

Bird's Eye View

BLACK-WINGED STILT - Denis Cachia



Rdum Tal-Madonna
A coastal walk for butterflies,
flowers and seabirds



Interview
Seabird researcher Benjamin
Metzger talks about shearwaters



Get Involved
Join our events and find out what
you can do to help wildlife



In Focus
The Spring Hunting Referendum

News page 3

Updates from BirdLife Malta

Bird profile page 4

Breeding Black-winged Stilts

What to spot page 5

This summer look for..

In focus page 6

Spring Hunting Referendum

Nature days page 13

Rdum Tal-Madonna

Bird lives page 15

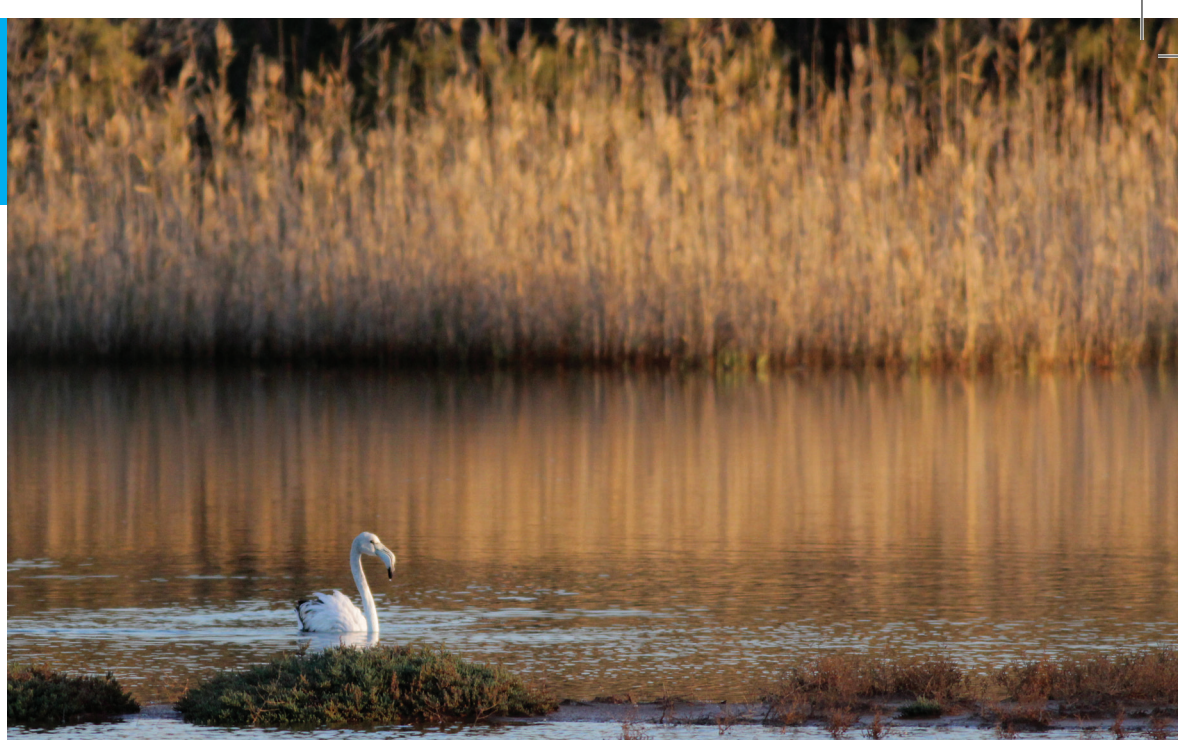
Benjamin Metzger talks seabirds

What's on page 16

Events and activities

Get involved page 17

How you can help



Referendum Dividend



Geoffrey Saliba
President

This year, Malta saw a historic campaign to abolish spring hunting in the country's first referendum to be called for by the people. We all know the result by now, with spring hunting being kept because a small majority, just over 2,000, voted in favour of it.

While the abolition campaign focused on the real environmental and social impacts of spring hunting on birds, on people's enjoyment of the countryside and the bullying behaviour of the hunting community, the hunting lobby did not want to discuss spring hunting at all. Instead, they focused on scaremongering and presenting a false image of themselves. They also used the fact that the Prime Minister staunchly supported spring hunting to gain as many votes in their favour as possible.

While it might first appear that the referendum defeat is a major setback, there are also some very clear gains. 75% of voters turned out to vote on a bird conservation issue, 3% higher than in the divorce referendum. Of this, 49.67% of the votes cast were for abolition of spring hunting.

