

# bird's eye view

issue 26 • summer 2008

  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA



## connect with nature

Dear Member,

Last month our organisation initiated a new campaign, *Connect with Nature*, launched by Minister George Pullicino during a dinner at Argotti Gardens in Floriana. For those of you who joined us, I hope that it was an enjoyable evening, made possible by BirdLife friends Theresa and Alfred Cremona who organised this dinner.

*Connect with Nature* aims to raise funds for BirdLife Malta's scientific work to study, identify and manage protected areas in the Maltese islands. This is an excellent opportunity for Maltese companies to contribute to the protection and management of our limited but in many ways unique countryside and its wildlife.

BirdLife Malta is at the forefront of conservation science in the Maltese Islands and through its work also helps the government to achieve its European Union obligations. But this tough work also requires a serious amount of time and resources. It is, therefore, essential for conservation organisations like BirdLife to raise funds from the public and also companies that are committed to the protection and management of their country's wildlife through their social responsibility programmes.

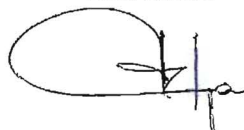
Acknowledging the importance of conservation in 1992, EU governments adopted the Habitats Directive which complements the Birds Directive, adopted in 1979. These two Directives are designed to protect the most seriously threatened habitats and species across Europe and are the basis of the Natura 2000 network.

Each Member State compiles a list of the areas that qualify as a Natura 2000 site under EU legislation and submits its list to the European Commission. After an evaluation and selection process these areas become part of the Natura 2000 network.

Protecting ecologically important areas alone is not enough however, since especially in a small country like Malta it is impossible to find an area in our countryside that is not affected by human activities. What is as important as protecting it from further exploitation is to prepare proper management plans and implement them, as required by the EU.

This campaign is therefore not only an excellent opportunity for Maltese companies to help achieve these goals but also a means to get more involved with ways to connect with our nature.

Best wishes



**Tolga Temuge**  
Executive Director



**Little Bittern**  
photo Aron Tanti

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## evening

### under the stars

- BirdLife Malta held a very successful fundraising dinner at the Argotti gardens in Floriana on May 24. Minister George Pullicino was present together with many members and members of the public who wished to support BirdLife. During the dinner the Connect with Nature fund was launched to finance the work BirdLife carries out for the better protection of more areas of countryside.

For more information on the **Connect with Nature** campaign please visit [www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org)

Kemmuna, an Important Bird Area (IBA), needs proper protection.  
photo Ian Balzan



Some of the guest at the dinner event.  
photo BirdLife Malta

Hadoram Shirihai, a world-renowned Israeli ornithologist, who recently rediscovered Beck's Petrel (previously believed extinct), was in Malta in May to meet with the EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project team and with John J. Borg of Heritage Malta. Shirihai joined John on a trip to Filfla to see the very special storm-petrels that reside there. Having seen just a little bit of what Malta has to offer, he expressed his belief that the Islands have the potential to become one of the top birding destinations in Europe in terms of migration.



Hadoram Shirihai  
photo Joe Sultana

## swiss support



The Swiss Association for the Protection of Birds SVS (BirdLife Partner in Switzerland) has renewed its support for BirdLife Malta's conservation work on the Islands. This time around SVS is sponsoring BirdLife Malta's new server and gateway. This will enhance the IT set-up in the office and provide better internet security. Visit SVS's website at [www.birdlife.ch/d/home\\_e.html](http://www.birdlife.ch/d/home_e.html)

## ornithologist sees malta as potential top birding spot

### upcoming events

#### • shearwater boat trip

date **Saturday, July 26, 2008**

Over a thousand pairs of Cory's Shearwater breed in the cliffs of Ta' Ċenċ. Every summer BirdLife organises a boat trip for members to see these



shearwaters just before the birds fly in to their nests at sunset - last year we counted over 2000 birds. Join us for another magical trip this summer. During the trip, a talk about Malta's seabirds will be given by our scientists. This event lasts 2-3 hours. For more details and to reserve your place, please call 21-347644/5 (office hours) or write to [office@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:office@birdlifemalta.org). Early booking is advised. Closing date 24 July.

Dennis Cechia





# spring watch camp

photo Adrian Thomas

## from the inside out

**Geoffrey Saliba** Assistant Camp Coordinator

Spring Watch Camp 2008 was an excellent opportunity for one to discover more of Malta's wildlife and countryside while contributing to the battle against illegal hunting.

