

# Bird's Eye View



**Foresta 2000**  
Walking in a  
Mediterranean woodland



**Autumn Wildlife**  
What to look out for this  
season



**Honey Buzzards**  
Discover where to see these  
beautiful birds of prey



**50 years of bird ringing**  
Celebrating half a century of studying Malta's birds



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BLACK-HEADED GULL - Aron Tarnti

## A Bittersweet Goodbye



Steve Micklewright  
Executive Director

This is my last editorial as Director of BirdLife Malta.

Mark Sultana will be taking up the role in November and I wish him every success. My time as Director has certainly been a bittersweet experience.

The sweetness comes through working with the amazing staff and volunteers who give more than anyone could expect to protect the birds that fly over Malta and educate people about them. It has been my privilege to work with a diverse team of Maltese, British, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Hungarian, Latvian and Portuguese staff. Since the birds belong to no country, it is appropriate that our staff and volunteers are from many. It is what makes BirdLife Malta so effective at its work and so very different from the xenophobia that is so prevalent in these islands. It has also been sweet because of what has been achieved in education, which is incredible.

We have also really brought to the attention of people in Malta and all over Europe the terrible situation for birds because of hunting and trapping. A recent report by BirdLife International confirms this. It reveals that the chances of a bird being shot while flying over Malta are greater than anywhere else in the Mediterranean and possibly the world.

This is where a bitter taste begins. It is hunting and trapping that stops Malta from being a safe haven for birds and it prevents more focus on positive projects. The fact that we lost a referendum on spring hunting by a less than 1% margin will surely haunt me (and others) forever, especially when this means that the current government believes pleasing hunters means more votes in elections.

But BirdLife Malta must continue to protect birds, educate people and campaign against the worst excesses of hunting and trapping. To do this, BirdLife Malta needs to continue to evolve and develop. I know Mark Sultana will lead the organisation in the right direction, but it is very much a team effort. He needs the right staff and especially Council members around him to give him the support and advice he will need in this most difficult of jobs. I hope his time in the hot seat is as stimulating, rewarding and enjoyable as mine has been.



BirdLife Malta is an environmental NGO working to protect Malta's wildlife by managing natural spaces, inspiring the new generation, opposing illegal hunting and undertaking research.

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## Winning Sparrow Photographer

Congratulations to Daniel de Castro whose winning photo in the recent Spot a Sparrow photography competition is this issue's cover image. It was difficult to choose just one from all the great entries, thanks to everyone who took part.

## Malta's First Bird Rehabilitation Centre

In June we took possession of Malta's first centre dedicated to the rehabilitation of shot and injured birds. The building, a restored farmhouse in Buskett Gardens, was renovated by the government and provided rent-free to BirdLife Malta. Once it is fully equipped, the centre will give countless birds a second chance.

## Inspiring Support at the British Birdfair

We returned to the British Birdfair in August where we met many inspiring friends and supporters who had been following the referendum and were keen to help birds migrating over Malta. Over 3 days we signed up new members to BirdLife Malta and raised vital funds and awareness for our work. Thanks to all the volunteers who made it possible.

## International Seabird Conference

In November, the LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project is hosting an international conference on Marine Important Bird Areas in Malta and the Mediterranean. The event will be an important opportunity to share knowledge and experience on protecting seabirds across the Mediterranean.

## Making a splash at the Aquarium

Our education programme has now expanded to include summer schools in partnership with the Malta National Aquarium. Throughout July and August, our daily activities at the Aquarium inspired over 3500 children about Maltese nature and what we can all do to help look after it.

## Malta to Face EU Court on Finch Trapping

The European Commission announced in September that Malta will be taken to the European Court of Justice for breaking EU law to allow finch trapping. BirdLife Malta travelled to the European Parliament in October, meeting MEPs to ensure that the Commission keeps up the pressure on Malta to obey EU laws on bird protection.

## Autumn Hunting Season

The hunting season is now open until 31 January 2016.

- Hunting is allowed on weekdays and Saturdays from 2 hours before sunrise until 2 hours after sunset.
- On Sundays and public holidays hunting is only allowed until 1pm.
- Hunting is not permitted within bird sanctuary areas (eg. Buskett, Salina), within 50m of a main road or within 200m of a residential area.
- Hunting at sea is permitted, but not within 3km of the shoreline.

