

# Bird's Eye View



*The Magazine of the Malta Ornithological Society*

*Spring 1994*



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Postal address  
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BirdLife Malta  
57/28 Marina Court, Abate Rigord Street,  
Ta'Xbiex MSD12 Malta Tel:347646 Fax:343239  
E-mail blm@orbit.net.mt

MOS Nature Shop  
65 St Lucia Str  
Valletta VLT 09  
Tel (356) 230684/250229  
Fax (356) 225665

## Bird's Eye View

Issue No 16  
Spring 1994

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### Editorial Board

Editor: Joe Sultana  
Members: Peter P Camilleri  
Desirée Falzon  
Victor Falzon

Production: Editorial Board  
Typesetting/Layout: Victor Falzon  
Acknowledgements: Norman Chetcuti  
Printing: Poullon's Print Shop

BirdLife Malta  
57/28 Marina Court, Abate Rigord Street,  
Ta'Xbiex MSD12 Malta Tel:347646 Fax:343239  
E-mail blm@orbit.net.mt



MOS is the Malta partner of BirdLife International

Front cover  
Male whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra* -  
Buċaqq tas-Silla), a common spring  
migrant of open country.  
Photo: Oliver Cardona



## Comment

After years of protests, sweat and talk, the new bird protection laws are now in force.

These laws have provided police with a useful tool with which to stop the illegal destruction of our birdlife. The enforcement of these laws depends entirely on them.

The new laws bring Malta closer to laws in many European countries, but are still not acceptable to the EC of which Malta is trying to become a member. It is expected that these laws be amended in the near future, namely to abolish hunting in spring and all forms of trapping.

Membership in the Community is not the only reason why the laws had to be changed. Malta's reputation was - and still is - at stake. Politicians and conservationists throughout the world continually point accusing fingers at Malta's bird conservation policy. They, together with a fast-growing number of concerned Maltese, will now be watching closely in order to determine whether the Maltese government's intentions are genuine or just an appeasement exercise.

The government's credibility will be measured by its willingness and ability to enforce the law it has itself enacted.

To effectively enforce the law, government must also produce a strategy for environmental protection. This strategy should identify the main environmental problems and set down plans for tackling them. Amongst other features, bird conservation should be a priority issue. MOS will be closely following every stage of the development and application of this strategy.

Political parties are nowadays trying to promote a green image for themselves. There seems however to be a great difference between what is said and what is actually carried out.

Over the years MOS struggled to achieve what is now law. MOS will now work to ensure that Malta's decision makers convert their words and promises into action.

Paul Portelli  
MOS Director

## Mute swan ... muted!



Photos Paul Portelli

An immature mute swan became superstar overnight when it settled in Spinola Bay late in December. The rare bird drew crowds of admirers, and was given good coverage on all the media. The swan's warm reception turned into an angry public outcry the following day when the bird was shot.

All countries have a moral obligation to safeguard the wildlife that occurs on their land. Malta is one of these countries. It is entrusted with affording rest and safe passage to birds migrating over its territory. This sacred duty is daily disregarded as birds continue to rain down from the sky as lifeless lumps. Which is why MOS untiringly insists that...

# This killing...



The dark speck in the bright sunny sky grows bigger as it approaches. The tired honey buzzard heads for the wooded slopes of Buskett, a welcome haven after a hundred kilometres of featureless and inhospitable sea. It skims the treeline, looking for a suitable pine.

The bird half folds its broad wings and rapidly loses height.

A barrage of gunshots shatters the silence, the scene and the bird. Hit squarely in the breast, the bird heaves and topples from the sky. It pelts down through the foliage, and comes to rest heavily on a stone.

The bird half spreads its broad wings and rapidly loses ... life.



Along the valley bed at Imgiebah the insects congregate around the fast disappearing pools of rainwater. Like miniature divebombers, the swallows and martins swoop in for the kill. And true enough they get killed! Are clay pigeons so expensive these days?



Paul Portelli /by courtesy of The Times

It was long before dawn when they started their journey from the shores of Africa. They uttered their guttural calls all throughout the night, they needed to stay together, there was safety in numbers. They sighted land and exhausted, the small flock of night herons settled down in the carob trees lining Marsalforn valley. They rested during the day, waiting for the night, to be on the move again. Their destination: a wetland somewhere up in Europe.

A stone hurtles through the sheltering branches, startling the roosting birds. They spread their heavy wings and reluctantly take once more to the air, calling to regroup. Big, slow, noisy and out in the open in full daylight: easy leadshot fodder.

A series of thundering gunshots abridges what would have been a long and fruitful life. They fall like dusty grey ragdolls, their glazing eyes no longer the sole spot of red on their still bodies.

# ... MUST stop!



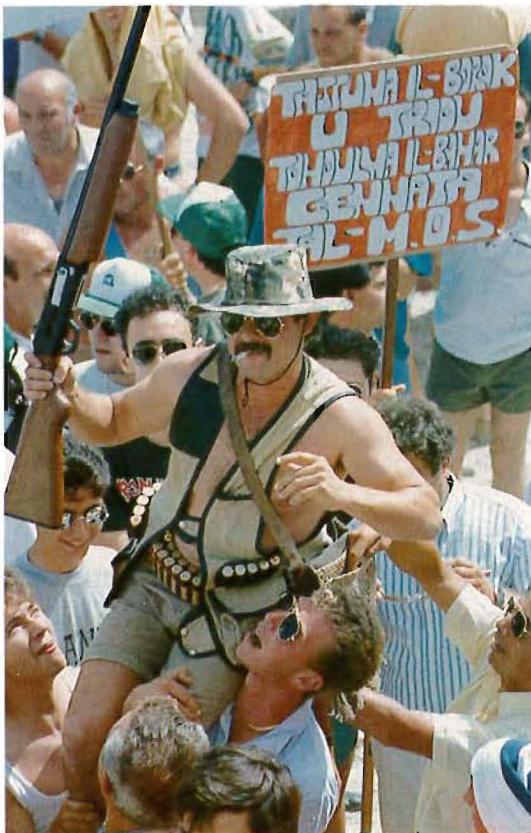
I & Sulana

These shocking episodes are not at all rare incidents. Indeed, during spring and autumn migration, such feats of barbarism are the order of the day. For a nation which prides itself in being hospitable, denying birds a night's rest and safe passage across their land is an indelible blemish on their conscience, and fast becoming a source of shame and guilt. MOS urges the authorities to help put an end to this carnage by enforcing strictly the laws.



