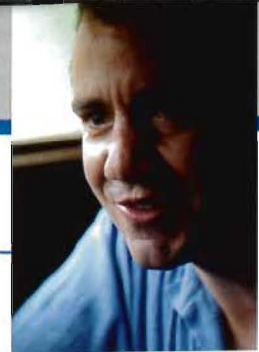


# bird's eye view



issue 27 • autumn 2008

  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA



# of science and slander

Dear Member

The EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project - Malta's biggest conservation project of its kind - has successfully completed its second year and submitted the mid-term report to the EU LIFE Unit. This exciting project has studied these secretive seabirds in greater detail than ever attempted before worldwide and is already providing invaluable data for the international scientific community.

In a world first, Yelkouan Shearwaters were this year fitted with GPS data loggers and their chicks with satellite tags, and to achieve this the project team has spent 59 nights on the cliff ledges and in the caves at Rdum tal-Madonna. The Project Manager has the details in her article on pages 6-7.

BirdLife Malta, as the beneficiary of the project, has not only successfully channelled EU funds to Malta for such a big conservation initiative but also set an excellent example of a government-NGO partnership. Despite this, the hunting federation in Malta (FKNK) has chosen to launch a smear campaign against this important conservation project. Since the close of the spring hunting season, the FKNK are appearing increasingly desperate and rather than fighting for their cause on legal grounds, they have resorted to denigrating BirdLife's conservation actions.

The FKNK administration has produced and posted a video on the internet that makes allegations about the project and BirdLife without substantiating their claims. The Federation also sent letters to BirdLife's project sponsors, including companies and foreign

embassies in Malta, making similar slanderous accusations about BirdLife. These are sad developments as the FKNK's smear campaign serves only to misinform its members and marginalise the hunting community in Malta still further.

On 11 July, the Head of the EU LIFE Unit sent a letter to BirdLife Malta stating his support for the project. He also sent a letter to the FKNK stating: "Since that video is misleading and makes unsubstantiated allegations about the way in which EU funds are used, I ask you to make sure that the video in question is removed from the YouTube site as soon as possible.". Despite this warning from the top official of the LIFE Unit (which continuously monitors the Project in Malta), the FKNK has refused to remove the video and instead continues to make further accusations about the Project and BirdLife Malta.

This is only one of the many examples of the FKNK's smear campaign against BirdLife in Malta. By using these tactics, the FKNK is damaging its own reputation and harming the hunting community in Malta. The fact is that the Maltese people treasure their wildlife and natural environment and are no longer willing to be intimidated by a single interest group which cares only for its "hobby". Times are changing and I sincerely hope we will soon see Maltese hunters represented by credible individuals who appreciate the nature protection laws of the EU and the importance of the conservation work that is essential for Malta's natural heritage.

Best wishes,  
  
**Tolga Temuge**  
Executive Director



Yelkouan Shearwater  
photo Frank Dhermain

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## meeting the prime minister

On 30 July, BirdLife officials met the Prime Minister. The meeting outlined the Society's vision for the future and focused on conservation projects in the pipeline. Among these were BirdLife's plans to promote birdwatching and ecotourism, and plans to expand the scope of the Yelkouan Shearwater Project and the BirdLife-run nature reserves. The meeting also touched upon problems of law enforcement with regard illegal hunting and trapping, and proposed a number of solutions. The meeting was very positive and it was clear that the authorities look on BirdLife as a credible organisation with a valid contribution to nature protection and enhancement.



Buskett - one of eight sites identified as ecotourism destinations.  
photo Alex Casha



## an evening with the shearwaters

No less than 250 people attended two boat trips over the weekend of 26-27 July. This was the much-awaited annual event organised by BirdLife and its junior section Klabb Huttaf. The boat ride to visit Ta' Ċenċ cliffs from below proved extremely popular with children: three of the four boats used were full of young members and their parents, an encouraging sign that children are taking an active interest in nature. During the trip, talks by youth leaders were given to the children, as well as infosheets about the Cory's Shearwater - the "star" species they had all come out to see. Many hundreds of shearwaters were in fact seen and enjoyed as they rafted in large groups not too far from the boats.

Just three years ago we were using one boat for this activity: this year we used four boats and still had to refuse bookings - proof enough that people are indeed becoming more aware of sites like Ta' Ċenċ and their magnificent seabird colonies.

BirdLife is grateful to staff, volunteers, youth leaders and helpers who organised, attended and ensured the success of this popular event.

## three o'clock stop

On 31 July the government announced the dates for the autumn hunting season. A new addition this year is an afternoon (from 3pm) hunting ban for two weeks in September. This ban will afford more protection to birds that migrate over Malta in the afternoon, especially those that decide to roost for the night. This is particularly true of birds of prey, a group of protected birds much in demand among poachers. The Legal Notice also declared the close of the trapping season on 31 December.



