environmental games and information panels line the nature trail with a couple of viewing points onto the lake where you can relax and listen to the different bird calls.



Sep–May
Mon, Wed & Fri 2pm–7pm
Sun 10am–4pm



Għadira Nature Reserve is teeming with life especially migratory birds like heron and wader species. A walk along the nature trail to our birdwatching hide brings you close to the wetland for a first-hand view of the birds.



Sep–May
Mon, Wed & Fri 2pm–7pm
Sat & Sun 10am–4pm



Salina Nature Reserve provides two choices – the newly-restored wetland area, open twice during the week, probably attracts keen birders and photographers whilst others looking for a place to visit can stroll along the paths on the salt pans side, stopping at our new Dinja Waħda Garden, a haven for dragonflies and wild flowers.



Reserve
Mon to Sun 7am–8pm (Apr–Sep)
Mon to Sun 7am–6pm (Oct–Mar)
Visitor Centre
Mon to Fri 8am–11am (summer)
Mon to Fri 8am–3pm (winter)
Wetland
Tue & Thu 11am–5pm



Foresta 2000 has several nature trails passing through the mixed woodland groves and along the wildflower meadows which are full of pollinators. You can rest along the trail and enjoy views of Mellieħa as well as Għadira Nature Reserve.



Open all year
24/7



More info about
our nature reserves



Book one of the
photography hides at
our nature reserves



Managing invasive species across the Med

First steps of new international project LIFE Tetide

The islet of Filfla may seem devoid of life but it is home to thousands of pairs of European Storm-petrels and an endemic subspecies of Maltese Wall Lizard

Benjamin Metzger



A Yelkouan Shearwater chick in a nestbox at L-Irdum tal-Madonna: a success story that can be extended to sites such as Fungus Rock

BirdLife Malta has formed part of a new international partnership with the aim to improve biosecurity measures on invasive species in seabird colonies. The project name, LIFE Tetide, draws on the name of the ocean *Tethys*, paralleling its vastness in ambition. In between the lines, "Tetide" stands for *Turning Eradication Targets Into*

Durable Effects. Immense efforts have been taken to remove invasive species such as rats from islands. However, a strong network of biosecurity is required to prevent invasive species from returning, detecting them if they do and effectively responding to any incursion to remove them swiftly before an incursion can become a re-invasion. Under the lead of Parco Nazionale Arcipelago Toscano, multiple entities in Italy, Croatia and Malta have committed to secure 26 Mediterranean islands.

In the Maltese Islands these are two islets of international conservation significance, namely Filfla and Il-Ġebbla tal-Ġeneral, also known as Fungus Rock. Both islets are strict nature reserves with access permitted only for research or conservation purposes. However, that does not mean they are free of threats. Filfla holds the largest breeding population of European Storm-petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) in the Mediterranean. The continued existence of these small seabirds depends on the islet remaining rat free. In contrast, there are already rats on Fungus Rock. These will be removed during the project to ensure that Scopoli's Shearwaters (*Calonectris diomedea*) can nest safely; nest boxes will also be installed on the Rock to also attract Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Puffinus yelkouan*) to breed.



A Scopoli's Shearwater tightly incubating its egg under the dense cover provided by native vegetation such as the Maltese Salt Tree

Filfla and Fungus Rock both have their own endemic subspecies of Maltese Wall Lizard (*Podarcis filfolensis*) which may also be threatened by rats. Also common to the islets is the challenging access up vertical cliff sides and treacherous boulders. We are therefore setting up the training of persons from the Environmental & Resources Authority (ERA), Ambient

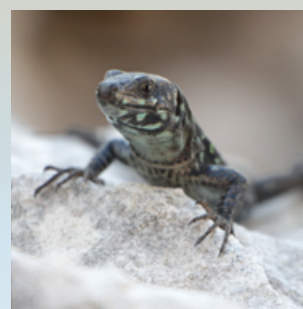
Malta and the two climbing clubs (MRCC and ClimbMT) so that together with BirdLife Malta we form a rapid response team that can monitor for rodent presence and tackle any incursion. We are also testing trail cameras with image transmission over the mobile network, with AI rodent image recognition that would allow swifter response to incursion.