# Threats, insults and plenty of muscle !

For more than a decade MOS pressured government not only to enforce bird protection laws, but also to improve them. Years of continuous campaigning had their effect, and eventually the authorities made it known that better bird protection regulations were to be issued. MOS at once put forward a set of sensible proposals, requesting laws parallel to the EC Bird Directive. By contrast, the Shooters/Trappers' Association's half-hearted and disorganised effort called for regulations which were actually more lax than the existing ones! When the Secretariat for the Environment publicised its first draft of the regulations, all hell was let loose...



Despite the fact that the draft fell short of what MOS was requesting, the shooters felt the axe menacing the very existence of their beloved sport/hobby/tradition/heritage/instinct/passion/food for thought/human right/raison d'être/way of life!

On May 30 they held their first public protest. They went to Rabat in cars, trucks, buses and jeeps. Several actually built carnival-like floats for the occasion, and some even rode in a speedboat carried on a trailer. They badly wanted to impress the authorities and the public with their numeral strength, and to press home their message that "hunting is here to stay" and that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush". They blew their horns, let off fireworks and waved a thousand and one banners. Some carried stuffed birds, others replicas of shotguns.

MOS placed first in the protesters' hitlist, followed by the Environment Secretariat and interfering foreigners. The mob marched to the tune of band instruments, hurling threats and insults. "MOS R.I.P." was paraded on a large black coffin. "HUNTERS SHOOT WHILE MOS DESPAIR", "READY FOR WAR, LEAVE US IN PEACE" and "DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT RUN BY MOS" were among several slogans. Some were aimed at Government: "ELECTIONS WILL COME", "NO HUNTING NO VOTE" etc.

The following day members of a political party *Alternativa Demokratika* were pelted with eggs as they collected signatures calling for a referendum on hunting.



*Photos on these pages by courtesy of The Times*

On the same day, three MOS members birdwatching at Buskett were shot at.

More protest marches by shooters and trappers were organised in the following months. During one demonstration in Valletta, the police had to intervene to stop hunters from "visiting" MOS offices.

During another meeting, in Gozo, the president of the Shooters/Trappers' Association got so carried away that he declared that shooters may even form a separate political party to look after the interests of their sport. He also pledged support for the party which sympathised with shooters. Officials of the Environment Department were named at one meeting and their home addresses and telephone numbers circulated. This malicious action was followed by anonymous letters and obscene phonecalls. The officials' homes had to be given police protection.

The Association's latest gaffe was its call to boycott the local council elections in protest against the new hunting regulations. They called for the resignation of the Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment and all his staff!

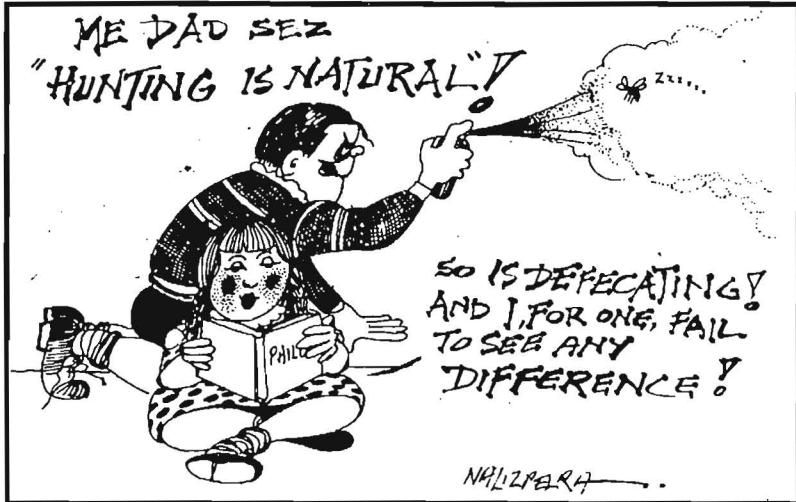
Vindictive acts have not been lacking, either: a large board at Ghadira nature reserve and several environmental signposts were torn down or "overprinted" with paint and colourful language! Used engine oil was dumped in the water at the new nature reserve at Is-Simar.

However might is not right. The shooters' show of force has highlighted their arrogance, and their actions have served to further tarnish their image. Despite months of bluster and machismo, not only were the new regulations published, but the Bern Convention was signed to boot!

## They poke fun at MOS...



But...



The Sunday Times 6/6/1993

The hunting issue is frequently in the papers. These pages show that hunters and their ridiculous arguments are not restricted to letters of disgust or MOS press releases, but are fast becoming a caricaturist's delight.

...it's not hard to guess who the laughing stock really is!