## upcoming events

### • raptor day

date **Sunday 21 Sep 2008**

Every autumn thousands of birds of prey fly over Malta, many of which also stop for the night in places like Buskett. Every year at this time, BirdLife organises an international camp for birders and ornithologists who come to Malta to monitor the raptor migration, and also to keep an eye on illegal hunting. This year BirdLife is also organising a RAPTOR DAY for members. The activity will start with a short talk on how to identify common raptors. After this, the group will proceed to a popular spot to watch these aristocrats of the sky as they fly in to roost. Booking essential. For more details and to reserve a place, call 21347644/5 (office hours) or write to office@birdlifemalta.org. Closing date 17 Sep 2008.



Arnon Tanti



André Raine

# lethal loophole

André Raine Conservation Manager

This Wood Sandpiper with gunshot injuries was found at Sannat on 29 July 2008.

The ban on spring hunting this year had an immediate and very noticeable effect, despite widespread illegal shooting especially in the south of Malta.

As a result, the number of shot protected birds that BirdLife received declined drastically. In 2007 the BirdLife office received 32 shot protected birds during spring migration. In 2008, over the same period, it received only 4 shot protected birds - a reduction of 86%.

At a European level, the end of spring hunting meant that species normally shot in the tens of thousands, like Turtle Dove and Common Quail, returned to their European breeding grounds in much larger numbers. An increase in the breeding populations of these declining species will have had an obvious conservation benefit.

But what does the reduction in shooting mean for Maltese breeding birds? It is certainly true that this spring we have had some significant conservation gains, such as the spread of Collared Doves - a cousin of the Turtle Dove - to several new breeding sites, dramatic increases in the numbers of breeding Common Swift colonies and the appearance of a new breeding species: the Common Coot.

## summer slaughter

However a loophole in the law has meant that we have not had the full benefit of an end to spring hunting.

This loophole is the rabbit hunting season, which opens on 1 June and continues until the end of the year. Thanks to this, hunters are able to walk the countryside with shotguns during the summer months, and some hunters use this as an opportunity to target birds illegally. One example of the effect of "rabbit" hunting can be seen with the Turtle Dove. At several sites around Malta this summer, Turtle Doves were

observed settling into breeding territories. However, as the rabbit hunting season began, one by one these birds disappeared. Breeding birds are particularly vulnerable to persecution, as they remain in the same area for the nesting period and engage in obvious breeding displays. This makes them easy targets for poachers.

At the same time, the rabbit hunting season coincides with a change in priorities for the Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) of the Maltese police. At this time of year, ALE officers are re-assigned to other duties including patrolling the beaches. As a result, officers trained to deal with wildlife crime are not available to deal with illegal hunting reports during the breeding season.

## easy targets

The combination has resulted in an upsurge in the illegal shooting of protected species during the breeding season in the summer months. The BirdLife office received several Yellow-legged Gulls, a juvenile Audouin's Gull, Green and Wood Sandpipers with gunshot injuries, and poachers were also recorded shooting rafting Cory's Shearwaters. As those who went on the BirdLife boat trips in July saw, shearwaters are particularly vulnerable at this time of year as they glide low over the waves around the boats or settle in the water in large flocks. The shearwaters off of Ta' Ċenċ were targeted on several occasions, with at least six birds being shot down in August alone. At this time of year, the Cory's are feeding their young, so the death of an adult is likely to result in the starvation of the chick.

While the ban on spring hunting has been an important and necessary step for conservation in Malta, illegal hunting during the rabbit hunting season has reduced the overall benefits we should have seen. This, coupled with a lack of law enforcement, has dealt a blow to many breeding birds in Malta this summer and needs to be seriously taken into consideration by the government next year.



# criminal minds

Geoffrey Saliba Campaigns Coordinator

One of the farm buildings gutted by arsonists on 1 June 2008

Since Malta joined the EU, the government has made efforts to improve hunting and trapping laws and increase their enforcement. This was, however, all thanks to pressure from conservation organisations and the European Commission.

Hunters and trappers are now feeling the pinch, and resent this new effort to increase conservation on the islands. The hunting federation (FKNK) has not taken this development quietly. It is venting its anger and frustration on BirdLife Malta by running an increasingly aggressive smear campaign. FKNK's aggression has been peppered with slander, xenophobic statements and baseless allegations.

The goal may not merely be to defame BirdLife, but is likely to have a much darker undercurrent to it. The FKNK constantly inundates the hunting and trapping community with unsubstantiated claims, racist sentiment and veiled threats against BirdLife, while making light of the violence that BirdLife staff and members have suffered.