This first camp was made up of 34 international volunteers from five countries, all with various backgrounds and birding experience. From this strong mix of people, several teams were chosen to conduct two watches a day from April 12 to 29, each at different locations. The teams had to record the number and species of birds migrating through the area.

The teams always had a leader, someone to record the data and of course an optimist armed with photographic equipment. Leaders had to ensure that their teams arrived on site in good time, spoke to anyone interested in the groups' activity, while acting as the local guides as the volunteers had loads of questions about Malta.

The participants agreed that the camp ran smoothly and that, despite a slow migration, they still had a great time. David - one of the international participants - was particularly impressed by how close the birds came to the

observers. He was impressed despite the fact that he has Marsh Harriers nesting in the woods just in front of his house in the UK.



Grey Heron was an attraction at Ghadira.

photo Denis Cachia





Montagu's Harrier was one of the highlights.  
photo Dustin Balzan

On one of the mornings at the airport the team observed a male Montagu's Harrier swooping down and catching something in his talons, then perform aerial manoeuvres to escape the larger female chasing him to steal his catch. Another golden sight was that of 16 Little Egrets coming into Golden Bay and settling down for the day on the rocks.

The Camp Coordinators, including myself, were careful not to overtire the participants and some days off were scheduled in. So the question is: What do birdwatchers do on their day off? Well... birdwatch! So on our morning off we headed out to Ghadira and were lucky to see a Grey Heron at the reserve catch a fish, lift its head and swallow the fish. It was like something out of National Geographic, only right there in front of us.

What was clear to us was that as the teams went about their activities, they were fully appreciative of the Maltese countryside and the migration that they were witnessing. Their eagerness to help stop the poaching of birds saw no bounds. By the camp's end, everyone felt they had done a good job, and there were some who wouldn't have minded staying longer, promising to return for more next Raptor Camp!

*Spring Watch Camp 2008 was coordinated by Dr André Raine, BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager, with the assistance of Geoffrey Saliba and Nadja Tschovikov.*



Spring Watch Camp 2008 - the participants  
photo Adrian Thomas

**Next RaptorCamp - autumn 2008!**

## nabu's helping hand



Dr Markus Nipkow (left) with Dr André Raine, Spring Watch Camp Coordinator.  
photo BirdLife Malta

Once again, NABU (BirdLife Partner in Germany) came through to support our Spring Watch Camp. NABU's financial contribution ensured that this camp could be even more professional than before. We were also very happy to welcome Dr Markus Nipkow, NABU's Ornithology and Bird Conservation Officer, as one of our participants.



NABU's website is at [www.nabu.de](http://www.nabu.de)

## in the interim...



Common Quail  
photo Juan Martin Simon/SEO

On April 24 the European Court of Justice issued an Interim Measure ordering Malta not to open the 2008 spring hunting season for Turtle Dove and Quail. This Order implies that the Court saw urgent need to prevent irreversible damage to these migratory bird species. Furthermore, the Court stressed the importance of protecting the EU's common heritage and stated that "the interest of hunters does not appear to have a value superior thereto". The EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "The order applies to the spring period in 2008 but we consider that it sets a clear precedent in relation to spring hunting in subsequent years also in other Member States." A final ruling on the court case is not expected before 2009.



# the benefits of a gun-free spring

Dr André Raine Conservation Manager

This year marked a major milestone for Malta, with the first spring without an open hunting season.

While some hunters, particularly in the south, did not respect the law (on one morning in April in Delimara, one of our Spring Watch teams recorded over 480 shots in three hours), the situation was better in many other parts of the island. The end of spring hunting, if properly enforced island-wide, will undoubtedly have serious conservation benefits for Malta. This spring we have already seen several firsts, and these bode well for the future.

## new birds, more birds

At Is-Simar nature reserve we had the first ever confirmed breeding record of Eurasian Coot, with a pair successfully fledging six young. While the coot chicks were paddling contentedly around at Is-Simar, a pair of Black-winged Stilts was seen courting and copulating at Ghadira nature reserve. Although they eventually moved on, this also gives hope that this species will eventually breed in our islands. The probable colonising of Gozo by Collared Doves was also a major bonus.



Will we see the return of Barn Owl among our resident breeding birds?

photo rspb-images.com



Three of six coot chicks that made ornithological history in Malta.

photo Raymond Galea

Changes in bird behaviour were also apparent. The Turtle Dove benefited hugely from the spring hunting ban, with the largest flocks in many, many years being recorded - this is of course what happens when 11,500 guns aren't turned on them each spring, decimating their numbers. Large flocks of Turtle Doves were also noted settling in the notorious woodlands of Miġeb, resting unmolested, being joined by more flocks, and then migrating onwards.