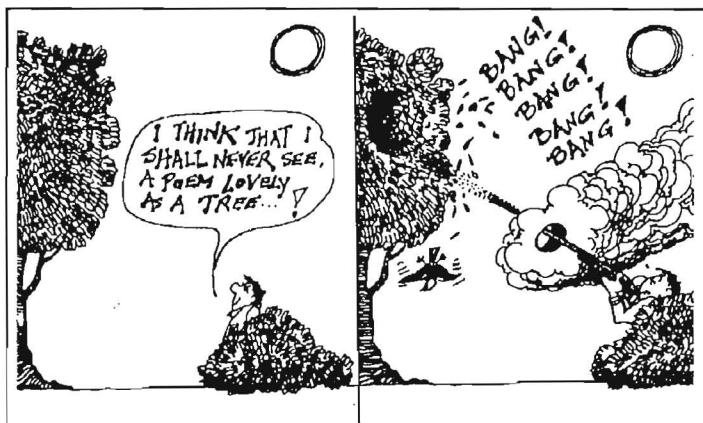


The Sunday Times 16/6/1992

Following a visit by the Red Arrows

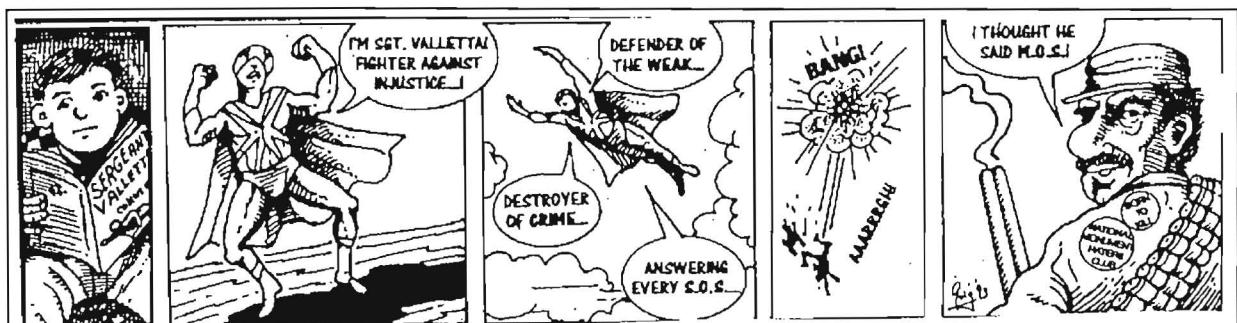


Translation:  
Better a bird in the hand, Stan... than a hundred floaters!



The Times 25/6/1993

With apologies to Joyce Kilmer and all true conservationists



The Sunday Times 20/6/1993



Some "sportsmen" threaten archaeological terrorism.  
Graffiti reads: *My hobby or I'll blow the place up.*

The Sunday Times 22/9/1991

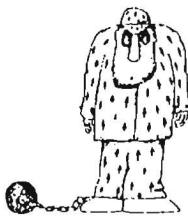


The Sunday Times 25/10/1992

The two main political parties, represented above by their leaders, are frequently reminded of the shooters' voting lobby.

#### ISLANDERS' CARNIVAL ATTIRE SUGGESTIONS:

1. ESCAPED CONVICT



2. "CONSERVATIONIST"

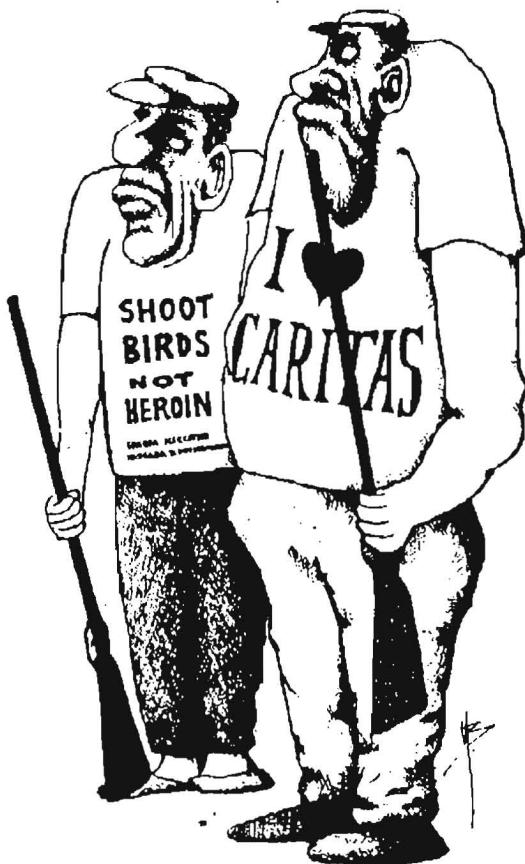


3. MUTE SWAN



...FORGET IT  
—TOO DANGEROUS

The Sunday Times 12/2/1993



The Sunday Times 24/3/1993

CIVILISATION CATCHING UP  
WITH YOU TOO!  
...WHATEVER NEXT?!



The Sunday Times 7/11/1993

FINE MESS  
YOU GOT US INTO,  
DAISY!!



The Sunday Times 27/6/1993

The Sunday Times 14/6/1992

# Clipping the bird killers' wings!

H E Axell



The moorhen has been removed from the game list

When the 1980 bird protection regulations were issued, they were hailed as a milestone in local bird protection history. But, important though they were, the 1980 regulations were riddled with loopholes through which many a guilty poacher escaped. Several points were also far from adequate. The close season was ridiculously short, and a number of bird species were left outside the protected fold. The new laws that came in force on January 1, 1994 aim to rectify most of these shortcomings.

Trapping in spring has been banned. In fact the trapping season has been shortened to five months (September 1 to January 31). On the trapping list there are now seven finch species, as well as turtle dove and quail, all of which can only be caught using traditional clapnets. All other forms of trapping have now been banned.

Shooting has also been restricted to the same five months, with thirty species of birds considered legal quarry. The list includes woodcock, snipe, golden plover and the thrushes, but now excludes all herons and egrets, curlews, nightjar and rock thrush. There is, however, a further hunting concession from April 10 to May 20, during which period bird shooters are allowed to kill turtle dove and quail. This concession is the main weakness in the whole of the new regulations, and the one with which MOS most strongly disagrees.

Shooting from seacraft is now only permitted in November and December. Only duck species can be shot at from such craft.

Four new bird sanctuaries, namely Għirgenti, Wied Ġħollieqa, Dwejra (Gozo) and Għammar hill (Gozo) bring the list of protected sites up to twenty two.

Joe Sultana



Little Egret - all herons and egrets are now protected

Over the years MOS has learnt through bitter experience that the enaction of laws and their enforcement are two different things altogether. No excuses remain: all loopholes have now been plugged by the new regulations. Sparing the lives of thousands of birds is now the sole responsibility of the law keepers: the police force. With this, MOS embarks on the major task of seeing that the job is done to the full.



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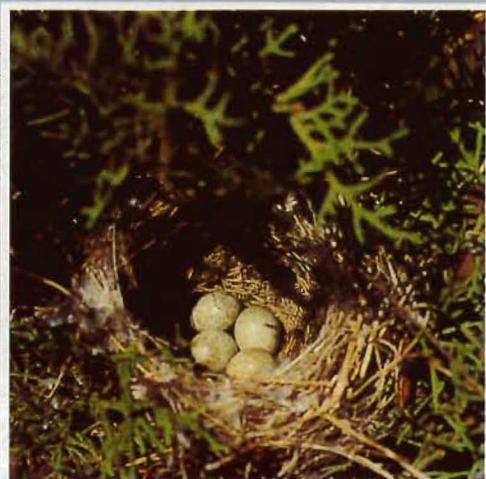
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# Are we losing this bird?



