

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 82 • December 2024




BirdLife
MALTA



Court orders ignored: environment law in jeopardy

We recently encountered significant challenges in upholding our environmental law, raising serious concerns about nature protection and respecting legal standards. Two recent cases indicate a trend where government entities disregard court rulings, undermining both environmental integrity and judicial authority.

The first incident involved a ruling from the highest court of appeal that deemed certain penthouses in Gozo illegal. Despite this definitive judgement, the Planning Authority ignored the court's decision and allowed this development. Such a move not only threatens our environment but also casts doubt on the enforceability of court rulings, especially regarding conservation.

The second instance occurred when the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled against Malta's "scientific" trapping derogation on seven finch

species. Instead of honouring this ruling, the government bypassed the ECJ decision and re-opened the trapping season. This disregard for environmental regulations is alarming and sets a precedent that threatens to erode public trust in both our judiciary and our commitment to international law.

These incidents underscore an urgent need to respect our environmental laws. We must advocate for a future where environmental stewardship is protected by laws that are enforced. This also calls for unity to ensure our advocacy is effective. Engos recently united and called on the European Commission to scrutinise the situation. We also need your support, which can be as easy as becoming (or enrolling) a member today. <https://birdlifemalta.org/become-member>

Mark Sultana
CEO



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Culprits brought to justice after being observed and reported by BirdLife Malta.

Sep 2024: CRIME. Hunter shooting and killing Short-toed Snake-eagle in Bingemma (Sep 2024) PUNISHMENT. €5000 fine + lifetime ban on hunting.

Nov 2024: CRIME. Trapper trapping on unregistered site in San Ġwann (Nov 2023) PUNISHMENT. €700 fine + 2yr revocation of trapping licence.

Oriental Honey Buzzard

On 24 September, BirdLife Malta birdwatchers at the Buskett raptor watchpoint spotted an adult female Oriental honey-buzzard (*Kuččarda tal-Lvant*) among the common European honey-buzzards. This exceptional sighting marked the **first record** of this species for Malta, offering a rare chance for photographers to capture this magnificent raptor's diagnostic features.



Aron Tanti

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#CITIZENS AGAINST TRAPPING

#CitizensAGAINSTtrapping

BirdLife Malta is sounding the alarm after the government reopened finch trapping despite a clear European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling, which on 19 September found Malta guilty of breaching the EU Birds Directive and demanded corrective measures within a month. Instead, the government authorised an estimated 3500 trappers to spread their clap-nets (until 20 December), pandering to trappers' interests rather than following EU laws. At a press conference, BirdLife Malta urged immediate EU intervention and called for suspension of the season. An open letter was also sent to Maroš Šefčovič, European Commission Executive Vice-President, demanding swift enforcement of wildlife conservation laws. This urgent appeal was supported by eight ENGOS, pressing for the European Commissioner for Environment to enforce the

rule of law and uphold the ECJ ruling. BirdLife Malta has now launched the #CitizensAGAINSTtrapping campaign to mobilise public opposition to the government's actions. The initiative raises awareness of illegal finch trapping – posing as research – and equips citizens with tools to identify and report such activities. Our surveys last year exposed rampant abuse, with an estimated 51,400 finches caught, most of which were unlawfully kept. To aid in monitoring, BirdLife Malta has mapped all 4,396 authorised trapping sites (available on Google Maps), using data from the Wild Birds Regulation Unit. It empowers citizens to verify trapping sites and report illegalities. We urge everyone to take part and to report cases of birds being caught in nets and hidden away instead of being released, and also report trappers who leave nets unattended and uncovered when not on site.

Dinja Waħda turns 30

Representatives from school admin, enthusiastic teachers and students gathered for the annual Dinja Waħda (DW) awards event to celebrate education through nature and to be awarded for their outstanding participation in the DW educational programme. Over 50 primary schools were honoured for their dedication to conservation and the environment. This year was particularly significant as it marked the 30th year since DW's launch in 1994.



Group photo from the Award Ceremony



Short-toed Snake-eagle

Eagles killed at Victoria Lines

A flock of five short-toed snake-eagles came under fire along Victoria Lines, as BirdLife Malta members followed these prized birds to prevent them being killed. Hunters shot constantly at these protected birds as these tried to roost for the night; one bird was filmed being shot down at Bingemma, while shooting continued on the others well into the evening all along Tas-Santi, Dwejra and Mtarfa.