The Federation's fomenting of anger and tension among hunters and trappers serves to make BirdLife personnel and property vulnerable to vengeance attacks. This is evidenced by the sheer number of major attacks that BirdLife has sustained: 17 attacks and serious threats - including vandalism, arson and drive-by shootings - in a mere 18 months. That's one major hit every five weeks, and this excludes minor incidents such as verbal abuses birdwatchers are subject to in the field. There is a dangerous escalation in both scale and frequency of attacks, which are also becoming more organised - the destruction of thousands of trees at Foresta 2000 in one night, the burning of

the forest ranger's farm, and the torching of birdwatchers' cars, are clearly premeditated crimes.

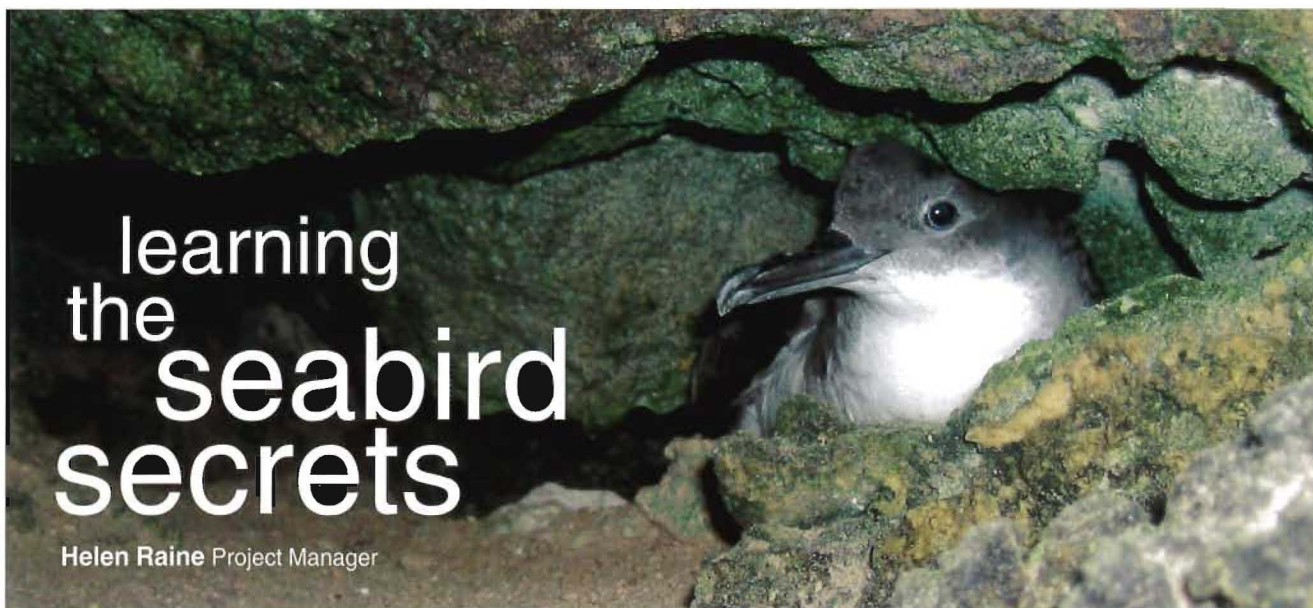
One cannot suggest that the FKNK is directly responsible for these attacks, as there is no evidence. On the other hand, there is little doubt that the FKNK's inflammatory tactics are signs of an organisation lacking in ethical, professional and socially responsible ethos.

What is also of major concern is the fact that, despite all the police reports and government promises, not one culprit has yet been brought to justice. This inaction from the authorities can only send out one message to the criminals still at large: "You have nothing to fear!"

## calendar of crime

some of the more serious cases of violence against BirdLife

- **20-21 Mar 2007** - Vandals dump 45 litres of burnt engine oil into the ditch and pools at Għadira nature reserve.
- **7-8 May 2007** - Vandals hack down 3000 trees and shrubs at Foresta 2000 afforestation site in Mellieħa.
- **01 Oct 2007** - A hunter shoots the Foresta 2000 ranger in the face, hurls abuse at him and at BirdLife, then flees.
- **17 Mar 2008** - Vandals set fire and totally destroy three cars belonging to BirdLife scientists at Buskett.
- **20 Apr 2008** - A group of hunters block the road and surround a BirdLife Spring Watch team at Fomm ir-Riħ, threaten and hurl verbal abuse, then force them to leave the area, despite it being public land.
- **29 Apr 2008** - A criminal removes wheel bolts from a car belonging to the LIFE Shearwater Project warden; the sabotage, however, is discovered in time, avoiding a potentially fatal accident.
- **1 Jun 2008** - Vandals burn down farm buildings and destroy trees, a water reservoir and a well on the property of the Foresta 2000 ranger in Mellieħa.
- **13 Jun 2008** - Three individuals in a car drive by a BirdLife fieldworker at Rđum il-Madonna and fire a shotgun in his direction.



## learning the seabird secrets

Helen Raine Project Manager

### Another world first for the yelkouan shearwater project

At 3 a.m. on a damp May night, I found myself on a sheer cliff in the pitch black. There was no sign of the Yelkouan Shearwaters that we were waiting for, not even a call. Even a die-hard researcher like my colleague John J. Borg was slumped against a burrow with his eyes closed, to all intents and purposes fast asleep.

