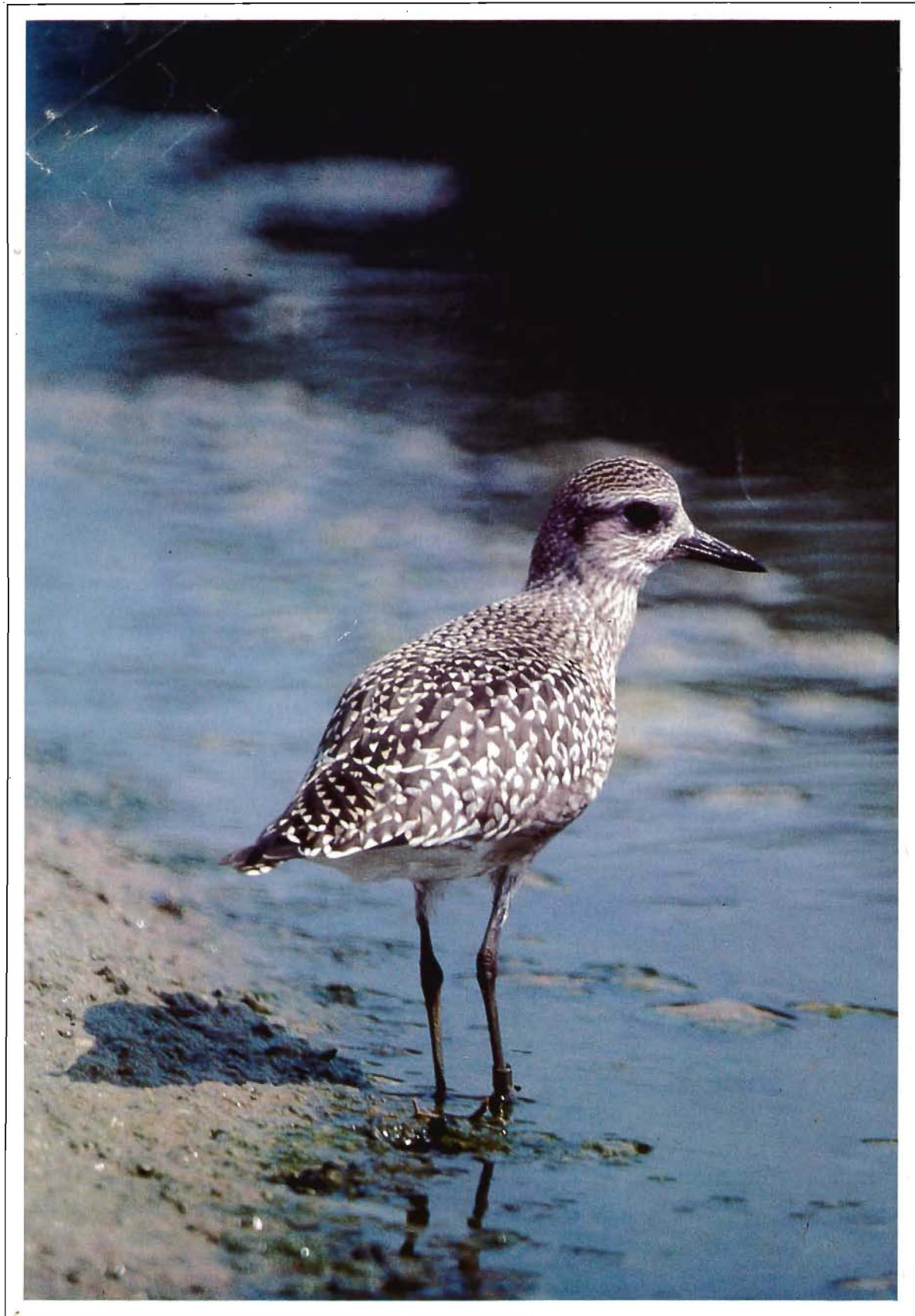


Bird's Eye View



The Magazine of the Malta Ornithological Society
AUTUMN 1991



Malta Ornithological Society

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The Malta Ornithological Society (MOS), founded in 1962, aims for the protection and study of birds and their natural environment. A major MOS policy is conservation through education which is executed mainly in schools and through its membership. The Society regularly publishes educational material as well as a scientific magazine *Il-Merill*. It organises various activities for its members and for the general public. MOS has been instrumental in setting up the Ghadira Nature Reserve which it runs in part. An active youth section forms part of the 2300-strong membership.

No. 14 Autumn 1991



EDITORIAL

Complaints have often reached my ears about the interference of foreigners on the problem of bird shooting and trapping in the Maltese Islands. Maltese compatriots have often had their feathers ruffled by foreign letters in the local press condemning the horrific mass slaughter of rare and beautiful songbirds. Indeed, the situation has worsened to the extent that potential tourists are cancelling their trips to Malta after hearing about the despicable sport that goes on here.

The accusation seems to be that MOS members are setting up these reports by feeding slanderous information to foreigners in order to put pressure on local authorities. The truth is otherwise: facts speak for themselves. Anyone taking a walk in the countryside can verify such reports with their own eyes. It doesn't take an expert to realise that every shot heard is aimed at a passing bird.

The May issue of the BBC Wildlife magazine contained a full-blown article on the atrocities which the author encountered on a visit to Malta. The article aptly described the bird situation as one in which "to have feathers and to be within firing range of Malta is almost certainly to be dead soon or in prison." With 12,600 licensed shooters present, it is hard to imagine that reports of bird slaughter are exaggerated.