## less casualties

Lastly, the benefits of the ban can be easily measured by the number of shot protected birds (such as raptors and herons) that have come into our office this spring as opposed to spring 2007. By May 21, we had received 14 protected birds this year. Compare this with the 43 received in the same time period last year and you can clearly see the benefits of having fewer guns out in the countryside.

## what next?

What is next for Malta? Will we see Turtle Doves breeding again in the countryside? How about finally having a few pairs of Common Kestrels, or seeing the return of the Barn Owl or the Peregrine Falcon? All of this is possible if spring hunting ends, and the laws are properly enforced. We still have a lot of work to do, because if hunters continue to break the law and get away with it, the birds will not reap the benefits of a spring free of gunfire. But if we continue to keep up the pressure and remain vigilant, maybe one day soon you will be watching a pair of Turtle Doves courting in a tree near you.



# spring brings huttafa to dinja wahda

Sandra Mifsud

Dinja Wahda Schools Coordinator



Huttafa meets children at the *Walk for Nature* event in March.  
photo Victor Falzon

As BirdLife Malta's Dinja Wahda Schools Coordinator, I have been visiting several schools over the past months as they celebrated *Nature Days*, one of 30 environmental activities that form part of Dinja Wahda's Teachers' Action Guide. The Action Guide was specially written and designed by BirdLife Malta's Education Committee to teach primary school students about how nature works, why our natural environment should be protected by all of us and how we can speak up for it.

Schools organising *Nature Days* usually bring together various Dinja Wahda activities on one day or sometimes over one whole week. A typical Nature Week would include a visit to a reserve, the planting of a tree on the school grounds or at Foresta 2000, presentations, poetry, crafts, games and songs about trees, pollution, climate change, alternative energy. Often *Green Talks* are also booked during such weeks. *Green Talk* is another Dinja Wahda activity, an easy one to get points on with the added benefit that it is highly informative. The talk is delivered by Jason Aloisio, one of our field teachers, who adapts them to the age group of his audience.

*Nature Days* this year also had a surprise guest. For many people swallows symbolise the arrival of spring. This spring a unique (and rather large!) swallow arrived especially to represent pupils of schools participating in Dinja Wahda as well as Klabb Huttaf members: HUTTAF, the mascot of Klabb Huttaf. HUTTAF is a recent addition to our educational team and has been doing the school rounds with Jason and myself to talk to the students about nature: insects, trees, reptiles, birds, the air, the sea and the human impact on all of this.

HUTTAF's first meeting with many children from Dinja Wahda Schools, Klabb Huttaf and BOV's Young Savers

Club was on March 30 during *Walk for Nature* - an event organised annually by Klabb Huttaf. *Walk for Nature* is another activity that forms part of Dinja Wahda. At the end of this activity the children, together with Huttafa and Cikkurillu, Bank Of Valletta's Young Savers' Club mascot, endorsed an important message that was publicised throughout Malta and Gozo: *Ahna Nhobbu l-Kampanja!* (*We Love the Countryside!*).

School activities for this academic year have now come to an end. However, the next long-awaited Klabb Huttaf event takes place in July: the boat trip to Ta' Ċenċ. This is the first time HUTTAF will be joining us for this event. (for more information on this event, see page 3).

This year celebrates the sixth edition of Dinja Wahda. With special thanks to our Educational Partners, Bank Of Valletta, Dinja Wahda this year increased from 18 to 30 activities and will run on an annual basis.



Kids making seed-cakes to stock their school bird table.  
photo Xewkija Primary School



## unravelling climate change

part 1

Tolga Temuge Executive Director



Oil rigs lining up in the picturesque Cromarty Firth, Scotland. Humans will soon have to stop depending on fossil fuels.

photo Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

After years of denial in spite of overwhelming scientific evidence, climate change is now accepted by the world community as the most pressing global crisis.

Human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels such as oil and coal, are releasing rapidly-increasing levels of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

This is causing the atmosphere to heat up. According to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), increased greenhouse gas emissions have already caused the Earth's surface to warm, on average, by 0.76°C above pre-industrial levels.