It appears, however, that 25 years of studying shearwaters have given John an uncanny ability to detect an incoming bird without so much as twitching an eyelid. Before I even registered movement, John had reanimated as if from the dead, his arms shooting up to head height and his hands clutching a very surprised-looking Yelkouan Shearwater!

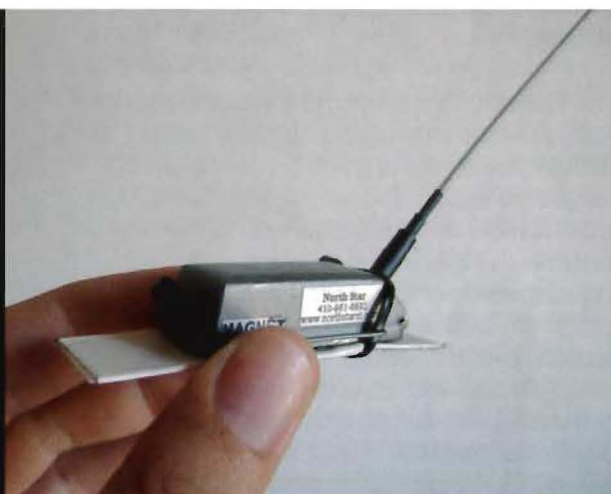
### good returns

All this nocturnal activity was part of the EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project, one aim of which is to find out where these seabirds are fishing and rafting. While you can do that

to some extent by boat, the best way to find out where these birds are going is through telemetry work (fitting electronic tracking devices). And to do that, you need to spend a lot of time on the cliffs at the project site of Rдум tal-Madonna - 59 nights in total this year.

The Yelkouan that John had just caught in mid air was a perfect candidate for fitting a GPS data logger device. However, that was only the beginning of the process - the challenge was to recapture the bird and retrieve the device so that we could download the data onto a computer for analysis. Yelkouans can make trips of up to six days at sea before they return to their burrows to feed their chicks.

By the end of June, sleep deprived and practically welded into our fieldwork clothes, the team had triumphed, obtaining five tracks showing the birds' movements. This gave the project detailed indications of the areas the birds are using at sea. Importantly, the data confirmed that the Yelkouans spent time opposite the cliff colony of Rдум tal-Madonna at night. Since their use of these waters is mainly nocturnal, we could never have obtained this information through conventional surveys.



Left: An adult Yelkouan Shearwater fitted with a GPS data logging device. Right: a satellite tag  
photos André Raine

## news from the east

In July, the project team switched to satellite tags, this time to track fledged chicks. This is the first time ever that this technology has been used on chicks of this species. The tags were fitted just before the chicks left the nest - once the young birds leave the islands, they don't come back for around three years.

The project team spent the first few days anxiously waiting for the first signals to come through from the satellite. Then the first tag sent a signal from Maltese waters on 2 July. By the end of the first week, both birds started heading east, one to Greece, where its last signal was received, and the other to Crete. We expected this second bird to head into the Black or Aegean Sea, where we have previously received two ring recoveries of birds ringed in Malta. Instead, our bird flew to the coast of North Africa. More research is needed to find out whether other chicks will follow this pattern, and if this is the case, it could increase the importance of North African waters for these birds. The team continued to receive signals from this bird until 20 July, when its tag too fell off - the tags are only intended to stay on the birds for a short time.

The results of this year's fieldwork have not only thrown light on exactly where these long-ranging birds are fishing, but have also allowed the team to obtain satellite information on chick migration patterns. All this data will be used to identify Marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs) to protect the birds effectively at sea. Since Yelkouan Shearwaters, like many