As if giving the Maltese a bad name within their own country isn't enough, Maltese shooters have taken their dirty habits abroad (to Egypt, for instance). The consequences of such action was to procure for Malta labels such as the 'Black Hole', the 'macho country', 'the final resting place' and so on.

Contrary to general feeling, bird protectionists do not gloat over negative publicity for Malta. On the other hand, it is easy to sympathize with the tourist who returns home and disgustedly crumples up all the brochures that talk of the 'gentle, friendly people of sunny Malta'. After all, birds have no boundaries and migratory birds are not our property. Seen in this light, the shooter is actually laying claim on something that is not his but that belongs to the tourist and equally important, to all Maltese people.

Desirée Falzon



Front Cover

Grey plover, a scarce visitor to Ghadira
(photo Denis Cachia)

Back Cover

Top
General's Rock, off Dwejra in Gozo
(photo Victor Falzon)

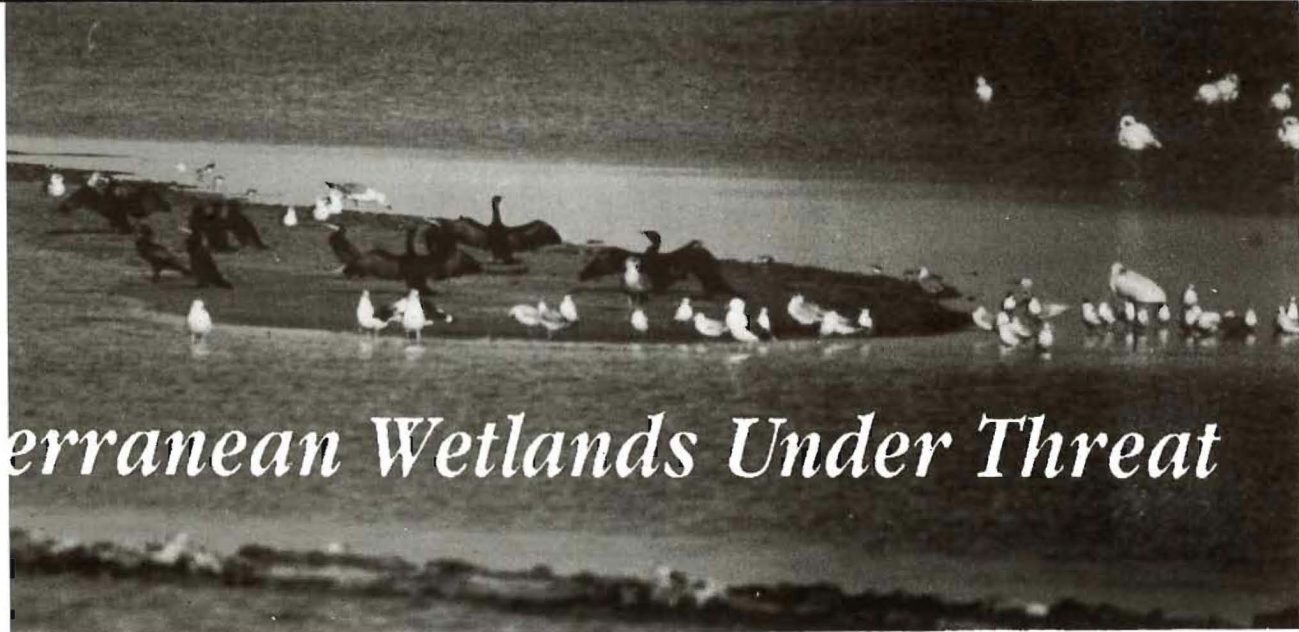
Bottom

left Maltese everlasting, an endemic plant now found only on the Rock and western cliffs of Gozo.

middle *Cynomorium coccineum*, a parasitic flowering plant formerly present on the mainland but now confined to the Rock.

right General's Rock lizard, an endemic subspecies of the Maltese wall lizard (photos Joe Sultana)

DO THE BIRDS A FAVOUR...
ENROL A NEW MEMBER



Mediterranean Wetlands Under Threat

Important wetland in Tunisia.

an essential part of any birds. A threat to habitat is immediately a threat to many species of birds.

near coasts and the environment was the third colloquy of a rope symposium held 90 in Spain.

ularly waterfowl, are just spectacular feature they are in fact a pre-form of these outstandingly important areas.

of Mediterranean wetlands creates rich niches for a large number of species, whose colonial behaviour are as varied as the food they thrive on. The wetlands, under constant close scrutiny by a multitude of waders of various sizes. The waders, rolled round the clock feeding herons and egrets. Cranes float lazily about in search of feeding. Flamingos, high-ranking specialized bird-world, constantly forage from the salty water. They come down, breaking the surface to snatch a big fish. They stretch or dive, adding a splash to the wetland site. They wade along the water's edge or chase insects, and birds forage for food or refuge in the reed-beds. On the shores of lakes and rivers, rails and cranes play

bird species and many sedentary and migratory,

wetlands are an essential part of life. A threat to one of the wetland habitats is immediately a threat to many individual species of birds.

There are over 100 such wetlands along Europe's Mediterranean coastal area and another string of wetlands, more widely scattered, along the 5,800 km long African-Mediterranean coastline.