The eggs are greenish white, with dark speckles frequently forming a zone round the thicker end  
(Photo Raymond Galea)

## Focus on the spectacled warbler



The young in the nest are well camouflaged (Photo Raymond Galea)

When in 1916 Giuseppe Despott published his work on the breeding birds of Malta in *Zoologist*, his statement on the spectacled warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata*) was that "of all our warblers this is certainly the most common, being found also all year round; as a breeder it must be considered very common".

Today the contrary is true. Its numbers have declined drastically in the past twenty years. Man's increasing intrusions in the countryside have taken their toll on this shy bird. Possibly some hard winters have aggravated the situation. Nowadays the warbler's abrupt, churring call is any birdwatcher's thrill. Its territory could be any secluded area of sparsely vegetated, open countryside. Ta' Qali and Wied il-Qlejgħa used to be two of this bird's strongholds: today they barely support a single pair. Breeding used to be quite common, even in the low vegetation along verges of country roads. But the tremendous increase in motor vehicles and machinery using these roads and lanes has pushed the spectacled warbler to remoter areas.

Known locally as "Bufula Hamra", the spectacled warbler is like a small version of the whitethroat, just 12.5cm in length. The male has a blackish face on a rich grey head, a pinkish throat and breast, red-chestnut wings and white outer tail feathers. The female is slightly duller with the grey areas a suffused brown.

Nest building starts between mid-February and mid-March, as a rule no higher than 30cm from the ground. The nest is deeply cup-shaped, in which three to five eggs are laid. Incubation takes about twelve days and the young, which are fed by both parents, fledge after ten to twelve days.

Joe Sultana



A male spectacled warbler removing faecal sac from the nest. He helps in feeding and in house keeping (Photo Joe Sultana)



Female spectacled warbler at the nest, feeding the brood. (Photo Joe Sultana)

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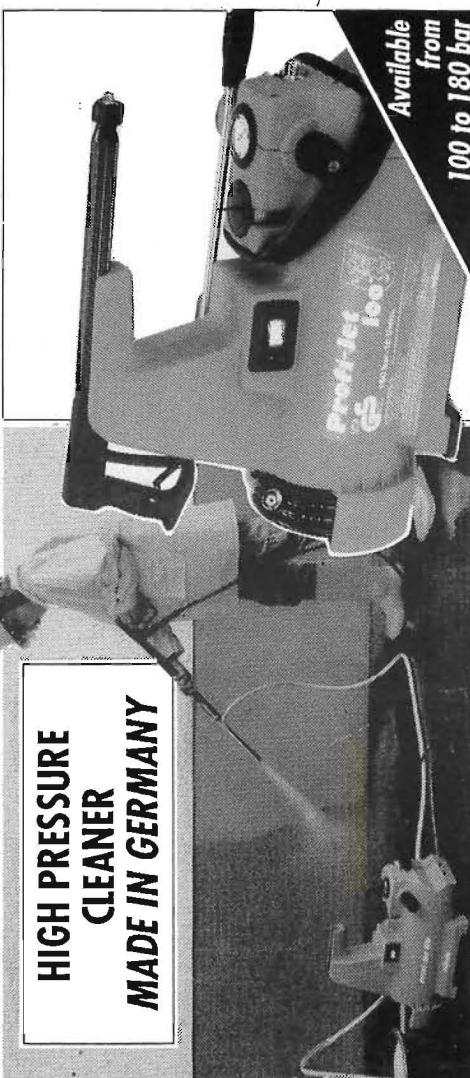


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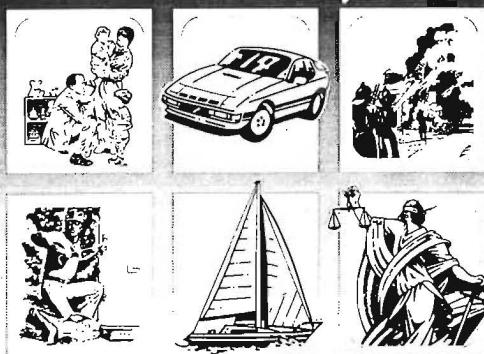


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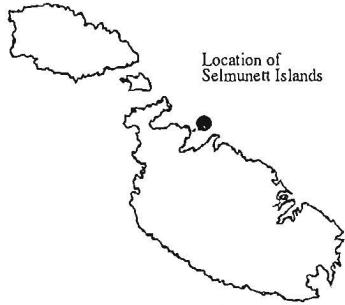


Aerial view of Selmunett Islets. Note fish farming enclosures in foreground.

## The Environment Protection Act in action

**Two new Legal Notices empowered by the Environment Protection Act have appeared in the Government Gazette in spring 1993 declaring a new nature reserve as well as giving legal protection to several species of flora and fauna.**

Photos Joe Sultana



### Selmunett Islands

Legal Notice 25 of 1993 designates Selmunett Islands, popularly known as St.Paul's Islands, as a nature reserve with total protection of all flora and fauna species present on them. Access to the islands is now only permitted between sunrise and sunset and then only for swimming, berthing of seacraft and walking along designated footpaths. All other activity, such as hunting and trapping, camping and barbecues, are prohibited.

Apart from their historical value, Selmunett Islands are of natural scientific importance. For instance, the lizard present there is the same species as that which occurs on the mainland, but it is ascribed a separate race (*Podarcis filfolensis kieselbachi*) and is restricted to the two rocks. Selmunett Islands are also the only place where a plant known as the Cretan pellitory occurs in the Maltese Islands. The site also supports a thriving population of wild rabbit.

In the past the Islands were known as Ta' Barba Marku, as they had been donated to a certain Marco di Maria by Grand Master La Cassière in 1576. Later the ownership returned to the Order of St John. In recent years the Islands were held by the Baron of Manduca on a thirty-year emphytheusis, which expired in 1980.

### Protected species

With the publication of Legal Notice 49 of 1993, a small number of plant species and several animal species were afforded legal protection. The flora species include the sandarac gum tree, the Malta "fungus", the Maltese rock-centaury and the Maltese everlasting, all of which are listed in the Red Data book as endemic or rare and endangered. All bats and shrews, the weasel and the Algerian hedgehog, as well as the painted frog and the freshwater crab are now legally protected.