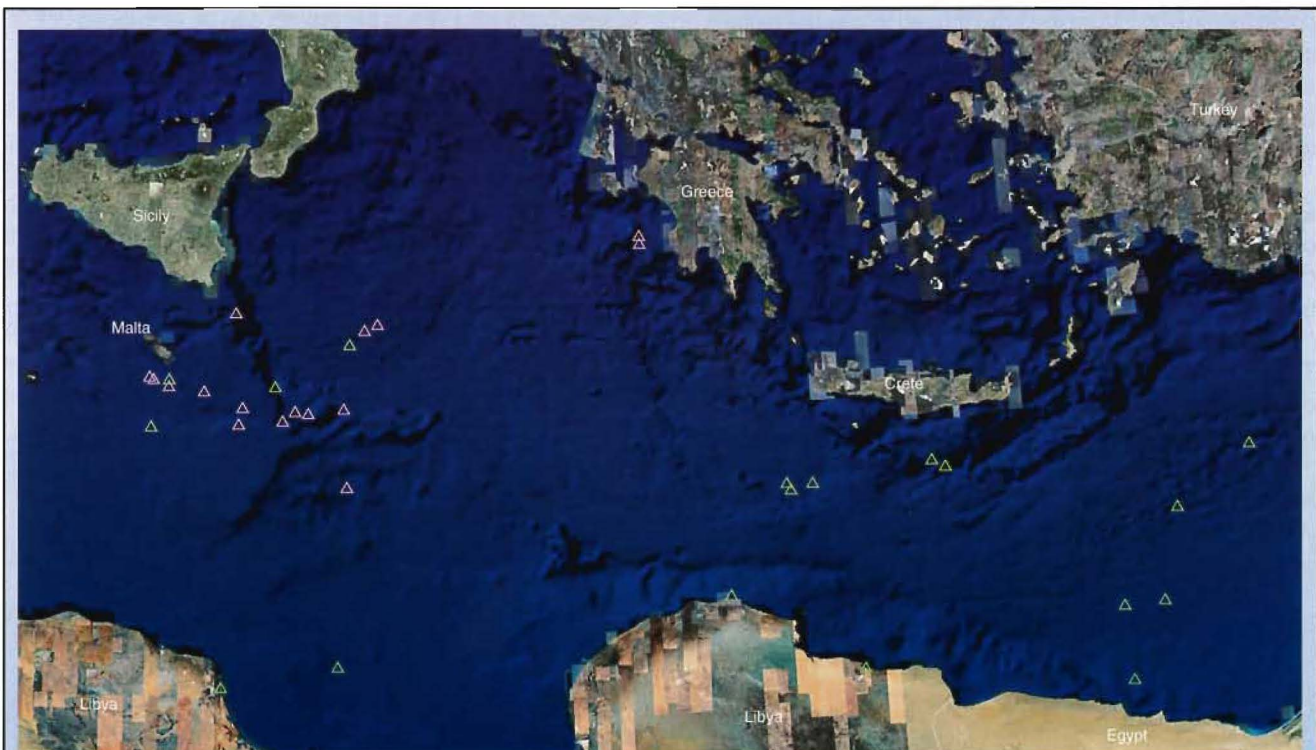


One of the fledged chicks fitted with a satellite tag.  
photo O. Slessor

other seabirds, spend most of their time at sea, we need to make sure that we can protect the marine areas that are important to them. Designating Marine SPAs is one way to do this, and the Project will be helping the government to fulfil its EU obligations in working towards this goal.

Visit our website at [www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt](http://www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt)

The EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project is a partnership project with BirdLife Malta, Malta Maritime Authority, Malta Centre for Fisheries Sciences, Heritage Malta, Armed Forces of Malta, BirdLife UK (RSPB) and BirdLife Portugal (SPEA). It is 50% funded by the EU LIFE Nature Fund, with contributions from partners, MEPA and HSBC.



The triangles show progressive locations of the two birds fitted with satellite tags.  
image Google Earth

# rush to wind energy

Tolga Temuge Executive Director

The global market for wind power has been expanding faster than any other source of renewable energy in recent years, with an almost tenfold increase since 1998.

According to the World Wind Energy Association (WWEA), wind energy reached a global installed capacity of almost 94,000 MW by the end of 2007. In some countries and regions, wind energy already contributes 40% of the total power generation and more. WWEA expects 170,000 MW to be installed by the end of 2010.

The impetus behind such an expansion of wind power has come increasingly from the urgent need to combat global climate change. Together with energy-saving applications such as more efficient light bulbs and policies to reduce energy consumption, renewable sources of power such as wind can significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Energy from renewable sources, however, is not without its own potentially damaging consequences for nature conservation. There is a need to balance the risks and benefits and to minimise any adverse environmental effects.

The Global Wind Energy Council agrees that the construction and operation of wind power, often in areas of open countryside, raises issues of visual impact, noise and the effect on local wildlife. To avoid such problems, WWEA recommends a set of criteria for the planning of wind farms. WWEA considers it imperative that one determines the potential impact of wind turbines on wildlife.

It is now widely known that birds and bats can be affected by wind energy development through loss of habitat, disturbance to their breeding and foraging areas and by death or injury caused by the rotating turbine blades. Past experience from the US and Spain shows that wind farms sited without proper research cause severe problems to wildlife, including birds (particularly large migratory species



such as raptors, storks and herons). At the same time the available evidence suggests that appropriately positioned wind farms do not create a significant hazard for birds.

Therefore all wind farm proposals must be subject to rigorous and independent preliminary environmental assessment, after which the project can be embraced or rejected. The effects of any approved developments must also be monitored before and after construction. There is also an urgent need for statutory marine protected areas to be identified, designated and protected, so that the criteria above can also be applied in coastal and offshore areas.

There is no doubt that the most significant long-term threat to birds and global biodiversity comes from climate change. According to the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), "recent scientific research indicates that, as early as the middle of this century, climate change could commit one third or more of land-based plants and animals to extinction."