While many long-distance migratory birds stop to feed and seek shelter in these areas, a large number of other species overwinter in these sites.

These precious Mediterranean wetlands are continuously threatened by man. Not one can be sacrificed. What would millions of European birds do without them?

Wetlands in Malta

Owing to small size (322 sq. km.), topography and extensive urbanisation resulting from a dense population level, wetlands in the Maltese Islands are at a premium. Presently the largest wetland area is the Għadira Nature Reserve, covering an area of about six hectares. Much smaller areas of saline marshland are found at Il-Magħluq (Marsaxlokk) and at Marsascala. These are not yet totally protected but are designated as future nature reserves. Other low-lying areas flood for short periods after heavy rains in autumn and winter. These include Is-Simar at St. Paul's Bay (designated as a future wetland reserve on the same lines as Għadira) and extensive areas of Burmarrad (formerly marshland but reclaimed for agriculture many years ago) and Marsa. In addition several water-

courses in valleys – now mostly dammed, the water being used for irrigation – are flooded in winter, a very few holding some water all the year round. These areas are however unprotected and suffer much disturbance from many quarters. Several small reservoirs mainly excavated in clay, as well as a few deep globigerina limestone quarries which hold some water for several months of the year, also exist. Although small, these form a chain of important wet havens in an otherwise dry countryside. It was in some of these areas, which were not accessible to birdshooters, that the moorhen started breeding in the past few years in Malta.

Charles Gauci
Joe Sultana



Little egret: typical of Mediterranean wetlands

Joe Sultana

Who will stop them BREAKING THE LAW?

During April and May our islands were host to thousands of spring migrants. MOS director Paul Portelli received countless calls related to reports of illegal shooting, trapping and stuffing of protected bird species. The most common – and frustrating – question tailing a report is a concerned *What will you do about it?* Although public response runs high on such incidents, there is still little MOS can do about them. With no legal power to deal with such incidents MOS can only go as far as to pass on each report to the Law Enforcement Section of Police. With police support limited to a very small section of the force, MOS officials are powerless to curb law infringement.

As illegal shooting and trapping in our islands become more widespread, law enforcers progressively loosen



Chris Gomersall / RSPB

their weak grip on the criminals of our countryside. A list of prosecutions (below) seems encouraging, but it only covers the tip of the iceberg.

Political intrigue and vested interest have always been crippling enemies of efficient law enforcement. One blatant example occurred at Marsascala in April when police inspector Jimmy Abela was threatened by trappers illegally using a mist net. RSPB photographer Chris Gomersall, present among the police, was forced to hand over his film to the trappers, whilst the nets – spanning over 100 metres of roadside – were left untouched.

The authorities, it seems, will not go beyond a commitment of isolated police raids. What is really needed is a group of specialised, well-equipped wardens who can consistently and fearlessly defend our wildlife in keeping with the established bird protection laws.

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A LIST OF PROSECUTIONS IN THE LAST 2 MONTHS OF 1990, ISSUED BY THE
ADMINISTRATIVE LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION OF POLICE

| NAME | RESIDENCE | CHARGE | PENALTY |
|---------------------|---------------|---|---|
| Charles BRIFFA | Valletta | Took birds at Manoel Island* | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Joseph CASSAR | Gżira | Took birds at Manoel Island* | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Julian MANICOLO | San Ġwann | Took birds at Manoel Island* | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Derek PRENTICE | Gżira | Took birds at Manoel Island* | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Andrew BARTOLO | Żurrieq | Mist net at Hal-Farruġ, Qormi | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Lawrence CARUANA | Għaxaq | Mist net at Has-Saptan, B'Bugja | Lm50, confiscation of nets and one year susp. of lic. |
| Anthony DESIRA | Għaxaq | Mist net at Has-Saptan | - ditto - |
| Salvu FALZON | Siġġiewi | Mist net at Girgenti, Rabat | Sec. 9 not to commit another offence for one year and confiscation of nets. |
| Saviour TABONE | Valletta | Took birds at Floriana* | Lm30 and confiscation |
| David DEBONO | M'Scala | Took birds w/o Licence | Lm25 and confiscation |
| John BORG | Cospicua | Mist Nets at Kalkara | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Augustine GRIMA | Mellieħa | Possession of protected birds and trapping at Għadira* | Still pending |
| Carmelo GALEA | Qormi | Mist net at Qormi | Reprimanded and admonished, and confiscation |
| Dominic BORG | Hamrun | Took birds at Portes des Bombes* | Lm20 and confiscation |
| George DEBONO | Wied il-Għajn | Took birds at Ix-Xagħra, Cospicua | Lm50 and confiscation |
| John Joseph BRINCAT | Cospicua | Took birds at Ix-Xagħra, Cospicua | Lm25 and confiscation |
| Jesmond LIA | Żejtun | Took birds at Ix-Xagħra, Cospicua | Lm50 and confiscation |
| Carmelo AGIUS | Rabat | Hunted at Buskett boundary* | Reprimanded and admonished |
| Carmelo CUSCHIERI | Paola | Possession of net-trap etc. | 15 days detention |
| Frank CALLEJA | Bingemma | Kept protected birds in captivity | Still pending |
| Carmelo GRIMA | Paola | Kept and offered for sale protected birds | Still pending |
| Joseph ELLUL | Tarxien | Took birds at Addolorata Cemetery | Still Pending |
| Raymond MIFSUD | Żebbuġ | Exposed for sale net-traps. | Still pending |
| Raymond MIFSUD | Mside | Took birds at Portes des Bombes* | Still pending |
| Carmelo NAUDI | Hamrun | Took birds at Portes des Bombes* | Lm25 and confiscation |
| Louis GALEA | Valletta | Took birds at Portes des Bombes* | Lm25 and confiscation |
| Alfred ABELA | Żebbuġ | Took birds at Marsa Sports Club* | Lm20 and confiscation |
| Bertu ELLUL | Żejtun | Took birds at Marsa Sports Club* | Still pending |

*Prohibited site.