Politicians are already taking note. The first dividend of the referendum was when the Prime Minister announced that hunters were on their last chance. Evidence that he was serious came when the spring hunting season was closed early after a kestrel was shot and landed in a school playground.

On a European front nature protection is under threat. The European Commission has initiated a fitness check of the Birds and Habitats Directives – the directives that protect Europe's most important or threatened habitats and species. Ostensibly to reduce 'bureaucratic burden', the fitness check opens the directives up to review by all parties – including those who would prefer reduced levels of protection, be it for economic gain or to make it easier to kill vulnerable wildlife, both across Europe and here in Malta.

Europe is still losing biodiversity every year. We cannot afford weakened nature directives. The BirdLife partnership, together with a very large coalition of European environmental NGOs, is working to stop that from happening. You can help by taking part in the online consultation that the European Commission has launched. Visit www.naturealert.eu to take part. Just five minutes of your time could help us protect nature in Malta and across Europe.



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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Turn to page 6 for the full story on the spring hunting referendum.

EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project

Our researchers travelled to Tunisia for a symposium on the conservation of marine and coastal birds in the Mediterranean. It was a great opportunity to highlight BirdLife Malta's pioneering work in tracking seabirds, and for different countries to work together for greater conservation of these birds.

Office Migration

As the number of our staff and volunteers is growing, we have moved to a more spacious office in Xemxija, now being closer to our nature reserves too. You can find our new address on the page opposite.

Homes for Swifts

The youth-led APUS (Appreciating, Protecting and Understanding Swifts) project have been busy installing nest boxes on tall buildings around the island, providing homes for breeding swifts. Many of the boxes were built by children at BirdLife Malta events, sending their best wishes for birds.

Spot a Sparrow Project

In a continued effort to map all sparrow roost sites around Malta and Gozo, our volunteers counted an impressive 30,000 sparrows flying in to spend the night in trees at St Dominic Square, Rabat. Numbers prove that roost trees like these need to be protected.

Wild Days out for Kinder Classes

Expanding our educational work, we have now begun to bring environmental education to kinder classes. Our new 'Nature Days' see little ones exploring nature and meeting wildlife in Buskett Woodland.

Taking Action on Finch Trapping

Following BirdLife Malta's lobbying to the European Commission and MEPs, asking them to take action on the contentious reintroduction of finch trapping, the Commission issued their second formal warning to Malta in May. If the warning is heeded, finch trapping should not be allowed again this autumn. If it is not, the Commission should take legal action to end this practice.

Thank You

We are grateful to Sheila Ingram who asked for donations to be given to BirdLife Malta during the funeral of her husband, Rodney. Rodney was a life member and also a talented artist who beautifully illustrated BirdLife Malta's early books *A Guide to the Birds of Malta*, *A New Guide to the Birds of Malta* and *L-Aghsafar*.



SOCIABLE SPANISH SPARROWS - Aron Tanti



BUILDING HOMES FOR SWIFTS - Matthew Scerri



WILD DAYS OUT WITH THE EDUCATION TEAM - Jennifer Law

Sincere thanks to our member Lee Roberts who made a generous donation to BirdLife Malta in memory of his late mother, Dora Roberts.



Black-winged Stilts

Stealing the Show

WORDS KETIJA RITENIECE

- > **Body: 33-36cm**
- > **Wingspan: 60-75cm**
- > **Legs: 14-17cm**
- > **Can be seen March - September**
- > **Easily identified by the long pinkish-red legs**
- > **Flies with neck and legs outstretched**
- > **Males have more black on the head**
- > **Females have a brown-grey back**

See Black-winged Stilts at Ghadira
Turn to page 15 for event details

Black-winged Stilt Fras-servjent

Black-winged Stilts are record holders in the bird world. They have the longest legs in relation to body length, making up 60% of their overall height. Their long rose-coloured legs make them unmistakable and they are surely one of the most graceful wading birds. The sharp contrast between their pitch-black upper parts and the snowy white belly and the needle-straight black bill all adds to their elegance.

Thanks to their long legs, Black-winged Stilts can wade into relatively deep waters for food that is inaccessible to other, shorter-legged, wading birds. They eat mainly insects which they pick from the water's surface but they also eat fish and crustaceans and will push their long beak into the mud to reach small worms. Their long legs keep their feathers dry when looking for lunch. Stilts can also feed on land but then they have to bend their extremely long legs to reach the ground.