At the same time it is hoped that we have learned enough from past mistakes to be in a position to avoid hasty decisions that would create other serious problems while attempting to solve the pressing ones.

**Friends of the Earth (FoE) Malta** has launched the **Big Ask Campaign**. It is a petition - joined already by 16 other FoE groups across Europe - that will be presented to the Prime Minister to lobby for a legally binding **commitment to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 3% yearly**. At least 30,000 signatures are needed, so every signature counts! To sign the petition visit [www.foemalta.org/bigask](http://www.foemalta.org/bigask)





## dinja wahda - one world of fun

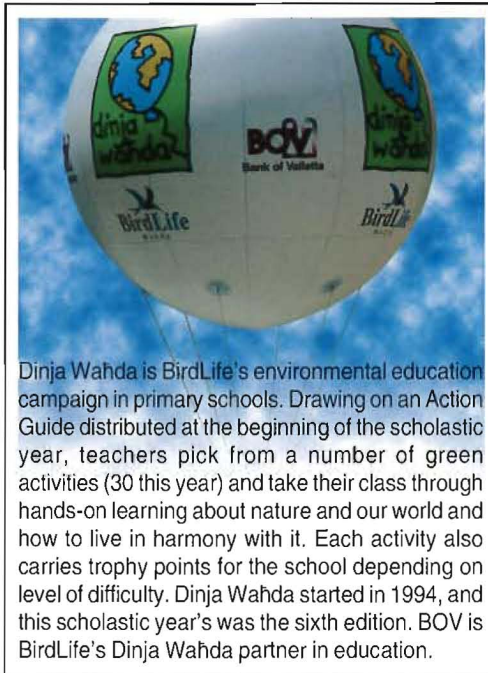
Desirée Falzon Education Coordinator

Dinja Wahda 6 was bigger and more colourful than previous editions, and as popular as ever.

Seventy-four primary schools took part in Dinja Wahda this year - this translates into about 22,500 students. Siġġiewi Primary C, De la Salle Junior School and Lija-Balzan Primary C top the charts, and these are just three of an outstanding 33 schools that achieved Gold Award level.

Children have a natural affinity with animals - this was made evident by the fact that the top two favourite activities were **I Promise!** and **Robin Round-Up!**, both of which are activities with animals (robins and lizards) as their focus. Coming in at a close third was **On Reserve!**, through which a total of 2430 primary schoolchildren visited BirdLife's nature reserves at Ghadira and Is-Simar.

Another activity that brought BirdLife's green message to thousands of children was **Green Talk!**, where a BirdLife teacher gave nature talks to a total of 2775 students.



Dinja Wahda is BirdLife's environmental education campaign in primary schools. Drawing on an Action Guide distributed at the beginning of the scholastic year, teachers pick from a number of green activities (30 this year) and take their class through hands-on learning about nature and our world and how to live in harmony with it. Each activity also carries trophy points for the school depending on level of difficulty. Dinja Wahda started in 1994, and this scholastic year's was the sixth edition. BOV is BirdLife's Dinja Wahda partner in education.

Another significant figure this year was 276. This is the total of members who joined Klabb Huttaf through Dinja Wahda. Klabb Huttaf is BirdLife's junior club, and thanks to the **Join the Club!** activity, these youngsters will continue to receive green news and views through the club's bimonthly magazine *Il-Huttafa*, and also get hands-on contact with nature through the club's outings.

Dinja Wahda's Midas touch also reached out to Foresta 2000, BirdLife's afforestation project - this year we had 34 schools fostering a total of 319 trees.

What also put Dinja Wahda 6 a cut above previous editions were its presentation and media coverage.

The new Action Guide and the giant Dinja Wahda balloon gave a special polish to the campaign, especially at big media actions, while the charismatic new Huttafa mascot brought a cuddly element to Dinja Wahda events.

A prize-giving event this autumn will launch next year's Dinja Wahda, all set to go after a year of resounding success.

BirdLife is grateful to Bank of Valletta, our partner in education, for helping to make Dinja Wahda possible.



## changing the course for the courser

Victor Falzon

**INDIA.** The 430km Teluga Ganga Canal, from Srisaïlam (Andhra Pradesh) to Chennai (Madras), is to be diverted around the only remaining habitat of the Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*.

Fuelwood collection and overgrazing may have contributed to the bird's decline, and for many years it was believed extinct until rediscovered 22 years ago in Andhra Pradesh. The rediscovery led the government to establish the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, to protect the courser's habitat of scrub forest interspersed with bare ground. The species is believed to number no more than 50 individuals

When the proposed canal threatened the sanctuary, conservationists including the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS, BirdLife in India) and RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) urged the Supreme Court of India to intervene. The construction work was halted and a detour route approved. The government also agreed to buy 1200ha of nearby scrub forest and will manage that land to protect and enlarge the bird's habitat. The realignment will also benefit the local community who will be compensated for land that was difficult to farm.