N.B. Trapping with mist net is illegal

STOP PRESS

This section has been recently rendered ineffective with the transfer of Inspector Jimmy Abela, officer in charge.



MOS Director with police taking down an illegal vertical net.

Chris Gomersall / RSPB

DEAD END

to a spring journey

script and photos
Joe Sultana



It is late in April. Dawn is on the verge of revealing a splendid countryside washed with sparkling dew, splashed with a hundred flowering colours and dotted with deep green carob trees. A turtle dove's purring is carried on the morning air. Suddenly, a shattering shot echoes along the valley and it is silenced for good. A minute later more turtle doves, flying low across fields, skim the rubble walls to a continuous stream of gunshot. The scene could be anywhere in the Maltese countryside.

Turtle doves, which have arrived during the night, fly wildly about at dawn. Such a scene is accompanied by a chorus of shots which may last for an hour or two. Following this, a deafening silence. Large numbers of turtle doves will never reach their European breeding quarters. Their spring northward journey has met a dead end.

The same thing happens to many others which arrive during the day, making for land in small tight flocks, struggling against a headwind.

Like many other European species the turtle dove is essentially a migratory bird. Many thousands fly annually back and forth across the Mediterranean, which has always proved to be a death trap for this docile dove.

Its migration has been occurring since time immemorial. One reference goes back to Jeremiah's words in the Bible: 'and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming'. As with other species, this cinderella of the European pigeon family has suffered immensely along the years, most particularly along the shores of this inland sea.

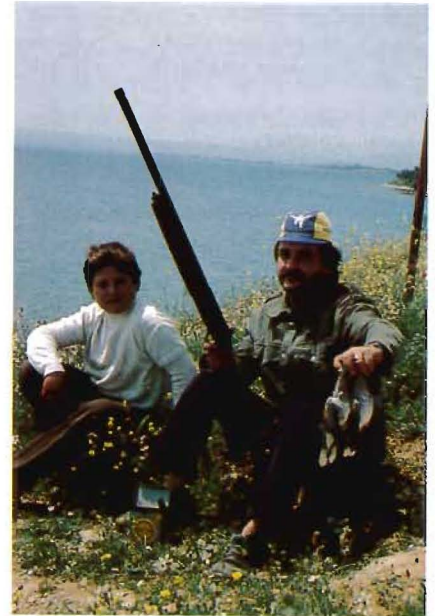
In former years migrant birds were an important source of food in the Mediterranean and for many years there was large scale killing and trapping. In Malta, where the turtle dove is regarded as the main game bird, large scale killing still takes place during the spring migration.

In recent years we have witnessed a greater affluence, allowing birdshooters more time and more efficient guns to indulge in excessive shooting. This is now a major threat to migrants in the Mediterranean, not least to the turtle dove. The Maltese Islands now top the list of countries where shooting is particularly intensive.

In Malta alone, where there are over 12,000 licensed shooters, one can fairly estimate that during a poor migration season, at least 120,000 turtle doves are killed, given a low seasonal catch of 10 birds per shooter.



The decoy bird is harnessed with two straps of leather round the tarsi and onto a small round platform at the end of a stick. This jerks the bird up and down when the string attached to the device is pulled.



The bird shooter has been the main reason for the decline of the turtle dove.

During a good season the number of turtle doves killed could rise to a horrendous figure. In spring 1990, it has been estimated by birdshooters themselves that over 500,000 turtle doves were killed.

The ground attack on turtle doves is also carried out by trappers who use clap-nets positioned at traditional trapping sites. These sites are situated at vantage points on hills. Turtle dove trapping was more popular in former years but is gradually giving way to its new competitor; the shotgun, which requires less patience, skill or time.

The number of turtle doves bagged in the Mediterranean is much higher in Malta than anywhere else, when one considers the small size of the islands. One may cite two examples of areas where a concentration of spring turtle dove shooting used to take place. In the provinces of Cáceres and Badajoz in the western Spanish Extremadura, the largest estimate of turtle doves killed was 120,000. In the Gironde area, in the south west of France, the annual estimates vary from 30,000 (hunters' estimates) to 100,000 (according to conservationists) in one season.



The apparent fondness of the mouth to mouth feeding technique hides the fact that the bird is used the following morning to lure its wild congeners to the trapping site.



Trapping is carried out with clap-nets using hooded decoy birds.

The story is also quite different in another way. Since 1985, when several protests were held in the Gironde area against the illegal spring killing of turtle doves, the government has disallowed spring shooting. Hunters breaking the law have been prosecuted regularly and have had to pay up to 2000 French francs. Even the main hunting association of the region, the *Federation Departementale des Chasseurs de Gironde*, with 80,000 members, has been prosecuted for a number of violations of the law, and has had to pay 37,000 francs to five French wildlife protection societies.