When it comes to breeding, the gentle stilt turns into a fearless and aggressive guardian of its brood. The marbled chicks are constantly under the watchful eye of their parents who chase off other birds as big as herons, gulls or ducks; and even rabbits. People walking along the visitor path at Ghadira Nature Reserve have received some vocal aggression from them too. During breeding, stilts get noisy. Their call is a squeaky and quickly repeated 'kik kik kik', whereas predators are scared off with a loud and grinding 'kreet kreet kreet'.

The hope has always been there for stilts to breed since at Ghadira since it was created. Their preferred breeding habitat, wetland, is scarce in Malta and degraded elsewhere. Black-winged stilts make their nest on bare muddy ground in low water, sharing parental duties. They first bred at the nature reserve in 2011 and have returned every year since. This year a pair began their courtship ritual in mid-April and if all goes well, by the time you are reading this, the chicks will be hatched or even already swimming with their parents. By the beginning of July the young will be able to fly. Let's hope these graceful waders will be regular breeders in Malta in the future.

Ketija Riteniece is the Social Media & Communications Assistant at BirdLife Malta

WORDS STEVEN WILLIAMS

Mediterranean Thyme Sagħtar

This low-growing shrubby flowering plant is typical of rocky arid places and a walk along the cliffs in June is a great time to look for, and smell, the rich scented purple flowers of this native perennial. The plant's scent is actually a defence mechanism, as it is related to an oil which gives it an unpleasant taste to goats. A member of the mint family, it flowers from May to August and the flowers are an important source of nectar for many insects. Mediterranean Thyme has adapted to suit its dry environment with small, tightly-packed leaves and wiry, dry stems; which are all ways of making sure it doesn't lose water. Protected by law, it is illegal to collect thyme.

Maltese Swallowtail Farfett tal-Bużbież / Farfett tal-Fejġel

One of our most spectacular butterflies is the swallowtail, with its large size and striking yellow-and-black pattern. The Maltese names refer to the caterpillar's foodplants. Fennel (*bużbież*) grows in fallow fields, steppe and along road verges and can nourish many swallowtail broods, but unfortunately the increased use of weedkiller to 'tidy up' the road verges turns a rich source of food into a dead zone. The swallowtail caterpillar also feeds on rue (*fejġel*) which grows in garrigue areas, making this another habitat where this butterfly is found.



Ocellated Skink Xaħmet l-Art

Skinks are reptiles like lizards and snakes - indeed, skinks look very like a cross between a lizard and a snake at first glance. Skinks have been known to have a bad reputation in the past, however they are harmless animals and very shy of people. They eat small insects like ants, and scurry to the nearest hole in the wall when people approach. Your best chance of seeing a skink is while it is warming itself in the sun, as many reptiles do. If you spot one, notice its beautiful brown skin mottled with a black-and-white pattern. The ocellated skink is the only species of skink in Malta, and it is a protected animal.



Common Swift Rundun

These remarkable birds migrate from their wintering grounds south of the Sahara each year, arriving to breed in Malta. Listen for their screams in summer skies as groups hawk the air high above for insects. Fast flying, as their name implies, they spend their entire lives in the air, only spending a brief period of a few months on land to breed. Traditionally, swifts nest in sea-cliffs or caves but will now nest on tall buildings. Modern buildings often don't provide spaces for swifts, but putting up a nest box is an easy and effective way of helping to give them a home. Swifts feed almost exclusively on the aerial plankton of small flying insects and airborne spiders. They mainly feed at around 50-100m, but turbulence can sweep insects far higher in the air, and swifts have been observed following these swarms to about 1,000m.



The Spring Hunting Referendum

WORDS
STEVE MICKLEWRIGHT

The Long Road to a Referendum

Spring hunting of migrating birds has always been a controversial, and increasingly political, issue in Malta. When the country joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, Malta was meant to fully apply the Birds Directive that forbids spring hunting. However, after the matter was subject to a European Court of Justice decision that found Malta guilty of breaking the Birds Directive, years of political manoeuvring meant that spring hunting was still taking place in Malta.

This is the pathway that led to the spring hunting referendum on 11th April 2015.