Osprey

Osprey killed near Birżebbuġa

On the second day of Raptor Camp, a specially protected Osprey was shot down by hunters while flying across Has-Saptan during a storm. Authorities were alerted and police are investigating. This occurred after about four other ospreys were seen roosting in the Buskett area the evening before.



Shot Black Stork

Black Stork Down

BirdLife Malta recovered a severely injured black stork, a rare and protected species, shot near the Prime Minister's summer residence in Girgenti. Another was reportedly killed at Ta' Ċenċ in Gozo. BirdLife Malta criticised ongoing and uncontrolled illegal hunting and urged stronger enforcement to protect Malta's wildlife and to verify taxidermy lists.



Injured European Honey-buzzard

Schools as bird sanctuaries

On 7 October a teacher at the Archbishop's Seminary in Rabat found a shot and injured European honey-buzzard in the school grounds. BirdLife Malta swiftly rescued the bird, marking the 22nd shot bird recovered since 1 September. BirdLife urges authorities to declare all schools bird sanctuaries, with a 200m buffer zone.

WORDS **Khouloud Belhadj** BirdLife Malta Communication Assistant. Photographs by BirdLife Malta.

The European Goldfinch: a vibrant visitor

The European Goldfinch is a beautiful bird easily recognized by its red face, black-and-white head, and bright yellow wing bar. Its elegant plumage and unmistakable song have made it popular, unfortunately often for the wrong reasons.

The Goldfinch population in Europe and Asia appears to be stable across the region but threats like habitat loss and trapping have raised concern in some areas. In Malta, it is a common migratory species and occurs in autumn – when the birds migrate south – and again in spring, when they are returning to Europe to nest. Were it not for local widespread finch trapping many Goldfinches would winter in the Maltese Islands, as they do in neighbouring Sicily, where flocks of hundreds of Goldfinches feed in open countryside.

The call of the Goldfinch is as pleasant as the bird's appearance: a delightful, twittering song, often described as a sequence of high-pitched, tinkling notes. The song is often heard when there is a good passage of the species. Goldfinches are highly adaptable and occur in various habitats, from open woodlands to garrigue and even farmland. In Malta, they are often spotted in areas with abundant seed-producing plants like thistles and sow-thistles.

Goldfinches are social birds, often seen in flocks especially during migration and in their wintering grounds. They are particularly attracted to thistle seeds and other small seeds, which they deftly extract with their slender bills. Goldfinches are also known for their acrobatic feeding habits, often hanging upside down on plants to reach seeds. During the breeding season, these birds build cup-shaped nests high in trees, usually in loose colonies. There are few records of the species breeding

in Malta, the last documented record being in 1966 when a pair built a nest in a Carob tree in Gozo.

With its striking colours and lively presence, the European Goldfinch is a fascinating species which, unfortunately, not many people get to enjoy in Malta. Indeed, the government has just re-opened a trapping season (under the guise of research, and illegal under EU law), during which thousands of finches, including Goldfinches, will be trapped to be kept in aviaries for the enjoyment of a few selfish individuals. BirdLife will keep up the fight for this iconic species, hoping one day we too will enjoy flocks of Goldfinches during our winter walks.

WORDS **Mark Gauci** BirdLife Malta licenced bird ringer

MALTESE NAME: Gardell

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Carduelis carduelis*

LENGTH: 12–13 cm

IUCN CONSERVATION STATUS: Least Concern

LOCAL STATUS: Common spring and autumn migrant



Nature at our reserves

Ghadira



Opening hours
September to May
Monday, Wednesday & Fridays 2:00pm-7:00pm
Saturday & Sunday 10:00am-4:00pm
Entrance free (donations welcome!)

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



Plain Tiger

Danaws *Danaus chrysippus*

This is not the kind of tiger that paces in chronic depression in one of these pathetic concrete miniature 'zoo' facilities sprouting around our countryside. The animal here is a butterfly, and there's nothing plain about it – indeed this amber beauty is one of the most stunning butterflies that visit our land, and arguably the largest too. The plain tiger occurs more or less every year in very small numbers, and breeding records are very few and irregular. It's a great migrant, though, and some years we get quite a few sightings, usually in autumn. They are often seen gracing flowering shrubs for a quick power drink of nectar, not least the golden samphire shrubs at Għadira.