In Greece, where turtle dove shooting in spring was very popular, the authorities were obliged to implement the EEC Bird Directive 409/79. Despite protests by the Greek hunters, the government has, since 1986, prohibited all spring shooting, which was mainly confined to the turtle dove. Cyprus, also notorious for its killing of birds, has joined the European bird-protection bandwagon too. Last year the Government abolished spring shooting. Thousands of turtle doves have been spared. Now, in many Mediterranean countries this dove can migrate safely in spring. But not in Malta.

Decline of the Turtle Dove

Derek Goodwin, a world authority on doves and pigeons and author of the monograph *Pigeons and Doves of the World* (1970), writing in *British Birds* journal in 1985 stated that his impression was that the turtle dove had greatly decreased in the past 25 years or so. In 1987 he again wrote that other observers confirmed his views adding that his contacts in Spain and the Netherlands had also recorded a marked decline. He concluded that despite the species' abundance in some places, the turtle dove had much decreased and is probably still decreasing. He also gives possible reasons, the main one being 'the continued (and probably in scale continually increasing) destruction of turtle doves done by man for sport and food'.



Richard Cachia Zammit

In Spain hunting, deforestation, agricultural changes, etc. are posing serious threat to the turtle dove. For this reason, the Iberian council for nature protection (CIDN) is pressing for a two-year ban on turtle dove shooting. The movement has so far been successful in the province of Extremadura where turtle dove hunting has been suspended since June. As part of its campaign, CIDN is calling on members of the public and overseas sympathizers to write to the addresses below to urge the authorities concerned to comply with the ban.

Director de la Agencia de Medio Ambiente
Junta de Extremadura
C/E Diaz Canedo s/n
06800 MERIDA (Extremadura)
ESPAÑA
(letter supporting the action)

Director del IARA
Junta de Andalucía
Republica Argentina 25
SEVILLA - ESPAÑA

Sr Presidente
Junta de Castilla La Mancha
TOLEDO - ESPAÑA

Sr Director General de ICONA
Gran Via de s. Francisco 35
28071 MADRID
ESPAÑA

Ta' Ċenċ

- to be or not to be?

The proposed building of a touristic village at Ta' Ċenċ continued until recently to hit the headlines. The unique scientific and archaeological importance of Ta' Ċenċ has been amply outlined in previous issues of Bird's Eye View.

MOS continued to lead the campaign by Malta's main environmental societies to save Ta' Ċenċ. The campaign reached a climax in October 1990 when the proposed project was due for discussion in Parliament. The highlight of the campaign was an advert in the Times endorsed by 65 university professors and lecturers stating "Ta' Ċenċ: Sentenced to death . . . We find Ta' Ċenċ not guilty".

Two press conferences and a street action were also organised. Public response against the project was tremendous. This was reflected by the large number of letters that were regularly published in the local newspapers.



Joe Doublet

The groups continued to lobby the government. Separate meetings were held with Mr. Michael Falzon, Minister of Infrastructure, Dr. Michael Refalo, Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism, and Dr. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, Minister of Education and Interior, also responsible for the Environment. Dr. Mifsud Bonnici informed the society representatives that the cabinet had approved an extension of the present hotel but had found the rest of the proposals unacceptable. Real Finanz, the company owning the area at Ta' Ċenċ has been asked to send new proposals for considera-

tion by the government. Environmentalists are awaiting the new proposals. It is hoped that the Environment Protection Act approved by Parliament in 1990 will serve its purpose and give proper protection to this unique area. It is doubtful whether any decisions will be taken before the next elections. However MOS and other societies have already taken a stand during their AGM - they are calling for Ta' Ċenċ to be declared a protected area, safe from any development and a monument for future generations.

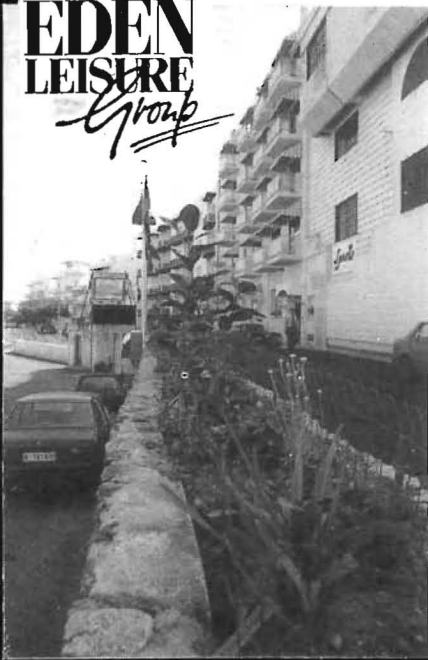
Joe Doublet



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EDEN ROCK HOTEL THE EDEN LEISURE GROUP STOWNES BUDDIES

Robin '90 Campaign

With its territorial behaviour, the robin is very easy to catch. Puffing out its red breast, a robin will advance aggressively upon a rival for its territory. This is the knowledge with which a robin trapper—usually a child—arms himself as he places a caged robin in the territory of the free robin.