2004

May Malta joins the EU and is meant to apply EU Directives, but continues to allow spring hunting between 2004-2007

2008

April Spring hunting is banned in 2008 and 2009 pending European Court of Justice (ECJ) hearings after Malta was taken to court by the European Commission (EC)

2009

September ECJ finds Malta guilty of allowing spring hunting



HUNTER - David Trilling / Nature Photo Library

2010

April The Nationalist government opens a 6 day a spring hunting season applying derogation (exception) from the Birds Directive, FKNK hunters' federation calls for boycott because they regard it as too limited

2011

April 6,000 hunters pay 50Euros to hunt between April 13th-30th, except Sundays and Public Holidays

May BirdLife reports 950 shots outside hunting hours, 61 protected birds being shot at, and 52 protected birds with gunshot injuries in flight and received 22 shot protected birds.

2012

April Government opens spring hunting season until 30th April, allowing more birds to be shot, but requiring hunters to wear an armband so they can be identified

May BirdLife Malta reports 730 illegal hunting incidents and received 14 shot protected birds from members of the public

2013

March Labour Party signs a deal with the FKNK hunter's federation on the eve of the general election in exchange for votes

April 9,500, that is 50% more hunters, take part in the 2013 spring hunting season after the new government removes the 50Euro registration fee and identifying armbands

August A Coalition of 13 NGOs and AD, The Malta Green Party, begin collecting signatures for a referendum to abolish spring hunting

December 30,000 people had signed the petition to call for the referendum, 34,000 valid signatures are required for the petition to be successful

2014

March 28th The Coalition for the Abolition of Spring Hunting presents a petition with 44,376 signatures to the Electoral Commission calling for a referendum

July 4th Electoral Commission confirms enough valid signatures were collected for a referendum to take place



GOLDEON ORIOLE - Rupert Masfield



HOPOE - Keiran Dadds



HOBBY - Mark Christensen

2015

January 9th Constitutional Court announces that it has decided that there are no valid legal objections to the referendum and it can go ahead

January 10th Prime Minister announces that referendum will take place on April 11th 2015 – the first time a referendum has been called by the people of Malta

January 17th A cross-section of Maltese society come together at St James Cavalier in Valletta to launch Shout – the Spring Hunting Out Campaign.

Three Months of Making History

SHOUT CROWD - Steven Williams

Between January 17th and April 10th 2015 the SHout - Spring Hunting Out - campaign took to town and countryside, to university campuses and television programmes to reach voters and ask them to vote 'No' and end spring hunting.

Campaign spokespeople Mark Sultana (BirdLife Malta Council member), Moira Delia (TV presenter and animal rights activist) and Saviour Balzan (Journalist and Media Entrepreneur) gave up their normal lives to convince the Maltese people to vote 'No' and abolish spring hunting. They were supported by a host of Maltese personalities from the worlds of music, sport, comedy and fashion.

Every event and activity was supported by an army of volunteers, too numerous to mention by name, who worked day and night to communicate to voters why they should vote 'No'.

The campaign was held together by BirdLife Malta staff Mina Tolu, Chris Debono, Caroline Rance and Steve Micklewright, and Trustees Desiree Falzon, Darryl Grima and Geoffrey Saliba. These pages are a testament to their hard work, and to all of those who supported the campaign and voted 'no' on April 11th.



CAMPAIGN SPOKESPEOPLE - Caroline Rance



JUDGE GIOVANNI BONELLO - Caroline Rance

'No one should fear that the referendum will affect their hobbies'

Judge Giovanni Bonello, former Judge on the European Court of Human Rights, endorses a report by lawyer Dr Mark Bencini which shows that the spring hunting referendum cannot be repeated on other activities such as festas, fireworks and horse-racing, as had been claimed by the hunters.

Spring Never Comes for the Hunted

Moira Delia and Mark Sultana launch a report on the impact of spring hunting on birds. It shows that at least 180,000 eggs are never laid because birds flying over Malta on their way to mainland Europe to breed are shot out of the sky each spring.

SHout campaigners reclaim Mizieb 'bird cemetery' for birds and people

A symbolic act by the SHout campaign to demonstrate that a 'no' vote could transform the notorious illegal hunting black spot into a living woodland for breeding birds in spring.



SHOUT CAMPAIGNERS IN MIZIEB - Caroline Rance

Referendum Fashion

Fashion stylist and campaign ambassador Carina Camilleri organises a photo shoot with models from Models M wearing customised SHout t-shirts to show their support for the campaign.



MODELS- Michele Agius

Countryside Closed for Spring

Spokespersons Mark Sultana and Moira Delia are joined by ambassadors and rambles to highlight the fact that 80% of the countryside is occupied by hunters in spring, effectively making it a no-go area for everyone else.