**Report any illegalities to the police immediately on 119, and inform BirdLife Malta.**

Full details can be found on our website.



HANDOVER OF THE NEW BIRD REHABILITATION CENTRE Caroline Rance



BIRDLIFE VOLUNTEERS MEET HENRY HEN HARRIER AT BIRDFAIR Birders Against Wildlife Crime



SUMMER SCHOOL AT THE NATIONAL AQUARIUM Steven Williams

## Honey Buzzard *Kučċarda*

In autumn our skies fill with migrating birds, coming together from countries all over Europe as they make their long journey south to reach sub-Saharan Africa where they will spend the winter.

At this time of year Honey Buzzards are the most numerous bird of prey to migrate through Malta, hundreds of them using the islands as a rest and refuelling point on their long journey south.

For a few weeks during September and October, if you look to the skies over Malta, you stand a good chance of seeing groups of Honey Buzzards and other birds of prey overhead. Their large broad wings are perfect for soaring, helping them to save energy whilst on their long journey, which is why you often see them circling in the sky.

Early morning and late afternoon are the best times to look out for birds of prey. Flocks of raptors arriving to Malta in the late afternoon will choose to spend the night here before continuing their migration the next morning. They look for trees to roost in, making areas like Buskett the ideal place to see them.

The majority of Honey Buzzards flying over Malta in autumn will be young birds, just a few months old and making this journey for the first time. These birds will not make the return trip until they are 3 years old and ready to breed, staying in Africa until then. They may live for up to 29 years.

Honey Buzzards can appear in various colours; from brown with a grey head, to pale white with brown markings. The variety results from genetics and probably represents the highest colour diversity of any bird of prey, with 10 different colour variations.

Despite the name, Honey Buzzards don't eat honey, but they do eat wasps, bees and hornets. They wait for one to fly past, then follow it back to its nest which the bird digs out with its strong claws to reach the young insects inside. Their feet and face are covered with tough, scaly feathers to protect them against being stung.

Steven Williams is the Digital Media & Communications Assistant at BirdLife Malta



# Soaring on migration

WORDS STEVEN WILLIAMS

- > **Body length: 52 – 59cm**
- > **Wingspan: 113 – 135cm**
- > **Can be seen: April and September/October**
- > **Large bird of prey**
- > **Broad wings and a long tail**
- > **Males are brown with a blue-grey head**
- > **Females are brown all over**
- > **Often gathers in large flocks, especially near trees**

Turn to the back page for a guide to identifying common birds of prey



WORDS STEVEN WILLIAMS

## Chaffinch *Sponsun*

These birds are autumn and winter visitors to Malta, leaving behind the cold weather of mainland Europe for our milder winter. They are typically found in woodland, such as Buskett or Foresta 2000. Look out for a tell tale flash of white on their wings as they fly past. The males are much more colourful birds, with an orange chest and blue cap on their head, while females are brown. Chaffinches have short, stout beaks that are perfectly designed to help them crack open seeds. You may also see them catching insects in mid air, returning to a nearby branch to eat them.



Chaffinch - Aron Tanti

## Western Whip Snake *Serp Iswed*

The Western Whip Snake is the largest snake in Malta and can grow up to 150cm long. They are typically found in dry rocky places where they hunt for lizards, small mammals, large insects and birds. Move quietly and you might find them basking in the sun on rubble walls or among vegetation. Although it looks black at first glance, it actually has a greenish tinge and a pale belly. Foresta 2000 is a good place to look for these reptiles.

## Lobed Agriope Spider *Brimba Kbirra tal-Widien*

Although they look similar, female lobed argiope spiders are over 3 times as big as males. The female's body is around 25mm long, while the males are a tiny 7mm in comparison. They both have a striking, yellow and black striped abdomen. They spin large webs in which to catch their prey, usually other insects, which they poison before eating. Luckily, as with most other spiders, this poison is not toxic to humans. Look out for them in areas such as the Dwerja Lines or Miżieb.



Lobed Agriope Spider - Ray Vella

## Autumn Narcissus *Narcis Imwaħħar*

This common little flower will brighten up an autumn walk, but if you want to see it you'd better be quick as the delicate flowers only last for the month of October each year. A member of the daffodil family, it grows to a height of about 20cm. Look for the tiny white flowers along cliff tops and garrigue. Take a walk around Red Tower, Mellieħa or nearby Majjistral Park, both are good sites to find these pretty flowers.