MOS urges government to ensure that these new regulations be upheld by the Maltese public. This can only be brought about through environmental education coupled with a sound enforcement policy.



Above: grey long-eared bat, one of several bat species occurring in Malta, all of which are now protected. Below: a splendid male specimen of the Selmunett Islands race of Maltese wall lizard.





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# Birding Round Up 1993

A quick look at migration highlights

Caldon Mercieca

Cuckoo  
first breeding record



Migratory species start reaching Malta's shores from the end of February. The first 1993 arrivals - green sandpiper, ruff, red-throated pipit and snipe - were present at both Is-Simar and Ghadira nature reserves. Hoopoe and wheatear appeared in quite good numbers, with regular sightings of black-eared wheatear. Several marsh harriers and kestrels, a few Montagu's harriers and black kites, and single ospreys appeared in March and April.

Passerine species varied in numbers. Willow warbler was less numerous compared to previous years. The same

cannot be said for subalpine warbler, especially after an influx on April 9 which lasted a couple of days.

Duck migration left much to be desired, with the exception of two good passage days. Apart from garganey, none of the other duck species showed up as in previous years. Curlew was regular, with several flocks (sometimes 70+ strong) sighted from seawatch areas. Black-winged stilt also showed an increase, with up to twelve birds sighted at Is-Simar and Ghadira. Little egret, night heron, cuckoo and scops owl appeared in normal numbers.

Passerine birds arriving in the second half of the migration period were very numerous and large numbers took advantage of the summer-like weather which prevailed in May. Swallow, sand and house martin, spotted flycatcher and icterine, garden and wood warblers were all plentiful. Moderate numbers of pied flycatcher, nightingale, whinchat and whitethroat

were also observed. Redstart numbers were however not so exceptional.

The much-awaited turtle dove passage was quite low, nothing like the "good old days". Notable sightings in May included regular observations of honey buzzard and red-footed falcon, and a few flocks of the colourful bee-eater flying low on the sun-parched fields.

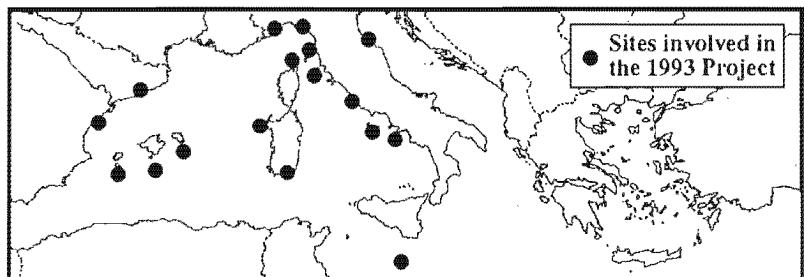
Scarce visitors were not lacking. Glossy ibis, a merlin, a rufous bushchat and the hard-to-tell semi-collared flycatcher were observed during April, while whiskered and white-winged black terns in summer plumage appeared in May. Two strikingly beautiful adult male red-backed shrikes were also seen.

One cannot fail to note the unfortunate decrease in numbers of some species which were commoner in former years. Turtle dove is decreasing every year. The same can be said for the quail and the purple heron, while species such as the corncrake have become virtually non-existent.

On the other hand, first breeding reports of tawny pipit and cuckoo in Malta have been quite encouraging this spring. A pair of woodchat shrike and a few spotted flycatchers were also successful in rearing young.

The autumn migration was heralded by a rare bird - a greater sandplover visited Ghadira in July. From then on, wader numbers were significant and flocks of wood sandpiper visited regularly Is-Simar. The raptors' passage reached its climax in mid-September when on one day more than 400 honey buzzards were counted. An Egyptian vulture and a lesser spotted eagle also paid us a visit later in the month.

The commoner winter visitors, namely white and grey wagtail, robin, black redstart and starling began arriving in October. Song thrush and other passerines appeared in large numbers at the end of the month. Some crane, lapwing and golden plover, as well as duck species made an appearance in the following weeks. Several sightings of flamingo were recorded in November. The highlights for December were several mute swans and a couple of greylag geese, seen early in the month.



## Mediterranean Islands' Project

The Mediterranean Islands Project has now become a yearly event for the MOS Ringing Scheme. The project was begun in 1988 by the Istituto Nazionale per la Fauna Selvatica of Italy. This annual study aims to monitor spring migration in the central and western Mediterranean.

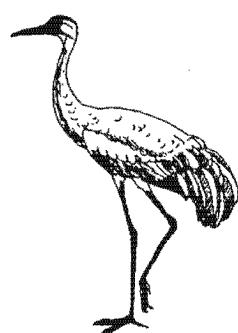
MOS joined the project in 1990, using Ghadira nature reserve as Malta's site. The following year the island of Kemmuna was used, and has since remained the regular study site.

1993 saw the highest number of study sites involved in the project. This included twelve islands and five coastal sites used (see map), with more than 300 ringers, trainees and helpers. The project spanned from mid-April to mid-May during which 52,701 birds of 130 species were ringed - 45,992 (119 species) on the islands and 6709 (86 species) at the coastal stations.

Nearly 200,000 birds have been ringed since the study began. As all birds are measured and weighed before release, this project is providing the largest existing mass of spring migration data in the Mediterranean for many species.

The Kemmuna station was manned daily from dawn to dusk for a whole month. Sixteen ringers, trainees and helpers took part and c2000 birds of 34 species were examined and ringed. Topping the list in number was the garden warbler, followed by the whitethroat. Other species studied in good numbers were icterine warbler, pied flycatcher and whinchat. Turtle dove, scops owl and nightjar also figured in the list.

Raymond Galea  
Project Co-ordinator - Malta



# Birds of a Closed Sea

Important seabird areas of the Mediterranean region

**S**eabird sites in the Mediterranean can be grouped into two habitat categories:

- a) coastal wetlands
- b) rocky coasts and islands

**Coastal wetlands** are generally known to have some connection or exchange with the sea. They include estuarine and delta systems, saltmarshes, intertidal mudflats, shallow water coastlines, coastal lagoons and commercial salinas and saltpans.