‘We want a more sustainable future for our country’

A group of students and young activists organised a press conference in Valletta to urge other young people to vote for a better, greener, more sustainable future.



STUDENTS SUPPORT SHOUT- Matthew Scerri

‘Spring hunting, we can do without’

Maltese musicians collaborate on a campaign anthem, a cover of version of ‘Shout’ by Tears for Fears. The music video, featuring footage from throughout the campaign, is viewed over 14,000 times on youtube.

Referendum No Threat to Fishing

Author and fishing enthusiast Stanley Farrugia Randon addresses the media to explain that, contrary to hunters’ scaremongering, leisure fishing cannot be targeted by a referendum as it is already done responsibly.

SHout Festival

A family festival is held in Sliema to encourage people to go out and vote. Live music from nosnow/noalps, family activities and support from other NGOs attracts the crowds.



SONG RECORDING- Steven Williams

One Last SHout

Hundreds of supporters join the campaign spokespeople and ambassadors in Valletta on the final day of campaigning.



SHOUT CROWD- Matthew Scerri

From Those Who Were Involved

“The referendum was an exceptional opportunity, which could have had significant positive ramifications in favour of biodiversity conservation at a national scale. Taking an active part in the SHOUT campaign became a personal obligation. I had the pleasure to meet and befriend many people with similar interests and values. Regardless of the result, I confirmed my commitment to be more involved in environmental conservation and awareness.” **Mark Zammit, SHout campaigner**

“I wanted to involve myself because this was a cause I strongly believed in. Regardless of the result, I think through the awareness raised and the effects of the campaign we achieved a lot of improvements. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Matthew Scerri, SHout volunteer photographer

“The referendum gave us a chance to speak out about an issue we felt very strongly about, and an opportunity to give our input to help stop such killing. The campaign provided us with a good insight on how much Birdlife Malta and other NGOs work incessantly towards safeguarding our natural heritage and environment.”

Edward and Sharon Camilleri, SHout campaigners

“I would like to think that more awareness is achieved. We must take care of our environment; birds are invaluable to our ecosystems and biodiversity. We are slowly corroding our world, let us be aware before it is too late.” **Carina Camilleri, SHout ambassador**

“This campaign was the bumpy start to a grassroots environmental movement that will hopefully preserve the island I know, and love. Knowing that in my small way I helped make this happen, is something I’m most proud of.” **Elena Portelli, SHout campaigner**

“This was my first experience in campaigning and it was for a cause I truly believe in. If I had to do it all over again, oh yes, I would do it again, no regrets! To the contrary, from all the massive feedback I got, people are so aware of what’s happening to our birds! They truly care and they want to see these birds alive – more people now participate and there are more people reporting illegalities etc. I feel so fulfilled having done my part, even though it was one of the toughest periods in my life.” **Moira Delia, SHout spokesperson**

“When the time came for campaigning I started feeling restless with bursting energy, so I made a phone call to offer my help. My offer was taken up immediately and I got to meet like minded people; vibrant activists with positive energy, whose selfless idealism was strong and contagious. I was happy and proud to be part of this group, together we planned and took part in activities aimed at convincing people to vote against spring hunting.” **Rita Brincat, SHout campaigner**

“I felt that this was one of those momentous moments in Malta where something important was happening. I felt proud to have helped in such a worthy cause and on a social note, taking part in the campaign allowed me to interact with people from all walks of life.” **Paul Galea, SHout campaigner**

“The campaign had a strong influence, showing that almost half the population are not in favour of spring hunting and won’t tolerate illegal hunting anymore.” **Fabio Spiteri, SHout ambassador**

“The incredible work of Birdlife Malta and their supporters garnered so much awareness about the necessity to protect birds. I am incredibly proud to have formed part of this important campaign and will continue to support this cause along with the many who now see its necessity.” **Sarah DeCesare, SHout campaigner**

“Having been involved with Birdlife Malta from a very young age I could see that this campaign resulted from, and was a continuation of, all the hard work that had been done by BirdLife Malta and other environmental NGOs through the years. Being part of it felt natural, and I feel honoured to have been trusted as a main spokesperson. The work now continues with a difference, as we now know that half the population support us.”

Mark Sultana, SHout spokesperson



Looking to the Future

We will continue our work to protect migrating birds in spring.