The 1990 robin campaign, having run into its sixth year, has revealed some surprising results. Although no statistical evidence confirms the impression, robin trapping seems to be less widespread than formerly. However, results from a comprehension test held in schools, show that children are more informed about negative practices concerning the robin than they are about the bird's habits. For instance, only 26% of respondents knew that robins don't nest in Malta whereas 86% felt that the best way to appreciate robins is not to trap them. Such results reflect the emphasis MOS has unfortunately had to lay upon inculcating a non-destructive appreciation of robins. It may be several years before a truly positive attitude sets in.



Leaders of the walk sporting identity bibs.

Victor Falzon

October 1990's campaign comprised three parts. The first section, held in schools, was mainly concerned with the distribution of educational material and sale of stickers. The second section which concentrated on public awareness, had two committee members chalking a large robin on the pavements at Republic Gate while young members of the public were invited to colour in robin line drawings attached to a large board. The third leg consisted of a marathon walk. The walk provided funds needed for next year's campaign. Over thirty prizes were awarded to winners of a school competition and to marathon walkers.



Children were invited to give colour to line drawings of the robin.

Joe Doublet



Sticker says: Let me fly mate!



Pedestrians stop to watch a robin sketch taking shape on the pavement.

Joe Sullana



Poster says: Let me free!



Walkers pose for a photo with banner.

Victor Falzon



Round Ringing

• *Piccole Isole Project*

The Italian bird-ringing scheme (Bologna) has for the past three years organised the 'Piccole Isole Project', which is aimed at monitoring spring migration along the Tyrrhenian coast in the central Mediterranean. The project involves ringing daily at the same time for a whole month (mid-April to mid-May), using the same number of nets at constant sites, recording visible migration and weather and collating a set of standard biometrics. The MOS ringing scheme joined the project last year, using Ghadira Nature Reserve as Malta's station. This year (1991) it has used Comino.

• *New bird species for Malta*

1990 was a record year with a total of 17,371 birds of 114 species ringed. These included two species which were not only new to the list of

species ringed but were also new additions to the list of birds of these islands. A Blyth's reed warbler at Lunzjata and a Radde's warbler at Ghadira brought thrilling moments to the ringers concerned, John Grech and Charles Gauci respectively.

• *Foreign recoveries*

Sixty-two of MOS ringed birds were recovered during 1990. Seven of these were reported from abroad, including a sand martin in Scotland, a house martin in Italy, a robin in the Ukraine, a great reed warbler in Hungary, single blackcaps in England and Hungary and a chiffchaff in Algeria. Amongst the local movements there were interesting controls of penduline tits between Malta and Gozo.

• *MOS at Hayes Conference*

The British Trust for Ornithology held its 23rd ringing and migration conference in January in Derbyshire.

Joe Sultana, who attended as representative of the MOS Ringing Scheme, gave a talk about 'Ringing in Malta'. Several studies of bird species through ringing were presented by various members of the BTO.

• *Euring Conference*

1990 was the 15th anniversary of the MOS ringing scheme. Joe Sultana and Charles Gauci, officer and secretary respectively of the Ringing and Research Committee attended the Euring conference in Hungary in September 1990. Euring is an association of autonomous ringing centres from different countries. Its main aim is to develop and promote the use of bird ringing as a research technique. An invitation to hold the next Euring conference in Malta was unanimously accepted.

Charles Gauci



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MOS Youths participating in a Bird of Prey street action

The Struggle goes on...

As the ground and sea attacks on migrating birds of prey continue, MOS once again launched a campaign to urge police to enforce laws and stop the illegal killing. In September 1990, at the height of migration, Society members distributed leaflets and stick-

ers in an effort to strengthen public awareness against this repeated violation of the autumn migration. With such little political response to these appeals it is undoubtedly the urgent plight of the raptors that keeps the campaigns going.

INWAQQFU DAN IL-QTIL

IT-TAJR TAL-PRIZA PROTETT MOS

Kampanja għall-*Har-sien tal-Tajr tal-Priza*

Two items of campaign material:

- A poster (designer Andrew Micallef) says: *Let's put a stop to this killing*
- A sticker (designer Gus Ariss) says: *Birds of Prey are protected*



Birds of Prey are still being killed by the thousands



Remember 1984?



MOS TAKES TO THE STREETS

Several 1990 youths escorted by a police officer, formed an off-beat parade through the streets of Valletta on Saturday morning of 19th September 1984.

The celebration was headed by a small number of MOS members who carried a banner for the protection of the country's birds and prey. The group was followed by a large number of people carrying a banner covered with protest petitions submitted by MOS members from throughout the island.

The large group on the lines of the "carnival" made its way to the "MOS" office in Valletta. The protesters' killing has not yet stopped. Hundreds of birds, including the bird of prey, were shot down during the past few days. This was the second time that the MOS took to the streets to make the public aware of the state of bird shooting which has deteriorated due to lack of law enforcement and the continual illegal killing of protected areas in and out of protected areas.

After seven years of judgement, the Maltese courts came to a conclusion on the 1984 protest case. During the event, reported in BEV no 9, MOS members protesting on illegal shooting were physically attacked by a large group of shooters, and one member was seriously injured. For those involved, the result is an anticlimax with 13 of the accused sentenced to fines ranging from Lm25 to Lm250 and others acquitted.

In the words of Page Thirteen of The Sunday Times, "one wonders whether so much time, effort and risk were worth the meagre results."

Chatterbox of Maltese Gair



1



2



3



"I have never known it to breed here". This is how Charles A. Wright ended a write-up on the Sardinian Warbler in his *List of the Birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo* which appeared in the British Ornithologists Union's journal *The Ibis* in 1864.