Due to the low tidal range of the Mediterranean Sea and the scarcity of major water courses entering it along the southern shore, coastal wetlands in the Mediterranean are few compared to those along the Atlantic seaboard.

The most notable sites which show a diversity of coastal wetland types include the delta regions of the Ebro (Spain), Rhône (France), Po (Italy), Evros/Meric (Greece/Turkey) and Göksu (Turkey), the Lagunadi Venezia in Italy, Buharet el Manzala in the Nile Delta, Sabkhet el Bardawil in northern Sinai and the Gulf of Gabes along the Tunisian coast.

Over the years many Mediterranean wetlands have undergone some

form of transformation and many are still threatened by further development: saltmarsh reclamation, urbanisation, industrial development, drainage, irrigation, fish-farming, pollution, upstream damming and recreational activity such as hunting and tourism. These and the lack of proper management are just some of the dangers which threaten the future existence of coastal wetlands.

These wetlands are important breeding, feeding, passage and wintering areas for a number of gull and tern species. More than 50% support important seabird populations.

The raised, drier areas safe from flooding represent the major breeding areas in coastal wetlands. Sandy and shingle beaches, dunes and small low-lying, sparsely vegetated islands are important nesting areas for several gull species, particularly yellow-legged gull, and for many tern species such as gull-billed, sandwich, common and little tern.

The Ebro, the Rhône and the Scanni del Delta del Po are important breeding sites for terns. The Nile Delta lakes alone constitute the most important breeding sites for little tern and slender-billed gull in the Mediterranean. Colonies of Mediterranean gull, which

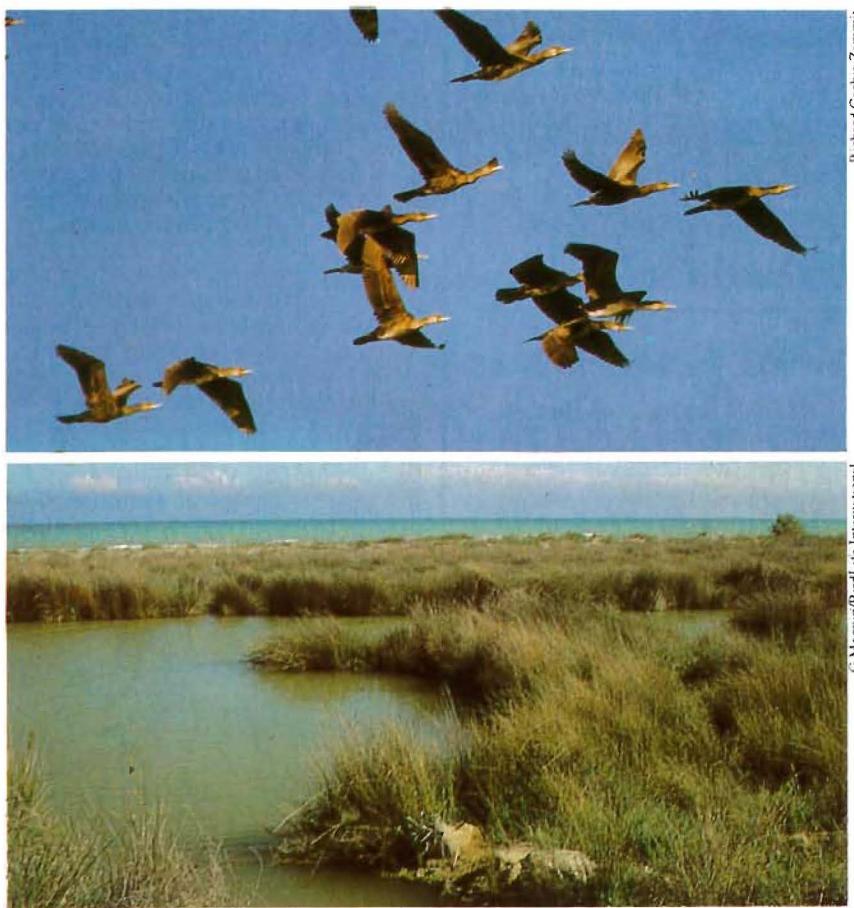
prefers the margins and islands of shallow saline lagoons, or dykes in commercial salinas, also occur in the Mediterranean.

**Rocky coasts and islands** in the Mediterranean are notable for their breeding populations of pelagic seabirds. Rocky coasts refer primarily to coastlines with cliffs and low rocky coastlines. Islands may have rocky as well as sandy shorelines and are frequently covered with low vegetation.

Rocky coasts and islands provide important breeding sites for a number of highly specialised seabird species. The cliff-nesting shag prefers sheltered, shady overhung ledges, fissures and caves. Mediterranean shearwater, Cory's shearwater and storm petrel breed in burrows on turf-topped cliffs and islands, under boulders and in rock crevices and scree. Audouin's gull nests on low-lying, flat rocky islands. Terns are also known to nest on flat areas of rocky and sandy islands.

Several vulnerable seabird species have a very restricted distribution. Thus their breeding sites must be classified as Important Mediterranean Seabird Sites. The Audouin's gull, endemic to the Mediterranean, is globally endangered. So too are the endemic populations of the two subspecies of Mediterranean shearwater (*velkouan* and *mauretanicus*), Cory's shearwater, storm petrel and shag (subspecies *desmarestii*). All are considered endangered and vulnerable throughout the Mediterranean region.

Among the important breeding sites for the above mentioned species are the Islas Columbretas, a small archipelago 70km east of the Castellón coast of Spain; the Islas Chafarinas, three small islands near the Moroccan Mediterranean coastline; La Mola de Formentera with high, coastal limestone cliffs in the Balearic Islands; the Golfo di Orosei and its seacliffs in Sardegna; the sheer limestone seacliffs at Ta' Cenc in Gozo (Malta); Filfla, a limestone islet off the southern coast of Malta; and the islands of Zembra and Zembretta in the Gulf of Tunis.