Autumn Narcissus - Ray Vella



# 50 Years of Bird Ringing

WORDS JOE SULTANA

**Ringling is a valuable tool for studying birds, giving us an extraordinary insight into their lives and migration journeys. This autumn, as we celebrate 50 years of bird ringing in Malta, Joe Sultana looks back at how it all began and what we've learned about the birds we share our islands with.**

A small bird flies directly towards a fine net strung up in front of fennel bushes in an uncultivated field in Xagħra, Gozo. Mont Hirons, a British licensed bird-ringer, lifts the bird gently from the net and carefully places a metal ring around one of its legs using a special plier, explaining step by step to those gathered what he was doing. This little bird, an Icterine Warbler, was the first to be ringed on the Maltese Islands fifty years ago - on 6th September 1965.

Mont Hirons was one of four licensed ringers from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) who came to Malta that autumn and the following spring to train the first Maltese bird ringers, myself included. The introduction of bird ringing in 1965 gave us the opportunity to significantly expand our knowledge and understanding of Malta's birds. Since then, the number of Maltese ringers has grown and together we have ringed over half a million birds of about 160 different species.

Bird ringing, placing the small, uniquely numbered metal ring on a bird's leg, is just the beginning. It is actually the recovery of previously ringed birds that provides us with information about their lives and behaviour, particularly their movements. Birds ringed in Malta have been recovered in various other countries, from Russia to the Democratic Republic of the Congo; while birds ringed in Malta are commonly recovered in Eastern Europe. Ringed birds have proved that through migration, Malta is linked to almost 50 different countries. This has enabled us to plot from where some of the migrants are hailing, and where they are heading to.



MONT HIRONS WITH THE FIRST BIRD RINGED IN MALTA

Joe Sultana



JOE SULTANA DURING RINGING TRAINING, AUTUMN 1965

## Fascinating Discoveries

Bird ringing has revolutionised the status of a number of bird species which were previously described as scarce or rare visitors to Malta. Studying birds which migrate through Malta, such as Subalpine Warblers (*bufula passajra*), it was revealed that some rest and feed at the very same areas on their migration every year.

Similarly, winter visitors, such as robins (*pitiross*), have been shown to be very faithful to their wintering quarters in Malta, returning to the same place in consecutive winters. Ringing and recapturing birds which breed in Malta, such as shearwaters and storm-petrels, has proved that these birds nest in the very same spot year upon year.

Such faithfulness is also noticed in the newly established, small breeding population of reed warblers (*bufula tal-qasab*) at Simar nature reserve. Ringing has been essential in discovering the longevity of our breeding birds as well as revealing the length of stay of those birds which are summer and winter visitors to our islands. We have been able to find out the local dispersal of our resident birds (how far young birds move away from their parent's nest), assess their survival rates and monitor their populations.

## Science of Seabirds

As early as 1986, when the use of Filfla for bombing practices was still in full swing, BirdLife Malta ringers organised the first visits to the islet to study the colonies of seabird nesting there. By ringing and recapturing thousands of Storm-petrels (*kanġu ta' Filfla*) we could safely assume that between 5000 and 8000 Storm petrel pairs bred on Filfla, compared to just a few pairs estimated by ornithologists before.

A bird ringed during one of these early visits was recaptured 27 years later, showing the impressive lifespan of these birds. These visits were the beginning of a long-term project which is still ongoing today, visiting the islet every summer to monitor the breeding seabirds.

## Comino

In 1990, the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme set up the Comino Ringing Project for bird observation and ringing during spring and autumn migration. In the first years, this bird observatory was used to participate in an annual bird ringing and observation project to establish the importance of small Mediterranean islands as stopover sites for migrant birds. Today, being a bird sanctuary, Comino is still an important ringing site for studying bird migration in Malta.

## An invaluable resource

The last 50 years have provided us with a wealth of information about Malta's birds, from those who stay here all year round and breed, to those who visit for just a few days on migration in spring and autumn. It has been indispensable in highlighting which birds are doing well and which need our help and protection.

We look forward to more exciting discoveries in the future.