The effects of climate change on ecosystems and wildlife are already being felt. Extreme weather conditions such as floods and droughts, the melting of glaciers, shifts of plant and animal ranges resulting in declines in some plant and animal populations and the potential extinction of species, are just a few examples. In short, climate change threatens the basic elements of life, and humans are not immune to it. For example, it is predicted that melting glaciers will initially increase flood risk and then strongly reduce water supplies; declining crop yields, especially in Africa where over 70% of workers rely on small-scale farming that is dependent on direct rainfall, could result in an additional 80-120 million people at risk of hunger. Rising sea levels will result in tens to hundreds of millions more people affected by flooding each year. Changing

climatic conditions are also expected to result in geographic shifts in human diseases. The list goes on.

To summarise the effects of climate change on humans and the ecosystems that all life depends on in a few pages is impossible as the issue is highly complex. On the other hand fighting climate change and reversing the human footprint on increasing greenhouse gases is even more complicated.

After decades of inaction most governments with a few exceptions - such as the United States - have started to put policies forward that would, in theory, reduce the carbon dioxide emissions. But most of these policies are far from addressing the urgency of this global crisis. Hydropower, solar energy - including wind farms - and biofuels among other so-called renewable energy sources are high on the agenda to replace conventional energy sources. However, if implemented wrongly renewable energy sources may not only generate other problems on biodiversity but also in some cases result in more greenhouse gases. Therefore, for each alternative energy source that governments and industry plan to invest in, a careful approach is essential to avoid further environmental and social problems.

### the myth of biofuels

There is no question that the replacement of conventional fossil fuels with bioenergy could help reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. The EU is seeing biofuels as a key renewable energy source and according to a recent



proposal by the Commission Member States are asked to ensure that by 2020 biofuel accounts for 10% of transport fuels. However, EU biofuel policy is likely to cause large scale environmental harm across the world as even the most severe cases of environmental destruction would still be considered "sustainable" under the proposed EU legislation.

A recent report published by BirdLife International presented real life cases, from across the world, where the production of biofuel feed stocks is leading to the clearing of natural habitats. The main problem with the Commission's proposal is that it ignores indirect effects of biofuel production, such as US corn ethanol subsidies driving soya expansion in the Amazon. The standards would also fail to protect key wildlife habitats such as precious wetlands like the Tana River delta in Kenya.

This loss of natural habitats due to unsustainable biofuel production - results in greenhouse gas emissions and loss of biodiversity. Oil palm plantations are already a major driver of lowland forest loss in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover displacing food crops by biofuels is already increasing food prices or leading to food scarcity, which would particularly impact poor communities. The exact contribution biofuels could make to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is yet unclear. Emissions savings are also dependent on the energy involved in the production and transport of fertilisers and other agrochemicals used, on

emissions caused by fertilizer use, on how the processing stage is powered, and what happens to any by-products. Some biofuels can actually result in significant emission savings while in the worst cases they may result in higher emissions than the fossil fuel they substitute.

Biomass, mostly wood, is a major energy source worldwide and especially in poor countries. Investing in better combustion technologies not only allows better use of the same resources but also reduces the impacts on natural forests. Win-win solutions should be explored where habitat restoration and management can be combined with biomass harvesting.

### time is running out

There is yet a lot to be explored to stop our dependence on fossil fuels. But time is running out fast and if we do not manage to pass radical legislation to significantly reduce carbon emissions and replace them with sustainable renewable energy sources, as well as strengthening the laws to safeguard biodiversity, the cost is likely to be too high. A single solution does not seem possible and it is about time we realised that the current free market system that is provoking more consumption everywhere on this limited planet also needs to be put under scrutiny before it is too late.

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*Next issue we will look into the potentials and problems of wind energy.*



The European Commission's proposed sustainable standards for the production of biofuel feedstock fail to protect key wildlife habitat such as set-aside in Europe.

photo Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



# globe lights, shearwaters and global warming

**Helen Raine**

EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project Manager

The connection might not be immediately obvious, but every time you click off a light switch after dark, you could be helping a Yelkouan Shearwater. BirdLife researchers from the Yelkouan Shearwater Project have found that cutting light pollution is a key factor in protecting this species.

This is because of the way shearwaters have evolved. These birds only come to their nests on land at night to avoid being eaten by lurking predators. To navigate in the dark, they have developed eyes which are very sensitive to light. They also try to find nesting burrows which are as dark as possible so that the birds cannot be seen.

The problem is that if you take a look around Malta, dark places are getting increasingly hard to find. We are illuminated from every angle by a multitude of globe lights, hotel lights, security and building lights. Incredibly, this is even blotting out the stars: very few constellations can now be seen from Malta. And the problem is getting worse. This means that the birds are being pushed out of some of their breeding colonies.