Victor Falzon

Plain Tiger

Aron Tanti



Little Grebe

Little Grebe

Blongun Żgħir *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

It's easy to mistake a grebe for a duck, but with a closer, binoculars-aided view you'd notice the rather long tapering bill, which looks nothing like a duck's. That beak is the ideal tool for snapping up the small, slippery, wriggly fish that make up these birds' main diet, with aquatic invertebrates completing the menu. Grebes are expert divers and much more at home in water than on land. About the size of a small pigeon, the little grebe is the smallest of the three species of grebe that occur in Malta. It is also the only grebe known to have nested in our country. Quiet creeks and shallow lakes are their favourite haunt, so Għadira fits the bill nicely (excuse the pun!).

Sea Daffodil

Pankrazju *Pancratium maritimum*

Walking on a sandy beach, you'd expect to find dead seaweed, flotsam and plastic bottles. The last thing you'd expect is a plant with large, white, lily-like flowers simply begging you to stoop and smell their delicate fragrance. Yet there it lies: the sea daffodil, queen of the beach, growing in a tangle of curly pale grey-green leaves. Winter is not the right time to look for this flower, though, because the sea daffodil's flowering season is late summer. Right now it will be focusing its energies on growing new leaves to ensure a stronger plant for a successful flowering season come summer. At Għadira this beauty is spreading nicely, especially in the recently restored sand dune.



Desirée Falzon

Sea Daffodil

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



Dinja Wahda: a 30-year journey

A school receiving both gold as well as the Special Dinja Wahda Banner

It all began with a robin...

It was the robin that started it all! In the 1980s, this bird opened a gateway for BirdLife Malta into schools. At the time, robins were considered children's playthings. Their territorial nature made them easy targets for children to catch in a *trabokk*, a purpose-built trap with live robin decoys. BirdLife was determined to eradicate this cruel practice, and this became the first mission of BirdLife's newly formed Education Committee.



For the next 10 years, the Education Committee targeted schools with messages of appreciation for free robins carried on a sticker-cum-slogan depicting a robin. Distributed to thousands of school children, robin stickers adorned pencil cases, copybooks, books, satchels and blackboards, proclaiming their message and becoming a collector's item with each new design. In time, a variety of educational material about robins accompanied the hallmark sticker. By the 1990s, robin trapping had been virtually wiped out.

Broadening our mission

That robin campaign was the blueprint for the next level of the education team's strategy because it indicated crucial



All editions of the printed Action Guides

elements to bring about change: target schools, use attractive visuals, produce materials for teachers, and communicate with teachers. This happened with the help of a network of 'school delegates': teachers passionate about BirdLife's mission who became our contact point.

It was time to broaden our mission to spread appreciation of all nature, not just robins. In 1994 BirdLife employed its first education officer, and the One World programme was born.

The key shift from campaign to programme was the publication of an Action Guide for teachers, which became the main tool, encompassing 14 activities ranging from learning about animals and plants to green action ideas. For a logo we chose a balloon-globe to represent the fragility of our world, but with a fun element.



Checking the trophies at the very first DW 1994-5 awards event



Students leafing through a brand new Action Guide, with the Dinja Wahda balloon in the background

The programme was an immediate success, with teachers in 74 primary and secondary schools lapping up the posters, craft material and other resources sent out with the Action Guide. One World was launched as an award scheme for that extra motivation, whereby schools could earn gold, silver or bronze awards depending on their level of participation. A special ceramic plaque based on the Dinja Wahda logo was forged for the purpose.

One world of fun

In 1999, One World changed to Dinja Wahda in recognition of its uniquely local focus. For its first few years Dinja Wahda did not run annually, as BirdLife worked on sourcing a steady revenue for its environmental education programme; a partnership with Bank of Valletta eventually secured this. From the outset, the programme was run in collaboration with the Education



Students watching a BIRDS | VIEW PowerPoint

Directorate. From 2007, Dinja Wahda became an annual programme—with yearly launch and award events—and with an average 80% of primary schools participating. A new Action Guide was published every two to three years, packed with ever-increasing activities and resource material for teachers, and always full of fun, learning, action and awareness of our precious nature.