It is not only about rats, however: we will also be removing invasive alien plants from the two nature reserves. Species such as *Carpobrotus spp.* and *Opuntia spp.* spread down the cliff faces where they block shearwater burrows or outcompete the native vegetation that shearwaters nest under.

LIFE Tetide is EU-funded, and locally BirdLife Malta is grateful to the co-financing of ERA. The project will run until 2028. BirdLife Malta looks forward to collaborating with stakeholders, volunteers and partners over the next few years to build a strong foundation for biosecurity in the very special places on the Maltese Islands that seabirds call home.

WORDS **Martin Austad** BirdLife Malta Seabird Research Coordinator

Arón Tanti



The endemic Filfla subspecies of Maltese Wall Lizard, *Podarcis filfolensis filfolensis*

The isle that punches way above its weight

Kemmuna is a gem of history, biodiversity and great views

San Niklaw Bay and Blue Lagoon aerial view

Nowadays, travelling from Malta to Kemmuna is relatively straightforward, with daily trips leaving Ċirkewwa and Marfa regularly, starting early morning till late afternoon. The trip from Ċirkewwa to the Blue Lagoon takes about half an hour, usually including a quick visit to the coastal caves. Most trips take you to what is probably the most popular spot on the island, the Blue Lagoon, but some take you to San Niklaw Bay or Santa Marija Bay.

Start at the Blue Lagoon

Being the most popular landing spot, our suggested walk starts from the Blue Lagoon (actual name: Bejn il-Kmiemen). Once you have enough of the hustle and bustle of this busy area, walk uphill for around 300m along the dirt road till you arrive at a crossroad. A left turn takes you towards San Niklaw Bay, a 250m downhill walk characterised by a mixture of abandoned farmland, garrigue and a number of mature trees. In spring, look for Whinchats in the open areas and for Spotted Flycatchers in the wooded parts. With luck you might even spot a European Turtle-dove or a Eurasian Golden Oriole. Do not forget to also look out for the Maltese Wall Lizard and the many insect species.

Santa Marija Bay

We strongly suggest that visitors keep to existing tracks, so we advise you to go back up to the crossroad, from where you can proceed towards Santa Marija Bay. Look about and enjoy the scenery, but remember also to scan the sky, as Kemmuna in spring is great for birds of prey such as Western Marsh-harriers.



Maltese Wall Lizard



Eurasian Golden Oriole

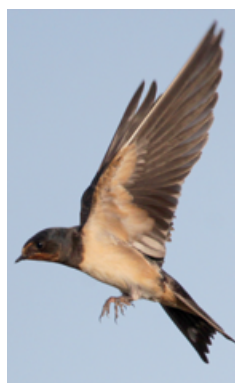


Western Marsh-harrier

After a 1km walk, you will reach the picturesque bay, with a newly regenerated wetland area, and a small chapel dedicated to the Return of the Holy Family from Egypt. The wetland, just behind the sandy beach, attracts a variety of birds. The Western Yellow Wagtail is common in spring, feeding along the muddy shoreline, with Barn Swallows and Northern House Martins flying overhead, snapping up insects from the air. Dominating the area is the African Tamarisk, a tree well adapted to high levels of salinity.



Wetland behind Santa Marija Bay, with chapel



Barn Swallow

A footpath at the other end of the bay takes you to a quieter area of Kemmuna, with lush garrigue on your left, and beautiful views of the valley on your right. Northern Wheatears are often spotted on the garrigue, while European Pied Flycatcher prefers the more densely vegetated valley.

A visit to the ringing station

Around 800m up the path, you will reach BirdLife Malta's Ringing Station. Disturbance in this sensitive area is kept to a minimum, but ringers present are always happy to share a word with anybody interested.

About 350m further on, you reach the derelict pig farm, with breathtaking views of Kemmauna, Gozo and Malta. Despite the negative impact of the structure, nature is slowly taking over, with various floral species thriving, including the endemic Maltese Ferule.