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Joe Sultana is an ornithologist and bird ringer



BIRD RINGERS KIT

ELLA BEESON

## Did you know..?

Each ring contains a unique number, the details of the country where the bird has been ringed and of the ringing organisation. The birds are also weighed and measured before they are released, and their details entered into a Europe wide database.

In Malta, we have recovered birds that have been ringed in dozens of European and African countries.



A STORM PETREL, RINGED ON FILFLA

BENJAMIN METZGER



A SCOPS OWL RINGED ON COMINO

RUPERT MASEFIELD

# Foresta 2000

WORDS RAY VELLA

A green and peaceful Mediterranean woodland stretches across Malta's northern ridge, providing food and shelter for a rich diversity of birds and wildlife. However this isn't an old forest as you might expect, but the result of an ambitious reforestation project and years of hard work.

Back in 1996, a dream was born to plant 2,000 trees for the new millennium. The brainchild of Klabb Huttaf, the young members of BirdLife Malta, it was to be a gift for future generations. Of course, you just don't dream of a forest and it will grow instantly; a lot of hard work is needed. In 2004 the area was identified and together with Din L-Art Ħelwa and PARK (the government department responsible for national parks) BirdLife Malta took this dream to reality.

Today, well over 21,000 trees and shrubs have been planted in the area and eleven years down the road one can actually see the forest taking shape. All of the trees and shrubs planted here are native, meaning that they either are growing or at some time grew in the Maltese Islands. These include **Holm Oak** (*Ballut*), **Carob** (*Ħarrub*), **Lentisk** (*Deru*), **Myrtle** (*Riĥan*) and Malta's national tree, **Sandarac Gum Tree** (*Għargħar*). Several other species of flowers and shrubs were also carefully grown, planted into the soil and kept watered throughout the hot summer months.

## how to get there

Take the bus towards Cirkewwa and get off at the stop after Ghadira nature reserve. Services X1, 221, 222, 41, 42, 37

Continue up the hill for a short distance then walk through the green gate where you will find an information board and map of Foresta 2000.

Continue to the car park at the top of the slope, here you can choose one of two routes:

**Route 1:** Choose to do a loop of the red route that will take you to the Red Tower where you will have excellent panoramic views.

**Route 2:** The longer blue trail follows the ridge around the reserve, allowing you to take in all the points of interest and explore the varying habitats.

If driving, you can park in the Foresta 2000 Nature Reserve car park. Take the turning off the roundabout for Red Tower and then turn left down a short track to the parking area.



The forest, which is north of Għadira Nature Reserve, is easily accessed from a gate near the Mellieħa Bay Hotel. From there one can follow the nature trail which is well described on a map at the entrance. Several other maps are strategically placed at different parts within the nature reserve.

During the winter months many **Starlings** (*sturnell*) can be seen feeding on the **Lentisk** berries, the birds are helping to spread this shrub all throughout the area. **Robins** (*pittross*), **Blackcaps** (*kapiniera*), **Song Thrush** (*malvizz*) and **Blackbirds** (*malvizz iswed*) are all commonly seen in the winter months.

In some years birds such as **Chaffinch** (*sponsun*) and **Greenfinch** (*verdun*) were regular visitors, but with the re-opening of the finch trapping season these birds have drastically been reduced. The pine trees also harbour many tiny **Goldcrests** (*Bufula tal-Qamar*) and **Firecrests** (*Bufula tax-Xemx*) in winter. During migration anything might turn up here from birds of prey to the smallest warblers.

As one walks down from the old hotel building and proceeds through the old pine forest there are several stone corbelled huts or *Giren*, at one time these were

used to hold agricultural tools and served as shelters from the sun or the rain. One has been recently been restored by BirdLife Malta, you may stop to look inside. Along the pathway several ponds have been dug in the garrigue, providing water for both the birds and mammals of the area, and are now home to **Painted Frogs** (*Iż-Żring*) and **Fairy Shrimps** during the winter months. **Collared Doves** (*Gamiema tal-Kullar*) have now completely taken over this area and breed regularly here. No one ever expected to see so many doves breed in one area in Malta!

Along the pathways one can encounter **Silvery Ragwort** (*Kromb il-Baħar Isfar*), **Hoary Rock Rose** (*Cistu Roza*) as well as **Great Sage** (*Salvja tal-Madonna*), all plants which have been transplanted here from areas under threat. When one approaches the cliff there are spectacular views of the west side of Malta all the way to Dingli.