A school proudly displays its Dinja Wahda trophies

Reconnecting children with nature

A recent milestone in the Dinja Wahda journey was a review of the Guide to address children's growing disconnectedness with nature. Topics shifted to action-based activity outside the classroom aimed at connecting children with nature through direct experience.

The Action Guide is now fully online with a state of the art platform that instantly updates school profiles and participation, and constantly improved in line with the



Students playing the Migration Game

programme's strategy of supporting teachers through its user-friendly interface. Dinja Wahda has also just been approved as an accredited programme within the Malta Qualifications Framework.

Above all, Dinja Wahda remains a fresh, fun programme that responds to the changing natural and education worlds and their challenges.

WORDS Desirée Falzon Field Teacher and **Victor Falzon** Field Teacher



Launch of Dinja Wahda 6 at Savio College

SAFEGUARDING SEABIRDS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA EXHIBITION

BirdLife Malta's LIFE PanPuffinus! project and Majjistral Nature and History Park have launched Malta's first permanent seabird conservation exhibition. This interactive experience highlights the need to protect Malta's environment for seabirds, offering insights into their behaviors and the challenges they face, like light pollution and bycatch.

Discover Malta's seabirds up close with our audio guide! Scan the QR code to hear the calls of Yelkouan and Scopoli's Shearwaters and get fascinating facts as you wander the park. Then, enjoy a scenic walk with eco-friendly tips to explore responsibly.



The exhibition is open
Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 15:00
with the trails open 24/7



Fiona – an inspirational story

Tracking our rehabilitated birds - Part 1

Fiona with a GPS-GSM transmitter harnessed to her back – the device gives us an almost real-time continuous position of her whereabouts.

Round the clock

Our work on the rescue and rehabilitation of wild birds is a round-the-clock initiative that engages all our staff and volunteer resources. Rescuing and caring for victims of hunting and trapping alone keep us busy throughout most of the year, but other issues also affect wild birds, including coastal light pollution, collisions, ingestion of toxic material, and even extreme weather events.

All rescued birds are seen first by appointed vets, and those that come back to us for rehab would need anything from a day to several months of care. Other birds come to us via the police, mostly confiscated birds caught from the wild or smuggled into the country and kept illegally.

question arose: what would happen if we released it at one of our nature reserves? Would it adapt to a life in the wild after being in captivity from a young age?

Technology nowadays helps us answer such queries. Thanks to our Events and Education Department, this year's Walk for Nature raised funds to buy a GPS-GSM transmitter that when fitted to the flamingo would send us its position regularly: a great way to follow a bird's fortunes!

Released

Meanwhile the courts found the hunter guilty, slapped him a cool €3000 fine and cleared the bird for release. Following training with the RSPB (our BirdLife Partner in the UK), the bird was carefully harnessed with this device. On 9 August 2024 we released the fully rehabilitated flamingo – named Fiona by the Walk for Nature winners – at Ghadira Nature Reserve. There she settled in and began adapting to life in the wild, even interacting with other wild flamingoes that visited the reserve during the period. But Fiona's story was far from over...

To be concluded in next issue!



Juvenile greater flamingo at Ghadira Nature Reserve

Enter Fiona

The interesting story of Fiona the Flamingo showcases well our work. The young greater flamingo was spotted in a hunter's aviary by a BirdLife Malta youth member. This led to a check by our staff working on wildlife crime, followed by a report to the police, who raided the hunter's property. The bird was probably a lost and stranded youngster – we see a few every summer along our beaches – that had been captured and taken in for a life of captivity. While contestations in court argued on the legality of keeping this protected species, the bird was placed in our custody, where we did our best to bring it back in shape to return to the wild. It stayed with us for a year, but now the



Fiona testing her wings at Ghadira Nature Reserve.