The reason that we will not give up is very simple. It is not justifiable to shoot wild birds making their migration from Africa to mainland Europe to breed. Spring hunting in Malta is putting birds that are already at risk in greater danger. And now we have the scientific proof. The Turtle Dove has just been classified as a threatened species showing a 80% decline in its numbers in Europe since 1980 (until recently it was still considered as species of Least Concern). A species in peril should not be hunted and we intend to lobby both the European Commission and the Maltese government to do their job and stop the hunting of these birds in spring, before it is too late. We are confident that we can achieve this at the very least.

As long as spring hunting continues, BirdLife Malta will continue with Springwatch and the other work we do to demonstrate its impact on birds and to help bring hunters that break the law to justice. Those hunters that use the open season in spring to target rare and protected birds must be dealt with and we will play our part.

The referendum defeat was a huge shock to everyone. After years of trying to persuade Maltese politicians and the European Commission to do their job and abolish spring hunting, we hoped the people would do the right thing and vote to end it. But that did not happen. However, this is not the end. BirdLife Malta will continue to campaign to bring spring hunting to an end.

BirdLife Malta has also been inspired by the fact that 75% of people voted in the referendum and almost half of them voted in favour of bird conservation. There is a desire among most Maltese to enjoy nature and see birds in the number and variety that the Maltese islands should allow. We will ensure there are more chances for people to enjoy birds and to witness the marvel of bird migration that takes place every spring and autumn. We hope to care for more areas as nature reserves too.

Many hunters know that spring hunting cannot carry on long-term and they are ashamed of how bird hunting is conducted by some of them. Somehow, these hunters need to be persuaded that it is in their interest to ensure that any bird hunting that takes in Malta is sustainable.

Science tells us spring hunting is not sustainable. European rules make it clear that spring hunting is unlawful. Most Maltese know that it is wrong too. While the hunters may see the referendum result as a victory, we will ensure that it is only short term.

Steve Micklewright is Executive Director of BirdLife Malta

Rdum Tal-Madonna

WORDS ROHAN TRIVEDI & STEVEN WILLIAMS

Situated at Malta's most northerly limit, much of the coast skirting the peninsula of Rdum Tal-Madonna is protected as a Natura 2000 site.

Wear some sturdy shoes and head out to a landscape shaped by the sea, in search of the wildlife that makes this important area home.

This wild corner of Malta is characterised by crumbling coastal cliffs, stretches of garrigue carpeted with thyme and pockets of woodland. The cliffs are home to over 600 pairs of breeding Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Garnija*), giving the area its special protection status, and on the northern coast you can find rare sand dunes.

Beginning at the tiny Chapel close to the Madonna statue, which legend tells was built by a thankful fisherman who survived when his boat capsized at sea, this walk takes you along the coastal cliffs to dramatic collapsed sea caves, stunning views across to Comino and Gozo, and the historic White Tower.

As you walk, look for **Mediterranean Thyme** (*Sagħtar*) which is in flower at this time of year and smells wonderful. Its brilliant purple colour, forming cushions of flowers, and its aroma attract pollinating insects. A quick inspection for butterflies is always worthwhile.

One butterfly you are likely to see is the **Painted Lady** (*Farfett tax-Xewk*). Each year, large numbers of these delicate creatures migrate across Malta from Africa. What was not clear until recently was the scale of their journey.

How to get there

Buses: There is no direct service to Rdum Tal-Madonna. Take a bus to Qammieh, which is the stop at the next roundabout up from Ghadira where you will see a signpost for Armier Bay. Take this turning and walk the road to the coast.

Estimated walking time to the Chapel:
1hr 30min

Bus Services: X1, 221, 222, 41, 42, 101, 102

Parking is available at the Chapel of Immaculate Conception.

Did you know?

Malta is home to 10% of the world's Yelkouan Shearwaters, making this area internationally important.

Rdum tal-Madonna was the focus of two EU LIFE projects: the Yelkouan Shearwater Project and the Malta Seabird Project

Findings revealed that, in a series of steps by up to six generations, they undertake a phenomenal 9,000 mile round trip from tropical Africa to the Arctic Circle and back – almost double the length of the famous migrations undertaken by Monarch butterflies in North America.

Listen out for the beautiful song of the **Short-toed Lark** (*Bilbla*). In recent decades these birds have become increasingly scarce in Malta but Rđum tal-Madonna remains an important site for their continued conservation. Other birds that breed here include the **Blue Rock Thrush** (*Merill*).

The habitat here is marked by Garrigue vegetation which is typically low shrubby, rocky, open habitat found on limestone in the Mediterranean.