Ten years later he obtained a female in May and had "little doubt she had a nest". A decade later the first nests



5

Focus on the Sardinian Warbler

were reported. In a letter to *The Ibis* in 1885, Henry Eeles Dresser – author of several works including *The Birds of Europe* – reveals that Dr. David Bruce, then stationed in Malta with the British Services, had informed him about finding two nests, one empty and the other with three eggs.

This strikingly pretty little *sylvia* warbler, barely 13 cm in length, established itself as a breeding resident in the last century. Before then it was a winter visitor. It is now found all the year round in quite widespread numbers. It frequents most habitats, including suburban areas as well as gardens in urban areas.

Its rattling, staccato alarm calls now form part of the characteristic bird sounds of the Maltese countryside. Synonymous with the presence of the handsome male are the bird's song and display flight of the months of spring.

Both the male and female share the task of constructing a neat cup-shaped nest with dry grasses, lined from the inside with vegetable down, fine roots and hair. The nest is usually built in a low shrub or tree, a short distance from the ground.

When the eggs hatch both parents are continually occupied with visiting the nest regularly to feed the ever-hungry young. An equally important task at this critical stage is defending the nest with a distracting display accompanied by a scolding chatter.

1. Three to five (generally four) eggs are laid. These are heavily flecked with olive brown spots, often forming a zone at the wider end.

2. The young, which are brooded for the first few days after hatching, are soon covered with down and feathers and do not leave the nest before twelve days.

3. The greyish-headed female is browner than the male. She frequently visits the nest with mouthfuls of caterpillars and grubs.

4. A new fledgling. The young accompany their parents for some days after fledging, during which time they learn how to search for food.

5. A male with characteristic red eye-ring and black cap helps the female in raising the young.

(Photos: 1, 3, 5 – Joe Sultana, 2, 4 – Raymond Galea)

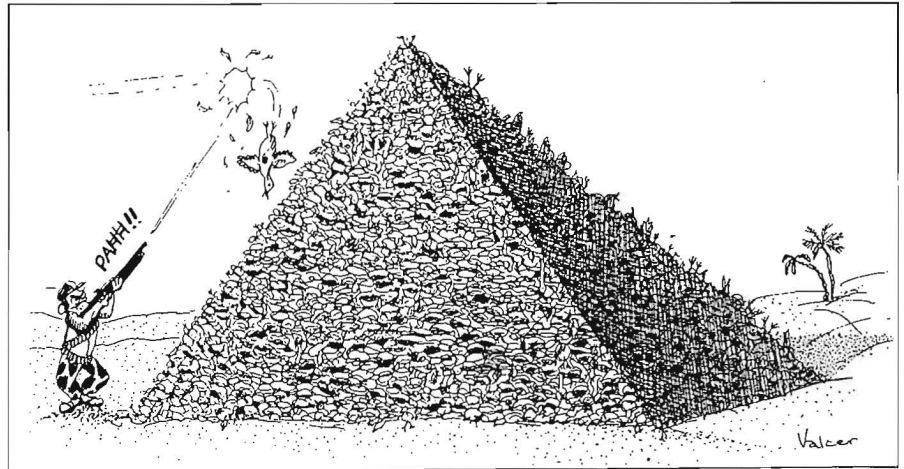
Joe Sultana

Another first for MOS – a GARNISHEE!

On April 4th '91 MOS was informed that a court garnishee had been issued against its bank accounts. The garnishee, to the value of Lm33,000, was requested by Mr. E. Vassallo, director of Sphinx Tours. Mr. Vassallo claimed in court that the campaign organised by MOS to stop bird hunting tours to Egypt organised by himself was causing a loss of income equivalent to the sum being sued for. (see BEV no 13, p. 13).

As a counter protest, MOS has stated that the claims made by Mr. Vassallo are unfounded as the Society was simply using its legal rights as a pressure group to inform the public and the authorities of the illegal killing of birds by Maltese shooters in Egypt.

European bird protectionists were informed of the situation and an international campaign supporting MOS was immediately initiated. Besides receiving very generous financial help from the Royal Society for the Protec-