WORDS **Nicholas Barbara** Head of Conservation BirdLife Malta

Chadwick Lakes

A winter wonderland for nature lovers

Magnificent white poplars line the valley at Wied il-Qlejgha

Chadwick Lakes, locally known as Wied il-Qlejgha, is one of our most treasured destinations for outdoor enthusiasts. Nestled between Mtarfa and Mosta, it offers a peaceful escape from urban life, especially during the winter months. With children on Christmas holidays, it's an ideal spot for families to reconnect with nature and discover Malta's unique biodiversity.

Built in 1890 by British engineer Sir Osbert Chadwick, the lakes were originally designed to provide irrigation water for agriculture. Today, they serve not only as a crucial resource for farmers but also as a natural haven for various plants and animals. After heavy rainfall, the lakes brim with water, transforming into picturesque scenes of cascading streams and waterfalls, perfect for nature walks and exploration.

A walk through nature's beauty

The Chadwick Lakes trail stretches over two kilometres, offering visitors a scenic and tranquil walk along the valley floor. Lush vegetation lines the path, home to various native trees. Among these are the holm oak (*balluta*), a long-lived tree with spiky leaves and small acorns, and the Aleppo pine (*znuber*), with needle-like leaves and dark cones (which are incidentally perfect for crafting bird feeders – but please don't pull them off the trees, pick the fallen ones).

The white poplar (*luq*) adds to the charm, especially when its dark green leaves flutter in a breeze and contrast with their silver underside. The fast-growing narrow-leaved ash (*fraxnu*) and the rare water-loving Mediterranean willow (*safsafa żgħira*) also grow here. A few carobs (*ħarrub*), with their twisted trunks and rough bark, add character to the landscape.



Mediterranean Willow



Holm Oak



Red-veined Darter

Wildlife encounters

Chadwick Lakes is a hotspot for wildlife, providing ideal habitat for our birds, reptiles and insects. Bird enthusiasts might spot the native Sardinian warbler (*bufula sewda*) and Cetti's warbler (*bufula tal-ġħollieq*), or winter visitors like the cheerful European robin (*pitirross*), the minuscule common chiffchaff (*vjolin tax-xitwa*) and maybe a white wagtail (*zakak abjad*) pacing smartly along the water's edge looking for insects - if you're extra lucky maybe also its close cousin the grey wagtail (*zakak tad-dell*), which is much scarcer. The ubiquitous Spanish sparrow (*għasfur tal-bejt*), our most common resident bird, thrives here too.



White Wagtail



Grey Wagtail



Cetti's Warbler



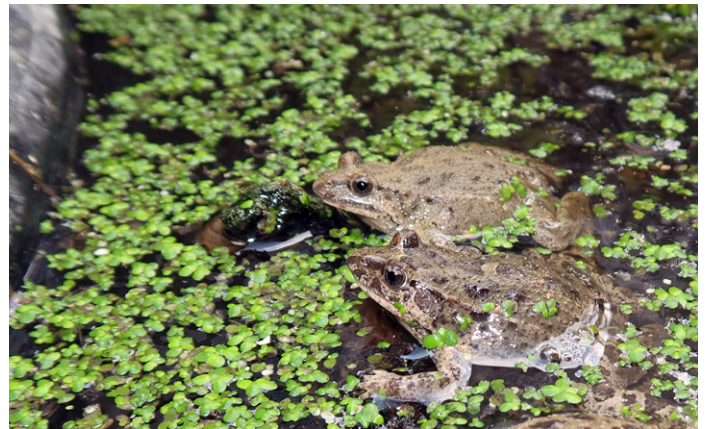
Common Chiffchaff

These social birds often gather in large flocks to sleep in the trees, especially in wintertime.

Reptiles and amphibians also live here. Look out for our endemic Maltese wall lizard (*gremxula*) basking on rubble walls, or the elusive painted frog (*żring*) peeping from the water's surface. Visitors may also spot a few species of dragonflies (*mazzarelli*), which begin life underwater.



Narrow-leaved Ash



Painted frogs

Accessible

Chadwick Lakes is easily accessible from Mosta and Rabat, making it a convenient destination for a day out. Whether you're walking, cycling or simply enjoying the peaceful scenery, the lakes offer a tranquil escape from Malta's busy streets.

With its abundant wildlife, lush landscapes and serene atmosphere, Chadwick Lakes is a must-visit this winter – a place to immerse yourself in nature, create lasting memories, and appreciate our natural heritage.