One can easily take the upper trail back towards the Red Tower and enjoy the views of Mellieħa and its bay and stop to have a break or picnic in this peaceful area before having to return to the busy outside world.

**Ray Vella (right) is the Foresta 2000 Reserve Warden**



EUROPEAN ROBIN - Aron Tanti



RABBIT - Aron Tanti



RAY VELLA - Steven Williams

## what to look out for

**Churchyard Beetles** (*ħanfusa tal-kantina*) are one of our largest beetles

**Strawberry Trees** (*Imbrijagla*) were reintroduced to Malta from Sicily

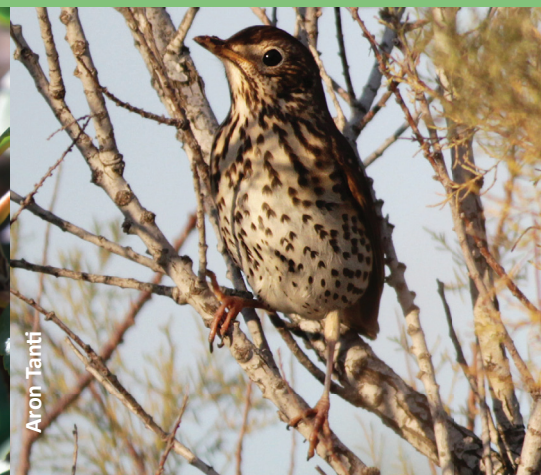
**Song Thrush** (*Malvizz*) eat snails by breaking the shells open on a rock.



Ray Vella



Ray Vella



Aron Tanti



## INTERVIEW KETIJA RITENIECE

**Looking back at half a century of bird ringing in Malta we spoke to Charles Gauci, one of the first Maltese ringers who is still active today, and his son Mark Gauci who started training at the age of 16 and is now Head of Malta's Ringing Scheme.**

**Charles, you have been ringing since 1967. How was it in the beginning?**

**Charles:** It was really interesting at that time because we were always discovering new things. We started regularly finding birds which had previously been regarded as rare visitors to Malta, like the Cetti's Warbler, and found that Yelkouan Shearwaters were breeding at Rdum Tal-Madonna. Over the years we have been able to build up a better picture of Malta's birds.

**How do you think bird ringing now compares with those early days?**

**Mark:** Ringing has evolved towards a more scientific approach. In the early years a ringer would visit many different sites in a bid to ring more birds, we tend to stick to particular sites and take a more systematic approach these days. This gives better scientific results because you are more likely to recover birds that have been ringed before.

**Is there any thing else, apart from science, that interests you about bird ringing?**

**M:** There is that tinge of excitement when you're out ringing on a freezing cold winter morning and you catch a bird that has been ringed before, a Sardinian Warbler say. You read the ring number and know that this particular bird has been around for 8 years because you see it at the same time year after year. It is incredible to realise that this bird weighs just 11 grams and manages to brave the weather, and stick around for all these years. This gives the adrenaline rush to keep ringing for the results.

**Can you describe a typical day's bird ringing?**

**C:** We set out about an hour before dawn and set up the fine mist nets in which the birds will be caught. We check on them regularly, so that birds are taken out of the nets as soon as possible. If there is a bird in the net, you lift it out very carefully and carry it back to the ringing station. Then we put the metal ring on its leg, take the various measurements, weigh it and release the bird again.

**M:** It's funny that describing the process is much more lengthened than the actual act of ringing the bird. Identifying the bird, choosing which size of ring will fit, specifying if it's a male or female - for a trained ringer it takes literally a couple of minutes to get the whole process done, and then bird is back into the wild.

**Do you have a favourite bird to ring?**

**M:** At my regular site I have a particular affinity for Tree Sparrows, because they're a common breeding bird which we know pretty much nothing about. So it's always nice to be able to ring them and gather more information, in the hope that one day we will have much more knowledge about the species.

**After 50 years, do you think we still need to explain to the public what bird ringing is?**

**M:** Lately we have been doing more public ringing demonstrations, holding activities at the nature reserves or at Comino where we show bird ringing to the public. This allows people to understand the science behind bird ringing and why it is needed.