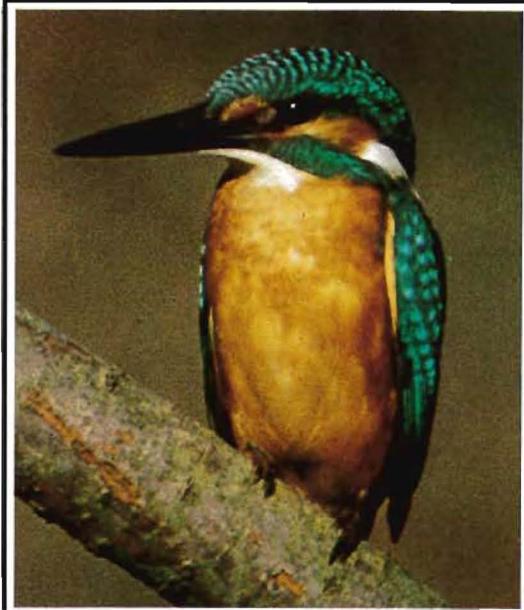


Cukurova Delta in Turkey (above) and cormorants (top)

## MOS Publication

Mediterranean seabird populations face many threats, which include increasing tourism development, pollution and persecution from hunters and fishermen. These threats and others are highlighted in the latest MOS publication - *Important Seabird Sites in the Mediterranean* by Joe Sultana. The book identifies 139 important seabird areas covering a total of more than 1.2 million hectares. The publication, sponsored by Amoco Mediterranean Petroleum Company (AMPC), carries sixteen pages of colour photographs of various sites and seabirds, as well as several line drawings by Victor Falzon.

The book may be ordered from MOS



## Is-Simar - shaping up!

*Nature has taken up the challenge at Is-Simar (below), and is winning in great shape. No one imagined that the scars inflicted by the heavy machinery would heal in such a short time. It was only two summers ago that the machinery rolled into the area to recreate and revitalise the wetland. With more than a little help from MOS, nature has now taken over. Birds such as kingfisher (left) already settle in the little reserve, but poachers still rush in with their guns when no one is around, and massacre anything that flies. It is a hurdle of ignorance and warped attitude, the hardest kind to overcome. But MOS strategy and perseverance will win the day.*

Joe Sultana



### Round Ringing

little stint ringed at Ghadira in August 1992 turned up in Senegal three months later, while a chiffchaff that wintered at Lunzjata in November 1992 was in Sardegna the following month. Another chiffchaff wintering at Buskett was reported by a ringer in Slovenia in April 1993. A chaffinch ringed three years ago at Lunzjata proved that in Italy too, as in Malta, shooters kill anything that flies... the bird fell target to an Italian shooter early in January 1993. A penduline tit ringed at Lunzjata in 1991 was controlled (re-trapped) by a ringer in early October 1992.

MOS ringers also controlled three foreign-ringed birds in April: two sand martins from Germany and Hungary, and a swallow from Slovenia.

The monitoring of the yellow-legged gull colony on Filfla was resumed, with 70 young birds marked.



This annual marking of the offspring is already shedding some light on their pattern of dispersal. Two birds moved to southern Italy soon after fledging, and another was found in Libya in its first winter.

Charles Gauci  
Ringing Secretary

After a quiet start to 1993 MOS ringers were kept very busy throughout spring migration, and by the end of June over 10,000 birds were examined and ringed.

One of the satisfactions of a ringer is to follow, even if in part, the life history of an individual bird that he has handled and ringed. This happens every time a ringed bird is recovered. Six such recoveries were notified to the MOS ringing scheme in the past year. A white wagtail which roosted at Lunzjata in November 1992 was found wintering in early 1993 in Tunisia. A

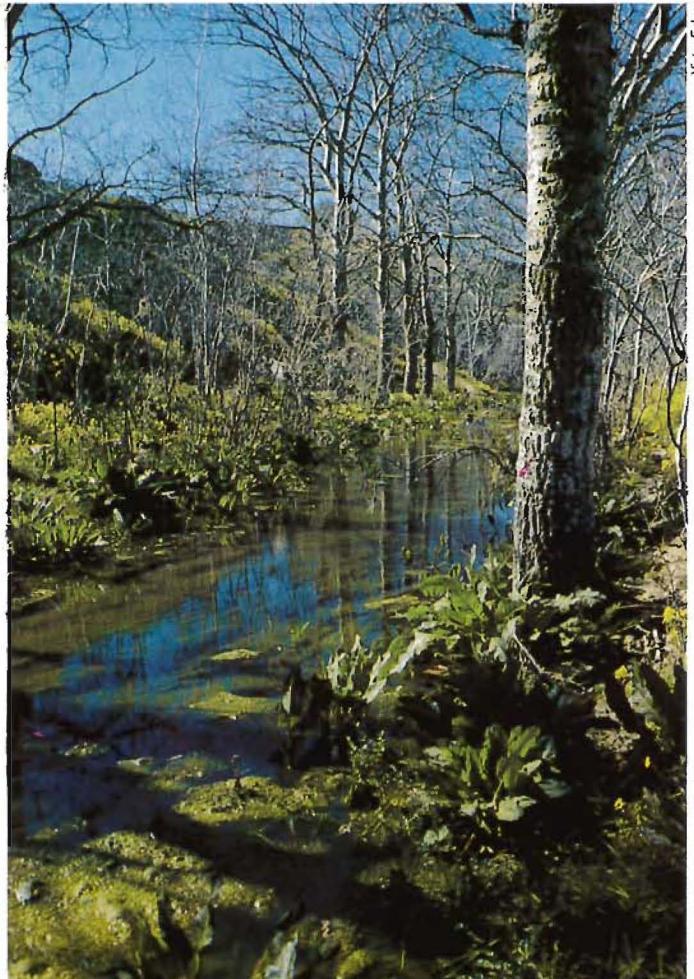
# Widien

*Despite their small size, the Maltese Islands have a varied topography characterised by hills and valleys. The valleys, known locally as widien, lend much to the charm of the Maltese countryside. This charm would increase manifold if we took proper care of them.*

Not all valleys are of the same type. They vary according to type of bedrock, depth and length. Some valleys are remnants of prehistoric rivers, others are geological faults. Valleys such as Wied Ghajn Riħana and Wied il-Qlejha (Chadwick Lakes) carry a temporary water course during the wet season; a few such as Mtaħleb, Baħrija and Wied il-Lunzjata (Gozo) retain a permanent flow even throughout the summer since they are fed by springs. Other valleys such as Wied Babu are permanently dry, carrying water only during torrential rains. In the past, the Maltese valleys must have carried much more water. Now that practically all springs have been completely harnessed, the valleys they fed have run dry. To aggravate matters, much water is pumped up from valley beds.