Jerdon's Courser - Critically Endangered.  
photo Simon Cook

It is hoped that the Jerdon's Courser will become the State Bird of Andhra Pradesh to create a sense of pride and stewardship among all of those on whom its future depends.

(condensed from [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org))

## recent highlights

Joe Sultana

### unusual species



Penduline Tit - good appearance after several years' absence.  
photo Ian Balzan

**Cattle Egret** 1 in breeding plumage at Ghadira on 19 May  
**Black Stork** 1 over Marfa on 18 Apr  
**Collared Pratincole** 1 at Bahar iċ-Ċagħaq on 12 Apr  
**Cream-coloured Courser** 1 at Luqa airfield on 22-24 May  
**Great Skua** 1 off Ċirkewwa attacking Cory's Shearwater on 29 Feb  
**Barn Owl** 1 flying at night in Xagħra on 6 Feb  
**Great Spotted Cuckoo** 1 at Ghadira/Foresta on 9-10 Mar  
**Stock Dove** 1 at Salina on 3 Mar  
**Richard's Pipit** 1 at Xagħra l-Hamra on 6 Jan  
**Rüppell's Warbler** 1 at Ghargħur on 12 Apr  
**Trumpeter Finch** 1 at Għarb on 13 May  
**Penduline Tit** made a good appearance after an absence of several years; mainly at Is-Simar and Ghadira, with up to 7 at Ghadira on 27 Feb

### good numbers

**Turtle Dove** good numbers in April, largest influx on 14 Apr, with 350+ at Is-Simar and 580+ at Blata l-Bajda (largest flock 75+)  
**Pintail** 1700+ off Ċirkewwa from 20-28 Feb (largest day-count 690+ in 3 large flocks on 27th)  
**Garganey** about 640 on 14-16 Mar off Ċirkewwa  
**Ferruginous Duck** 120+ on 19 Mar off Ċirkewwa  
**Tree Pipit** heavy passage in April, with 3000+ in 1hr at Torri l-Aħmar on 13th  
**Honey-buzzard** 161 on 11 May in Gozo - largest flock of 45  
**White Wagtail** 5433 counted flying in to their wintering roost in Valletta on 12 Jan

### breeding birds

**Common Coot** bred for the first time in Malta: 1 pair had 6 chicks at Is-Simar  
**Little Grebe** nested for the 2nd year running: 2 pairs raised 6 chicks at Is-Simar  
**Common Swift** noted prospecting and entering potential nesting sites at least at 6 sites, but mainly in the Paceville/Sliema area  
**Barn Swallow** nested for the 2nd year running at Sannat; another pair nested at Hal Far  
**Little Ringed Plover** a record 8 pairs nested at Ghadira

# rings of knowledge the science of ringing birds

**Mark Gauci**  
Head of Ringing Scheme

I still remember vividly when, as a trainee ringer, I visited Filfla for the first time. That night I handled a retrap Storm-petrel and when I read out the ring number one of the senior members of the group remarked that the bird I had just released was actually older than me: I was 16 at the time and the bird was over 21 years old! That remarkable fact pushed me even more to pursue the science of bird ringing.

The Valletta Bird Ringing Scheme is the name of the Maltese ringing group. It was set up in 1965 after British ringers had come to Malta to train some members of BirdLife Malta, then still known as the Malta Ornithological Society. That small group never looked back, and today the scheme is composed of 20 licensed ringers.

To become a bird ringer required a period of intense training, during which time the identification, ageing and sexing of species is acquired along with other biometric techniques. The prospective ringer must also pass a written examination to qualify for a police license. Licensed ringers must also rigorously follow the rules and regulations set out in the Ringers' Manual - this little book is the ringer's bible!

Bird ringing is a study in which birds are fitted with light metal rings on their leg. Each ring is inscribed with a unique number and the words BIRDLIFE MALTA to show that the bird was ringed in Malta. The ringed bird is identified and logged along with data like age, sex, wing length, weight and fat and muscle scores. The entire examination takes only a couple of minutes after which the bird is released back into the wild.



Ringling on Kemmuna - scientists ring and log a Scops Owl.  
photo Ray Galea

Around 12,000 birds are ringed every year in Malta, and the most commonly ringed here include Robin, Common Chiffchaff and Spanish Sparrow. Since 1965, over 426,000 birds of about 195 species have been ringed.