**C:** When I was a teacher I used to take schoolchildren to Għadira and show them bird ringing. They absolutely loved it. I explained to them what the bird has to go through to reach our shores, how it has to fly alone all those distances. I used to compare them to athletes – how far they are running! The children clapped their hands for the birds and when it came to releasing the bird, they all waved goodbye and said good luck! We still meet people now who were at Għadira as school kids and they say they remember bird ringing.

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**Ketija Riteniece** is the Communications Assistant at BirdLife Malta

# what's on

## Falko Explore Comino

Sunday 31 October, 8:00 - 16:00

Meeting at Cirkewwa. Adults €10

Falko, the youth section of BirdLife Malta, will start the day by watching a bird ringing demonstration, before a full day's hike around Comino.

Please send bookings to: [falkoblml@gmail.com](mailto:falkoblml@gmail.com)

## Nature Reserves Opening Celebration at Is-Simar

Sunday 1st November, 10:00 - 16:00

Is-Simar Nature Reserve, Xemxija

Free, donations welcome

A celebration of the opening of BirdLife Malta's nature reserves for the new season. We will have bookable family exploration sessions at 10am, 11am and 12pm. The reserve will then be open to the public from 1pm onwards.

## Selmun Stroll

22nd November, 09:00 - 13:00

Selmun Palace, No charge

Circular walk to Imgiebañ Valley and Bay. Easy to moderate walk, sturdy footwear recommended. Slippery tracks if wet.

## Protecting seabirds in the Mediterranean: Advancing the Marine Protected Area Network workshop

23rd - 25th November, Gozo

An international workshop on protecting seabirds across the Mediterranean, as well as setting the way forward for international collaborations in protecting our seabirds.

For more information contact: [nicholas.barbara@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:nicholas.barbara@birdlifemalta.org)

## Coast to Coast

10th January 2016, 09:00 - 13:00

Majjistral Nature and History Park Visitor Centre

€5 Suggested donation

BirdLife Malta joins up with Majjistral Nature and History Park for a coast-to-coast walk. Starting with a guided tour of the park, we will walk across the island to Għadira Nature Reserve.

## New Year Walk to Fawwara

17th Jan 2016, 09.30 - 13.30

St. Mary Magdalen Chapel, € 1.50

An idyllic country walk from Dingli cliffs, down to Fawwara and onto Għar Lapsi. It will be an easy to moderate walk, however sturdy footwear is recommended. Return transport will be provided.

For further information or for bookings please email [events@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:events@birdlifemalta.org) or call +356 79028782



CHAMELEON - Holly Forsyth



FALKO ON COMINO - Steven Williams

Check our Facebook pages for up to date events info:

 [/birdlifemalta](https://www.facebook.com/birdlifemalta)

 [/falkoblml](https://www.facebook.com/falkoblml)

Remember to check the members email newsletter for further event details.



PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP - Holly Forsyth

## Spotted a Sparrow? Let us know!

The Spot A Sparrow project needs your help to find sparrow roosts across Malta and Gozo. Sparrow roosts are easy to spot at this time of year, with lots of noisy chirping sparrows coming together in large leafy trees at dusk. Your reports will help us to monitor the Spanish Sparrow populations, and ensure their roost trees are protected.

To report a roost, visit our website and leave us details so we can send our experts to take a look.

[www.spotasparrow.org](http://www.spotasparrow.org)

## Christmas Gift Membership

Send a unique Christmas present and help protect Maltese birds and nature by making someone a BirdLife Malta member. The new member will receive a beautiful bird calendar together with a membership pack, and a year's membership of BirdLife Malta.

To apply, please fill in the form that came with this magazine.

## ID: Autumn Birds of Prey

### Honey Buzzard *Kučċarda*

Migrant, spring and autumn  
Broad wings and a long tail. Often seen soaring in groups, especially near trees.  
Most common autumn raptor.

### Kestrel *Spanjulett*

Migrant, spring and autumn. A pair bred this year and small numbers will stay all winter.  
Hovers in search of small mammals and birds. Also eats frogs and worms.

### Marsh Harrier *Bagħadan Aħmar*

Migrant, spring and autumn  
Large wings. Fly very low when hunting over fields and reedbeds. Second most common raptor on autumn migration.