Santa Marija Tower and cliffs

Santa Marija Battery and Tower

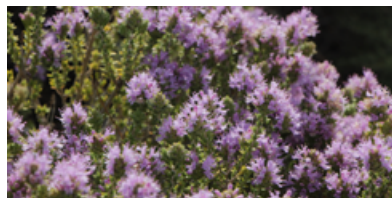
A detour towards the coast will reward you with spectacular views of the seacliffs that dominate the northern coast of the island. About 350m downhill from the pig farm you reach Santa Marija Battery, a strategic viewpoint overlooking the Kemmauna channel.

Walking 1.5km westward along the southern coast towards Santa Marija Tower, observe the low-lying biodiversity and be sure to make frequent stops to admire the flora, including Tree Spurge, Maltese Spurge, Mediterranean Thyme, Blue Pimpernel, Horn-of-Plenty, Branched Asphodel, Olive-leaved Germander, Shrubby Kidney Vetch, Seaside Ox-eye Daisy (particularly evident in the Tower area) and White Hedge-nettle, to name a few that flower in spring. Also remember to look for butterflies, such as Clouded Yellow, feasting on the wild flowers.

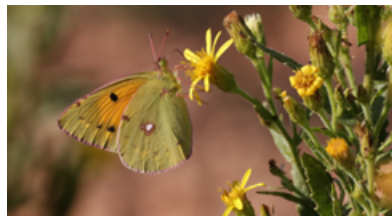
Around 200m from the Santa Marija Tower, the abandoned isolation hospital is also worth noting, before pursuing the remaining 1.5km walk back to the Blue Lagoon. This circular walk of around 8km should engage you for a whole day, especially if you dedicate proper attention to the flora and fauna along the way, so make sure to keep the entire day clear on your calendar!



Garrigue overlooking Santa Marija Bay



Mediterranean Thyme



Clouded Yellow



Western Yellow Wagtail



Maltese Ferule

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **Aron Tanti** BirdLife Malta nature photographer



Martina Schembri



25 Nov 2023 We held an event for our Klabb Huttat members at Salina Nature Reserve. The aim was to educate the children about nocturnal and diurnal animals. The youngsters enjoyed a day of exciting activities including a treasure hunt, a debate and a quiz where they learned new things about birds and bats.

CVC Media



2 Dec 2023 We celebrated Gozo's heritage and nature with a fully-booked event at Dwejra Tower marking the start of the festive season, the return of Yelkouan Shearwaters to the cliffs and the start of a new project, LIFE Tetide, which has key actions in the Dwejra area. Following a tour of the recently restored Dwejra Tower by Din I-Art Helwa, we discussed how the public can contribute to seabird conservation in Malta. While the strong winds and crashing waves did not allow us to hear shearwaters calling after dusk, we closed off the evening at the tower with homemade mince pies and refreshments instead.

Murat Geilir



17 Dec 2023 Families and children joined us at Simar Nature Reserve's visitor centre for a Christmas family event to celebrate the festive season. The event also served to bring children closer to nature through several activities

such as origami, birdwatching and more. Together we combined the Christmas atmosphere with the wonders of nature!

21 Dec 2023 Seabird biologists and artists Marc Schruoffenegger and Anne Marie Austad were at Majjistral Nature and History Park's visitor centre to help participants discover the secret world of seabirds. The participants wondered at these beautiful creatures through the art, which they were able to link with their scientific knowledge. The exhibition was open all day long, with some interesting presentations throughout the day.



14 Jan 2024 A group of children from our Young Birders Club, accompanied by parents and leaders, enjoyed a day's birdwatching in Sicily. We spent the day at Vendicari and Pantani Cuba & Longarini Nature Reserves. The club is a group for 8–13-year olds interested in nature and birdwatching. If you know children who are enthusiastic about nature and would like to join our club, please get in touch on info@birdlifemalta.org.



Ian Balzan

14 Jan 2024 The first of a series of focused monthly events was held at Simar Nature Reserve. The main protagonists of the event were the several Common Coots currently spending winter at the reserve. Visitors were given information about this charismatic species, so easy to identify with its jet black plumage and white bill. The younger visitors also enjoyed a special game set along the nature trail that leads to the birdwatching hide from where the visitors enjoyed glimpses of the Coots.