Some of the valley systems run for several kilometres, with numerous tributaries. The largest is the Wied il-Kbir system with several sources, such as at Wied l-Isqof/Wied Qirda, Wied il-Luq, Wied Inċita which, uniting as Wied is-Sewda and Wied il-Kbir eventually drain at Marsa. Up till the 1860s, the Marsa area was Malta's largest saline marshland. It was, however, drained, with a resultant loss of numerous plants and animals. Also extensive is the Wied il-Għasel system, with sources at Wied il-Busbież/Wied il-Qlejha, Wied Qannotta, and Wied il-Hżejjen/Wied Ghajn Riħana, which eventually converge onto Wied il-Għasel. This drains into Salini, again the site of a once extensive (and still respectable) saline marshland.

Valleys support very diverse communities of plants and animals.



Wied il-Qlejha supports a healthy stand of white poplars that grow along the valley bed. The water teems with aquatic organisms.

which has

Valley sides (where they are still intact) support a maquis vegetation which consists of an assortment of small trees and large shrubs with climbers and large herbs. Trees and shrubs include carob, lentisk, buckthorn, hawthorn etc., accompanied by woody climbers such as smilax, bramble and ivy. Typical large herbs are acanthus and arum. This type of vegetation may also occur in the bed of dry valleys. Valleys which support a water course have a variety of water plants and animals. Many of these valleys have dense (sometimes too dense) populations of the giant reed,

which is one of the best indicators of the presence of water. Anchored in the mud would be plants such as water crowfoot, which is a sort of aquatic buttercup, and water plantain with its beautiful leaves and profuse three-

## *"Maltese valleys are under continuous threat"*

petalled pink flowers; and the loosestrife with dense spikes of lilac flowers. There would also be a variety of rushes, sedges and grasses with their elegant flowering heads, as well as the southern reedmace, which often reaches four metres in height. This is one of the few water plants which is becoming more frequent. In some favoured valleys there are still remnants of the riverine woodland, with deciduous trees such as the white poplar, hoary elm, white willow and Mediterranean willow. Such "riverside" woodland must have been much more frequent in the not-too-distant past, but it has been cut down to clear the land for agriculture. In fact only a solitary specimen of white willow - a male tree - has survived, and a rather ailing and persecuted one at that. This has provided material for reintroduction into suitable habitats since cuttings usually root quite readily, and some of the new plants are doing fine. Valleys supplied by a permanent

spring are particularly interesting, and some of the plant and animal species inhabiting them are quite unique. Of particular interest in such localities is the ever-decreasing freshwater crab, which actually belongs to a race endemic to the Maltese Islands.

But the Maltese valleys are under continuous threat. Water drainage and spring harnessed have killed or severely depleted some of our "wet" valleys. Quarrying is another big problem. If one goes to Wied il-Għasel, one is confronted with the worst sort of quarrying, where lack of concern for the habitat has led to the valley side caving in. Wied Qirda (meaning Valley of Destruction), once so captivating, is now living up to its name. The beautiful trees including bay laurels and elms have been burnt, the valley sides and bed are a rubbish heap. What future can be expected for the rare wild tulip, whose presence in our islands is limited



Wied Babu is a valley hewn out by river water. Nowadays the bed is dry throughout the year, yet some sections of the valley are choked with maquis vegetation such as carob and lentisk.

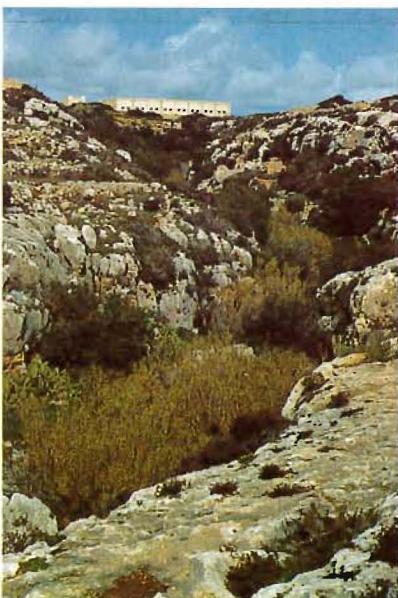
to this valley alone? Many of the dams constructed for water catchment have been vandalised.

Moreover, valleys have also come under attack from official sources. Way back in the colonial past, some genius decided to pass a major road down the very bed of one of the largest valleys, the Msida valley. What happens when it rains is general knowledge! Not all that long ago somebody equally brainy decided to give Maltese valleys a treat (or rather a threat) in the form of the Risq il-Widien (the Valleys' Good Luck) Project. This essentially consisted in bulldozing valley beds and piling up soil and rubble into earth dams at intervals. This resulted immediately in the collapse of rubble walls of adjoining fields - the binding power of the valley side plants having been removed, the dams were washed

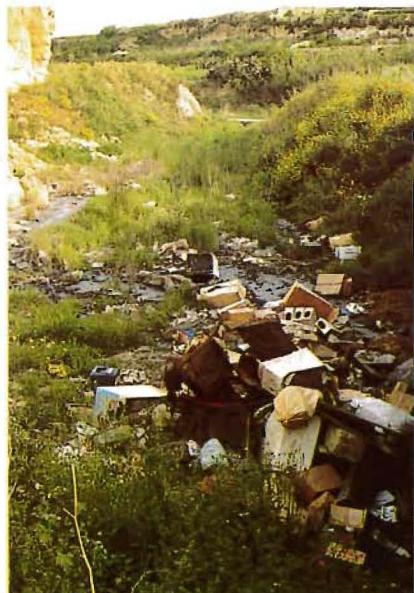
away by torrential rains and what vegetation regrew consisted almost entirely of invasive alien weeds instead of the original native and varied flora.

It is very important to rehabilitate our valleys. Such a task would require much effort and planning, and it may be more difficult to carry out in dry valleys than in those supporting a water course. However a good start, and one which requires more goodwill than effort, would be the cleaning up of our widien, and their protection from "development".

Edwin Lanfranco



Building encroaches Wied Znuber



Rubbish piling up at Wied Sara, Ghawdex.

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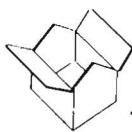
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