

A Small Breeding Population of Barn Swallows in Gozo

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Introduction

The Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (in Maltese *Huttafa*) is a member of the family *Hirundinidae*. (swallows and martins). It is well adapted for a life in the air. The adult bird has long pointed wings and a deeply forked tail with long streamers. It is bluish-glossy black above and white or buffish white below, with a small bluish-black breast band and a dark red throat and forehead. When it spreads its tail it shows white spots on the outer tail feathers. It has small, short legs and a small bill but with a large gape. Sexes are alike but the male has noticeably longer tail streamers. Its diet consists of insects which it exclusively catches in the air.

The Barn Swallow is a long-distance migrant and the Barn Swallows which breed in the European

countries migrate south in autumn to spend the winter south of the Sahara, and return to their breeding quarters in spring.

It is a very common passage migrant during spring and autumn migration in the Maltese Islands, mostly from mid-March to mid-May and in September and October, although it may occur in smaller numbers a couple of weeks before and after these main migration periods. It is usually seen for most of the time in flight although sometimes it can be observed resting on wires. Ringed recoveries and controls of Barn Swallows published in bird ringing reports by BirdLife Malta (formerly Malta Ornithological Society), show that this species may reach the islands on migration from most European countries (see fig. 1).¹ In the evening migrating Barn Swallows congregate to roost in



Fig.1. Ringed recoveries of Barn Swallows in Europe and North Africa up to 2012. Forty-nine birds (black numbers) were ringed in Malta and recovered abroad. Sixty birds (white numbers) were ringed abroad and recovered in Malta. One Malta-ringed bird was recovered in Central African Republic (not in map).

¹ This map by Victor Falzon appeared in Sultana, and Borg, 2015: 290.



Fig.2. A few examples of nests built in different sites on Gozo since the first breeding record on the Island in 2006. (A) Ta' Sannat 28.05.2012; (B) Ghajnsielem 11.07.2011; (C) Kerċem 26.06.2009; (D) Victoria 01.09.2001.

large flocks, preferring sheltered reed beds such as that at Lunzjata Valley.

The half-cup-shaped nest is skilfully built by both adults using pellets of mud, reinforcing it with some dry plant material and saliva, and lined from the inside with horsehair, soft plant material and feathers, and placed on a beam or a projection in outhouses, barns, stables, derelict houses, but also under balconies (see fig.2). A clutch consists of three to six eggs; white sparingly marked with light reddish-brown or greyish spots and blotches. These are mainly incubated by the female for about fifteen days. The nestlings are tended to by both parents and fledge after about eighteen days (plus or minus a couple of days). In the early days after fledging, the young return in the evening to roost on the nest.

Documented Breeding Records

The first and only reference to breeding in the Maltese Islands of this species before the

1970s was made only by Antonio Schembri, who simply stated in his *Catologo Ornitologico* (1843), that some pairs bred in Malta – “*Qualche coppia nidifica fra noi*” (Schembri, 1843). However, the first documented breeding record for mainland Malta occurred in 1974 when a pair of Barn Swallows bred in a house in the middle of Mqabba.² Twenty years later the second documented record of a breeding pair of Barn Swallows occurred in a derelict farmhouse in the limits of Bidnija, when a nest containing four fully grown young was found on 28th July, a day before they fledged. The next record, also on mainland Malta, occurred in 2004 and since then a small breeding population established itself on the islands (Sultana, 2011).

Table 1 shows the breeding records on the islands, during the three-year period 2004-2006. It was during the last year (2006) when the first breeding record for Gozo was confirmed. Since then a small breeding population established itself in Sannat, Xewkija and recently in Victoria.

² Toni Ellul, the elderly and only resident in the house noticed a pair of Barn Swallows entering his home to build their nest, so he left a window open day and night. The pair raised four young successfully, which fledged on 2nd August (Sultana, J. and Gauci, C. 1975). An unusual occurrence – swallows breeding in Malta. In *Eight Ornithological Notes: 1974-1975. Il-Merill* 15: 2-4.

Year	Site	Breeding Log
2004	Buskett	Pair breeding twice (two broods) in an old room. Both broods fledged successfully.
2005	Għadira	Family party on 3 rd August – pair with four recently fledged young, observed being fed at times by the adults in the reedbed and also in flight.
2006	Tas-Sellum (Mellieħa)	A pair bred and raised two broods in an open corridor above garages. First brood of four young fledged by 21 st July. Adults noted incubating second brood in August.
	Ta' Gajdoru, Xagħra, Gozo	A family party consisting of a pair of adults and three fledged young were observed on 4 th July 2006 at Ta' Gajdoru, Xagħra, Gozo. One of the adults was noted feeding one of the young perched on a wire. Family party was still in the area the following day (5 th July). A pair must have bred somewhere in Gozo, probably in Xagħra (first breeding record for Gozo).

Table 1: Breeding records of Barn Swallows during the three-year period 2004-2006, when a small breeding population was established in the Maltese Islands.

The first nest in Sannat was found in a small derelict room in an area of horse stables. Three newly-hatched young were being brooded by the female on 14th June 2007. By 2011 there were three to four pairs breeding in the same horse stables area at Sannat. Due to disturbance this area was deserted by the breeding Barn Swallows in 2014. However a couple of pairs moved elsewhere in Sannat and were still nesting in old houses during the last breeding season (2016).

Two other breeding records of single pairs were also recorded in a derelict hunting lodge in Kerċem in 2009, and under a balcony in Għajnsielem in



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2011 respectively. In Xewkija three to five pairs have been breeding annually in the past few years, while in Victoria, after the first pair starting nesting in an old house³ in Dr Anton Tabone Street in 2001, the number has gone up to three pairs nesting in the same house (see Table 2).

Year	Nesting log of the breeding site at Victoria
2011	Pair with nest containing two fully-grown young located on 22 nd August; ready to fledge by 1 st September.
2012	Two pairs; each raising successfully a brood of two and three young respectively in July-August.
2013	none returned to breed.
2014	Two pairs; each raising successfully a brood of four and three young respectively in July/August.
2015	One pair with four young in nest on 19 th May; fledged successfully in early August.
2016	Three pairs; each raising successfully two broods in May- July; a total of 22 young fledged successfully.

Table 2: Breeding records of Barn Swallows using the same old house in Victoria during a six-year period 2011-2016.

After the breeding season all the Barn Swallows, both adults and juveniles, migrate south like their European congeners do.

It would be interesting to find out in which African country, the Gozitan Barn Swallows spend their winter. Some 140 young birds were ringed before they fledged, hoping that in future one or two may shed some light where they spend the winter. However, so far none have been recovered.

References

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Joe Sultana started a teaching career in 1957 and retired as Principal Environment Officer in 2000. He served on the PA Board (1992–7), and on the Ornis Committee (2003–6). He also participated in the formulation of legislation for the protection of sites and birds and in setting up nature reserves at Għadira and Simar and a bird observatory on Comino. He authored several publications and writings about birds and nature.

³ The owner of the house leaves the windows open purposely for the Barn Swallows to freely enter the house.