Once at the collapsed sea cave, often referred to as the 'blue hole', take your time to explore the area. You may see **Spanish Sparrows** (*Għasfur tal-Bejt*) that nest in the crevices of the cave. The waters around Malta team with marine life and **jellyfish** are quite common. Over twenty species have been recorded in Maltese waters.

You will have spectacular views across Comino to Gozo, and the sea around the peninsula

of Rđum tal-Madonna shares in places the intense clear blue waters of these islands.

Continuing your walk will take you through various stages of habitat as plant communities develop.

White Tower Bay itself is a small, sandy beach overlooked by The White Tower (also known as Aħrax Tower), one of thirteen De Redin Towers built across Malta by the knights for defensive and communication purposes. White Tower is now abandoned and somewhat derelict, however climbing to the top offers stunning panoramic views of the area.

Follow the road from the coast, walk back in land and search for **Chameleons** (*Kamaleonte*) in the trees adjacent to the road.

As late evening approaches, sit on top the cliffs for the possibility of seeing shearwaters as they return to land to feed their young, if not simply to watch the day draw itself to a close. Whilst **Yelkowan Shearwaters** (*Garnija*) only return at night if you see a shearwater flying low over the sea it may well be a **Scopili's Shearwater** (*Ċiefa*) which also breed here in smaller numbers.

Rohan Trivedi and Steven Williams are part of the Communications Team at BirdLife Malta.



RĐUM TAL-MADONNA FROM THE AIR - AEM



SEA CAVE - Benjamin Metzger

Wildlife to watch for

Short-toed Larks (*Bilbla*) are summer visitors to Malta

Chameleons (*Kamaleonte*) change colour to match their surroundings

Blue Rock Thrush (*Merill*) can be seen singing from rocky outcrops



SHORT-TOED LARK - Aron Tanh



CHAMALEON - Ray Galea



BLUE ROCK THRUSH- Aron Tanh

Benjamin Metzger has spent almost four years in Malta working to protect Maltese seabird species: Yelkouan Shearwaters, Scopoli's Shearwaters and Mediterranean Storm Petrels. He reveals what fascinates him about seabirds - that are yet so challenging to study.

WORDS KETIJA RITENIECE

In November the LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project will announce the marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs) that you have found. What does this mean and what will change in these areas?

Marine IBAs are areas which contain a significant proportion of a seabird's population, which the birds use for breeding, rafting or foraging. Or they may be key sites for seabirds on migration. EU member states are required to declare marine protected areas so that these sites become legally protected, in the same way that nature reserves are protected on land.

The next step is to create management plans for the areas, setting out steps which will protect seabirds. For example, if an Important Bird Area in the Baltic sea has a very strong interference between diving sea ducks and gillnet fishery for herring, meaning that a lot of these birds get drowned in the gillnets, then the management plan would ideally limit the fishery to a certain time of the year, to a certain depth of the water, which is not used by the ducks.

Is it true that rats are a problem at seabird nests?

In many seabird colonies, rats and other small rodents are a problem. They are attracted by litter and will eat seabird eggs and chicks. The only site in Malta where rat control is carried out is Rdum tal-Madonna, where the largest colony of Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Garnija*) nest. We carry out rat control there every year during the breeding season to protect the nesting birds. We have an indication that around 60 % of eggs and chicks used to be eaten by rats and now none are, with no indication of losses to rodents for at least three years. This work has been made possible thanks to financial aid from MEPA and HSBC over the years.

It seems that working on seabirds is more challenging because they are out at sea, where it's hard to reach for humans, and then only come in to their nests on land when it is dark?

Yes, it's true. One important tool for our research is the boat based observations. To study the birds at sea, you need to have a really good vessel, which is usually expensive. The other important tool to find the whereabouts of seabirds in the marine environment is tagging them with tracking devices, but for this you need to go into colonies at night, and sometimes spend the whole night just waiting for some tagged bird to return. They might be out at sea for weeks and you don't know when a bird will come back. Sitting on a cliff ledge on cold and often windy nights in January and February makes the work challenging. Next, most of them nest in the least accessible places. You often need to reach them from ledges, climbing with ropes.



BENJAMIN METZGER - Steven Williams

YELKOUAN CHICK - Benjamin Metzger



What have been your best moments during the project?