Light pollution is also an issue for shearwaters because when the young birds leave the nest, bright lights dazzle them and draw them to land, where they collide with buildings, instead of flying out to sea for fishing. The BirdLife office receives several injured shearwaters every year. The picture at right shows one of these birds being released.

To combat this problem, the Project has joined forces with the Light Pollution Awareness Group to work with hotel owners, local councils and other stakeholders to find simple, effective solutions to light pollution. New legislation and enforcement is urgently required for future developments and the Project will be working with the government and MEPA to ensure that this happens.



Overillumination. The lights along this promenade at Bugibba are typical of wasteful illumination systems.

photo Matthew Borg Cardona

But all of us can help make a difference. Simple steps such as turning off the lights you don't need, closing the curtains at night, using the right "cut-off" design lights outside and putting security lights on a motion sensor are very effective. Not only will you be helping to save a shearwater, you'll also reduce global warming and save on your energy bill. We're at the peak of the fledging season for young shearwaters right now as they leave the safety of the nest for the first time alone - so switch off and save a shearwater this year!

To find out more, read our light pollution report which you can download from [www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt/publications](http://www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt/publications)



Yelkouan Shearwater shortly before release.

photo Ian Balzan



Light pollution glows over Mellieha Bay, as seen from L-Ahrax.

photo Matthew Borg Cardona



## at the front line of enforcement

**Marija Schranz**  
Communications Coordinator

One of the biggest environmental challenges facing the Maltese Islands in the 21st century is that of abusive behaviour. How many times have we seen refrigerators and sofas dumped in the countryside even though a bulky-refuse service is provided free of charge to all and sundry? We regularly read articles about structures and dwellings built without permits. And of course, as a conservation organisation concerned with the protection of wild birds, illegal hunting and trapping is one of the main issues we deal with on a daily basis.

Naturally, BirdLife Malta is not in this fight alone: at the front line of enforcement in the field is the Administrative Law Enforcement Unit (ALE) within the Malta Police Force. A semi-specialised unit operating both on land and at sea, the ALE was set up in the early 1990s to, amongst other issues, investigate crimes related to the environment. It works with environment NGOs and collaborates with other entities such as the Lands Department, MEPA, the Veterinary Services and the Malta Maritime Authority.

Inspector Alexander Miruzzi has been with the ALE since September 2000 and is the longest gazetted officer to remain with the unit. As a result, he has seen the ALE grow to what it is today, with around 25 officers on its team, and he reposes this to be the most fulfilling part of his job. Inspector Miruzzi goes on to explain that, however, as pressures on the environment continue to grow, so too must the unit become more sophisticated and professional in meeting upcoming challenges. He outlines the field of



ALE officers with one of BirdLife Malta's Raptor Camp teams monitoring a migration hotspot.

photo Amy Bergman

information technology as being one deserving of more input, as well as that of continuing to build bridges with counterparts abroad.

The ALE has already left its mark at the Central European Police Academy where its contribution has grown in the last five years. Through the ALE, Malta delivers lectures on environmental crime to this Academy, especially on illegal hunting and trapping, and pollution at sea.

Inspector Miruzzi explains that the ALE has been instrumental in reducing illegal hunting and trapping, and its members have also trained various officers at district level, who are therefore themselves also directly engaged in combating wildlife crimes.

His final appeal is that police work is successful only if people want it to be successful. People should be sensitive to what is occurring around them and report any crime they observe directly to the police.

For information on how to report illegal hunting and trapping activity to the ALE, please visit:  
[http://www.birdlifemalta.org/campaigns\\_hunting\\_and\\_trapping/actionyoucantake](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/campaigns_hunting_and_trapping/actionyoucantake)



Representatives of the Calderdale Committee presenting optics to the ALE. Insp. Miruzzi is at centre with Supt. Ray Zammit, with Committee Chairperson Nick Carter first from left.

photo Tolga Temuge

## uk birding group makes donation to ale

Members of the Calderdale Bird Conservation Committee, who were here in Malta to join BirdLife Malta's Spring Watch Camp, presented the ALE with a donation of optical equipment to help the unit with its work in the field. This donation will surely go a long way to ensure a more complete monitoring of our countryside and will help to further clamp down on illegal hunting and trapping activity. The binoculars were also presented to Police Commissioner John Rizzo.



A large flock of shearwaters is seen over a vast expanse of blue ocean. Many birds are in flight, with their wings spread, while others are swimming on the water's surface. The scene is captured from a low angle, emphasizing the scale of the flock.

You **will** love it!

Join us on board.  
Share the shearwater experience.

More on page 3