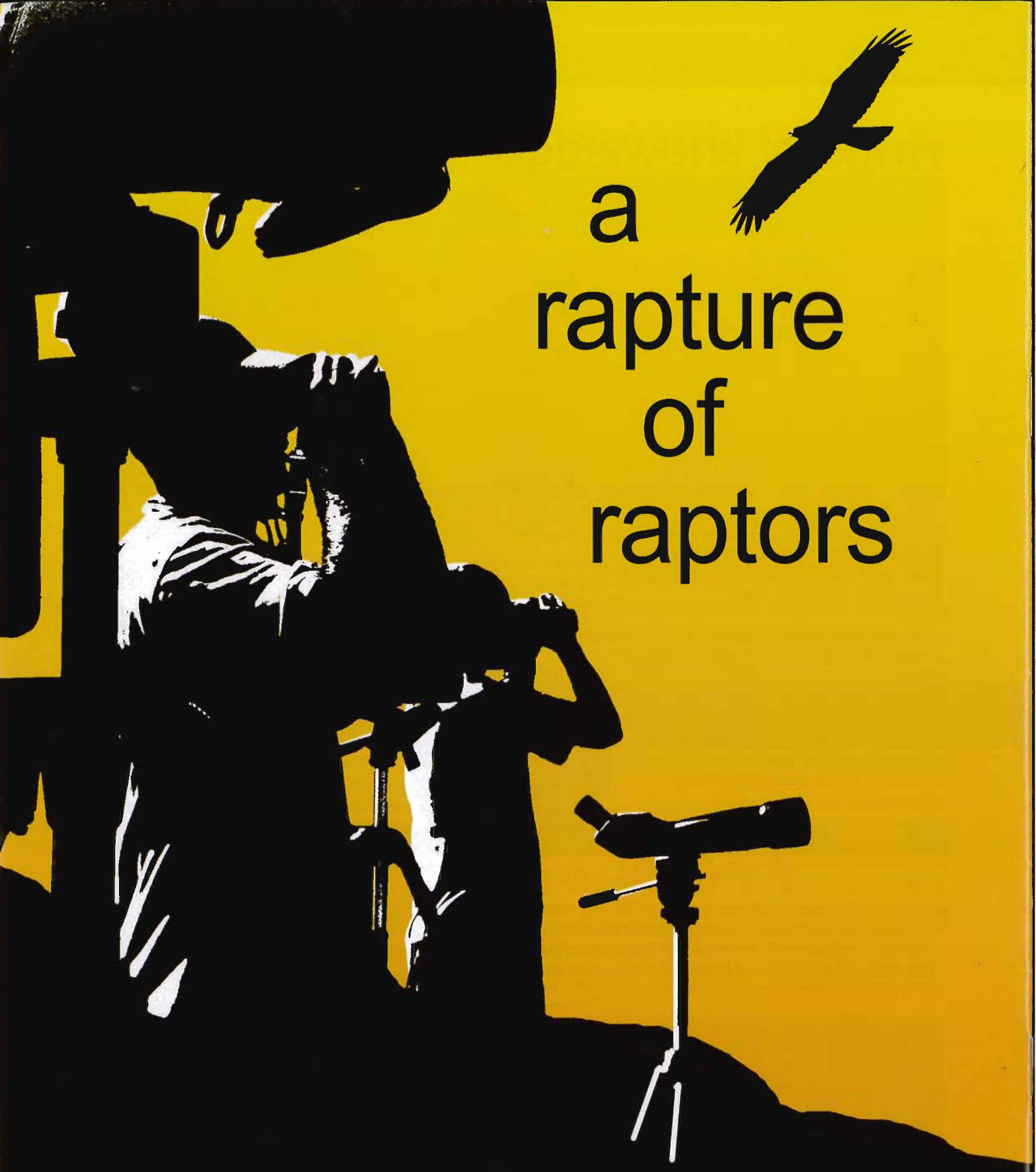
Analysing the data is fascinating as it is through this that we unravel the secrets of our feathered friends. Everyone can tell a Robin, but few people know that Robins tend to return to the same place in successive winters. This bird flies thousands of kilometres across Europe - without map, compass or GPS - and finds the same spot every year! Ringing also gives us a good idea of how long birds live in the wild: the familiar Spanish Sparrow, for example, can live up to 12 years in the wild. Again, it is through ringing that we know this.

All ringing schemes around the world exchange information and this leads to accurate mapping of bird migration routes. How does this happen? When we find a bird carrying a foreign ring we inform the relevant scheme and learn exactly where and when the bird had been ringed; at the same time, the foreign scheme learns that their bird had flown to Malta. For example, one Goldcrest - a tiny bird weighing just 5g (the weight of a biro!) - was ringed in Buskett in winter 2006 and retrapped in spring 2007 a thousand kilometres away in Croatia. Were it not for the ring on the bird's leg, such feats of endurance would be unbelievable.

Bird ringing is not merely a study to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the animal world. These bits of data help us build a clear picture of the various species, their habits and their habitats. This vital information will show us the best way to protect these creatures and their habitat, and ensure that birds continue filling our skies and countryside with their beauty.



The ring is placed on the bird's leg with a special tool.  
photo Victor Falzon



a  
rapture  
of  
raptors

A members' day with birds of prey

21 September 2008

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