One of the best moments was when we caught a Storm-petrel that was ringed 27 years ago on Filfla. Imagine, it's a bird of a size of a sparrow but has had an amazing life history! Another great moment was finding an incubated egg, and later a young chick, in one of the nest boxes we had set up for Yelkouan Shearwaters. This was actually one of the first examples anywhere in the world of Yelkouan Shearwaters using a nestbox. Also, retrieving the first tag, downloading the data and knowing that this method works.

Have there been any disappointing moments?

The hardest moment is finding birds shot in front of their nests, some people are killing them for fun. Also, if a tagged bird comes back after four weeks and you find that salt water has entered and damaged the tag, so all the data has been lost – things like that are disappointing from the scientific perspective.

What are the things that amaze you the most about seabirds?

They show a high site fidelity, returning to the very same spot every year to nest. They grow tremendously old and show faithfulness to their partners. What amazes me is how different their world is from ours. How they orient in the open ocean with hardly any visual clue, how they find their small island and nest entrance in pitch darkness, coming back from thousands of kilometres away, just by the smell. How they can spend days without using energy, just by using these tiny upwinds above each wave to fly, travelling huge distances within a very short time. This makes them quite fascinating to study.

Ketija Riteniece is the Social Media & Communications Assistant at BirdLife Malta

Breeding Birds Birthday at Ghadira

Sunday 14th June.

Celebrate our breeding birds during this rare opportunity to visit the nature reserve during the closed season. We'll be keeping an eye out for our newly hatched Little-ringed Plover and - this issue's featured bird- Black-winged Stilt chicks!

Cost: Free

BirdLife Malta AGM

Wednesday 8th July, 6.30pm,
Natural History Museum, Mdina

We invite all members to join us for an evening of presentations on our year's work, followed by a short annual general meeting.

Cost: Free

Sunset Shearwater Boat Trips

Adult members: Saturday 4th July, 6.45pm

Families boat trip: Friday 10th July, 6.45pm

Public boat trip: Saturday 8th August, 6.45pm

A boat ride to the Ta' Cenc cliffs in Gozo to observe one of Malta's most enigmatic seabirds: the Scopoli's Shearwater

Cost: Members: Adults €7, Children €5 (Under 14),

Non-members: Adults €10, Children €6

Guided Bat Walk

Sunday 19th July, 7pm, Ghadira

An evening at Ghadira Nature Reserve with Malta's bat expert John J. Borg, to discover bats.

Cost: Members €2, Non-members €4. Kids free.

Autumn Excursion to England

October 2015

We are currently planning a nature-filled trip to England.

If you are

interested in coming along please send us an email.

For further information or for bookings please email events@birdlifemalta.org or call 2134764 5/6



GHADIRA - Tim Micallef

Sunday 14th June



SHEARWATER - Aron Tanti

June & August

Overseas Events:

UK Birdfair 2015

21th – 23rd August, Rutland Water Nature Reserve
We will be returning to the British Birdwatching Fair this year with a stand and talks. Come and say hi!

Check our Facebook pages for up to date events info:

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

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

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

SHEARWATERS - Aron Tanti

You, our members, provide vital support for our work through your annual subscriptions, but for those who want to do more here are a few ways in which you can help...

Nature Alert

The laws that protect nature across Malta and the EU are under threat. The Nature Directives protect many birds, plants, animals and special places, yet the European Commission is considering weakening them. We must act now and say that we want these laws to be maintained, enforced and not weakened. It takes just two minutes to add your voice, visit the nature alert website

www.naturealert.eu

Homes for Swifts

Our youth-led APUS (Appreciating Protecting and Understanding Swifts) Project has been busy building nestboxes to provide homes for breeding swifts, now we need to find buildings on which to install them. If you would like to host a swift nestbox on your property, please contact Jennifer.law@birdlifemalta.org

Help us to Stop Illegal Hunting – Donate Now

Every spring and autumn, protected birds are illegally killed on their migration over Malta. BirdLife Malta needs your help to ensure that we are effective in our monitoring and surveillance, so that we can catch illegal hunters and bring them to justice. With your donations, we will be able to buy new camera recording equipment, suitable vehicles and train our volunteers.

To make a donation, please visit our website: www.birdlifemalta.org and click 'donate'. Or, send a cheque, addressed to BirdLife Malta, Xemxija Waterfront Apartments, Flat ½, Triq Is-Simar, Xemxija SPB9025.



Sparrow Photo Competition

The Spot a Sparrow project has launched a sparrow photography competition, with the chance to have your photo displayed in a public exhibition. There are two categories, under-12s and adults, and you have until 31st August to send in your entries.

www.spotasparrow.org