Cristina Alonso



Ben Critchop

21 Jan 2024 A nature walk led by our Events & Activities Group started at Mgarr and proceeding to Ta' Lippija Tower, a small 17th century watchtower overlooking Ġnejna Bay. We passed Qarraba Bay and then walked down the clay slopes of Ġhajj Tuffieħa which was a little difficult, but everyone made it up to the plateau. Our return

journey included a somewhat steep uphill walk, but we enjoyed the dramatic scenery of the area before taking the same path back to Mgarr.



Vera Tokmakova

4 Feb 2024 As the world celebrated World Wetlands Day, BirdLife Malta hosted an open day at Salina Nature Reserve to showcase these precious ecosystems. In this event we explored the salt pans, held activities for children and also a bird-ringing demonstration, as part of our official opening of the newly-restored wetland area.



4 Feb 2024 Salina Nature Reserve's visitor centre was transformed into a biology lab for a fascinating owl pellet dissection workshop. Members of our Young Birders Club, Nature Guardians and their parents dissected and identified pellet contents and added to our knowledge of Short-eared Owl habits. Notable finds included bones of rodents, bats and various birds.

15 Feb 2024 BirdLife Malta held the fourth session in the *Sip, Savour and Soak in Nature* series at Salina Nature Reserve. Snake experts Ellie and Nick Dobbs shared with us years of study about our four snake species and the packed hall learned about the status of the snake populations in Malta. The event was free and open to everyone, and we hope to see more people on our next session.



Mark Gauci



17 Feb 2024 BirdLife Malta organised a Klabb Huttat adventure at Foresta 2000. Starting off with a communal crossword puzzle, we tested knowledge of Maltese nature. Equipped with loupes and binoculars, the youngsters became nature detectives and went on a discovery of nature's wonders. The event was led by a team of dedicated BirdLife Malta volunteers.



18 Feb 2024 Our Events and Activities Group organised a walk at Buskett. We started from the parking lot near Verdala Palace and walked to Ghar il-Kbir and Clapham Junction. From here we continued to the Bronze Age grain silos situated along Dingli cliffs and then down into Fawwara valley passing by the chapels of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the Annunciation.



18 Feb 2024 This month's *Walk and Talk* was special as it was held at our Salina Nature Reserve. Attendees were welcomed by hundreds of gulls, some Little Egrets and a Common Sandpiper. After a short birdwatching session we walked to Kennedy Grove where Dr Nicole Borg gave a talk on how to take care of our mental health. We continued the walk surrounded by colourful flowers and ended up back at Kennedy Grove and Salina, where David Bartolo had his journal for sale to help people with their mental health journey.

10 Mar 2024 The BirdLife Malta Events & Activities Group took us on walk in beautiful Gozo. The route started at Mgarr Harbour and we hiked along the eastern coast to Hondoq Ir-Rummien, the Qala Cart Ruts, Il-Ġebbla tal-Halfa and then proceeded to Qala.



Upcoming events

13 Apr 2024 Our Events & Activities Group is organising a Sicily Day Trip for our members. We will be trekking in Cava Misericordia, a circular 12km route starting from Ragusa Ibla, followed by a late lunch at an agriturismo. If you are not a BirdLife Malta member yet, you need to join first!

28 Apr 2024 BirdLife Malta will again have a stand at Science in the Citadel in Gozo. Join us and find out more about our work especially our ongoing EU-funded LIFE PanPuffinus! project and engage in different activities with us.

Want to help us continue our work?

Join at <http://bit.ly/joinBLM>
 Donate at <http://bit.ly/donate-to-birdlifemalta>
 Support at <http://bit.ly/Becomeasupporter>
 Volunteer at <http://bit.ly/volunteerwithBLM>

Want to join an event?

Get more details at <http://bit.ly/joinanevent>
 or email events@birdlifemalta.org
 or call +356 2134 7645



Hiking for nature!

Photos: Murat Gellir



Nearly 90 nature enthusiasts joined us on Sunday 3 March for our annual fundraising Walk for Nature 2024. Participants of all ages, from kids to seniors, trekked the 7km route departing from and returning to our Simar Nature Reserve in Xemxija. Following the walk, prizes were awarded to the top fundraisers and to those who reached most people on social media, encouraging them to donate to support BirdLife Malta's work. We raised over €1,500 in total to support BirdLife Malta's education and conservation efforts.