WORDS **Antonia Micallef** Public Engagement Executive at BirdLife Malta



Antoine Monnier



21 Sep 2024 Live-stream bird-ringing at Ghadira Nature Reserve as part of the Science in the City pre-festival events. From their home, online participants watched the ringing process up close and asked questions too!

Tamar Antia



27, 28 Sep 2024 BirdLife Malta joined Science in the City to highlight nature through sensory activities, with insights from our Erasmus+ project *A Superpower to Defend Nature*, a seabird survey and a comic book gift. Hoping we communicated our passion for science!

BirdLife Malta



6 Oct 2024 Our Falko Youth Group led a walk to Buskett for 60 families from St Benild School. Participants connected with and learned about nature, and enjoyed a fun day outdoors.



Tamar Antia

5, 6 Oct 2024 An exciting weekend during Eurobirdwatch24. It started with bird ringing at Salina on Saturday. Then, on Sunday we had a full-day event for young people, introducing them to birdwatching and wildlife photography. All made possible by the Erasmus+ *Blooming Schools* project, empowering youth to engage their communities in combating the environmental crisis.

Stefania Papadopol



9 Oct 2024 BirdLife Malta attended the King's Birthday Party at the British High Commissioner's Residence. This year's theme, "Youth in Action," celebrated organisations empowering young people to make a difference in Malta. After meeting their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh, representatives from Falko Youth Group, Nature Guardians and the Young Birders Club shared their experiences.

8, 10 Oct 2024 BirdLife Malta participated in MCAST Freshers' Week at Paola and Mosta campuses where participants learned about our volunteering opportunities, educational projects and engaged with their communities. It was a privilege to attend!



BirdLife Malta



11 Oct 2024 Salina Nature Reserve welcomed another event from the *Sip, Savour and Soak in Nature* series with two interesting talks. Dr Cynthianne Spiteri explored ancient diets and cooking practices through analysis of ceramic vessels, and Nicholas Galea shared insights about the Short-eared

Owl and its breeding habits in Malta. After, participants enjoyed drinks and socialising on the terrace.



12 Oct 2024 Our Events & Activities Committee organised a memorable day trip to Sicily for our members. The group visited Saline di Priolo Nature Reserve where they spotted an Osprey, Grey Herons, many waders and even a Greater Flamingo that had been released there by BirdLife Malta! The group also explored the historic Thapsos site on Magnisi Peninsula.



13 Oct 2024 An exciting *Wings Over Malta* day at Simar Nature Reserve. Birdwatching enthusiasts observed autumn migration, followed the birds' journey on the map, and played bird-themed board games.



27 Oct 2024 Our Events & Activities Committee organised a nature walk at L-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa. The group walked along Triq il-Marfa, Is-Swar ta' Qassisu, Wall Stone Beach, Rdum il-Ħmar and Slugs Bay, all the way to the Kuncizzjoni Chapel, with great views of L-Irdum tal-Madonna, Għar iċ-Ĉomb and Rdum l-Aħmar, then headed to Coral Lagoon. A wonderful morning full of sunshine and natural beauty.



29 Oct 2024 A celebration day of *Blooming Schools* Erasmus+ Project which has paved the way for Dinja Waħda programme for middle and secondary schools. The event *Nurturing Nature, Inspiring Futures* brought together educators to explore the power of nature-based learning through school wildlife gardens. We thank our partners, speakers, and all the dedicated educators who made this project a success.

Upcoming events

28, 29 Jan 2025 BirdLife Malta will participate in FestAmbjent at Junior College, with information stand, interactive activities.

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

BEV
Annual Survey

Let us know
what you think



Green it up!

Yusuf Gamal



Spreading awareness about nature's diversity has always been one of BirdLife Malta's constant efforts. Our latest publication – *Let's Make a Wildlife Garden!* – is a practical step-by-step guide on how to turn a sterile piece of land into a little haven for nature. The book, written by teachers with years of field experience, is aimed particularly at schools. Many of our educational institutions lack green space, which hinders our efforts to connect children with nature. We hope this book, published through the Blooming Schools Erasmus project, inspires schools to take up the challenge and start greening up!