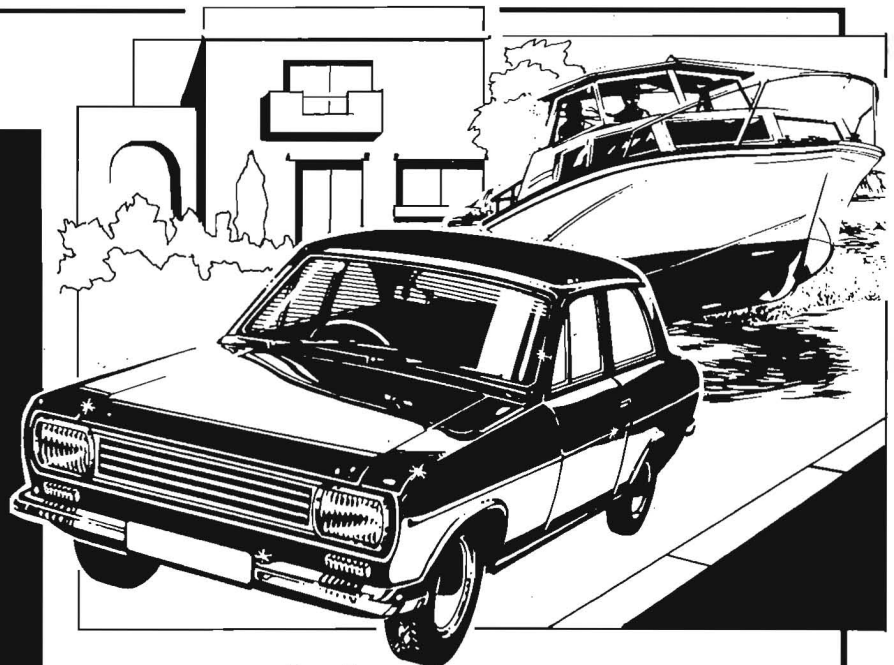
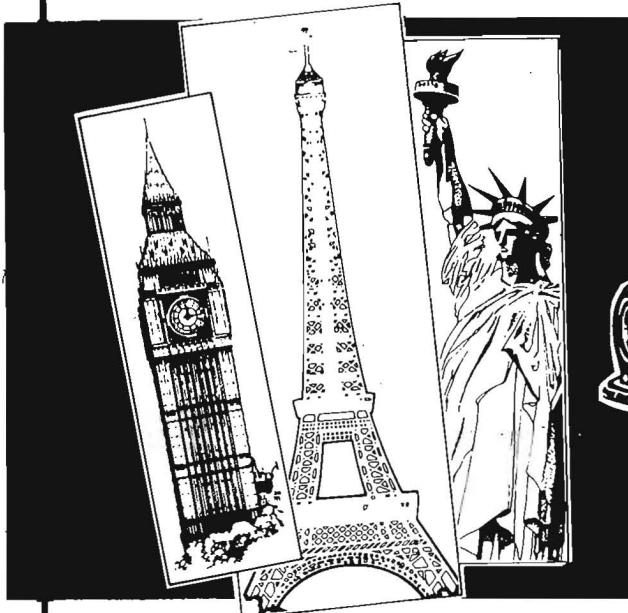
tion of Birds (RSPB), the International Council for Bird Protection launched an appeal for funds. MOS was proud to read letters and articles of sympathy for its cause in foreign publications and press. The Times of London stated, very strongly, that: 'To lead the Mediterranean league for bad conservation should be a cause for national shame. This court case could be pivotal for bird conservation.'

MOS was at the time greatly encouraged by a flood of donations from its members, immediately following an appeal for help in a special issue of its monthly circular.

HELP!!



For Travel

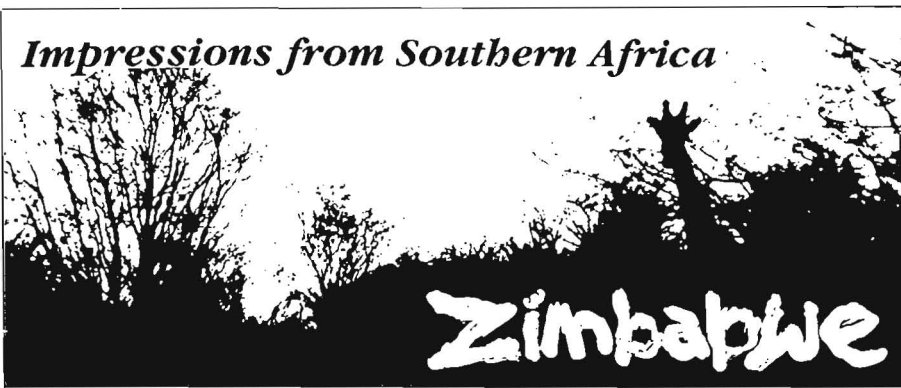


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Impressions from Southern Africa



The observation hide provides an excellent vantage point over the reservoir: by 9.00 a.m. the November sun has already warmed up the air as a cloud of dust heralds the arrival of the buffaloes. Being the largest water catchment for miles around during the dry season, Mandavu Dam attracts a varied wildlife. Waders, herons, kingfishers and African skimmer abound alongside crocodiles and large mammals – antelope, hippopotamus and hyaena amongst others. By mid-day they have had their fill and retire to the shade, coming back for a second helping later in the afternoon before sunset ends the day.

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country covering an area three times that of England and populated by some ten million inhabitants deriving from two major tribes of ancient extract. More recent colonial influence has left an indelible mark on modern day life and the physiognomy of the land. Good roads provide an adequate network practically throughout the country: away from the hectic city-life, the highways traverse wide expanses of an intensely varied natural landscape. From the low veldt of the Zambezi Valley up north, one experiences a radical change in scenery and associated wildlife as one moves up to the Eastern Highlands with their zenith at Mt. Bunga (2438m) overlooking Mozambique. Although the savannah (or veldt) remains the predominant habitat, the type and density of the trees represented vary significantly. The Zambezi River delineates the northern border with Zambia: Victoria Falls to the west is an outstanding beauty spot, the spray emanating from the cataract itself supporting a rainforest type of vegetation with its characteristic fauna. Travelling downriver, one eventually

arrives at the huge man-made Lake Kariba, the direct consequence of Kariba Dam constructed in the '50s. The formation of this artificial water collection in the few years following the damming sparked off the earliest multi-national effort in wildlife conservation: Operation Noah attempted successfully to some extent to salvage the animals in danger of imminent drowning, and international assistance was solicited and achieved. Forty years later, life along the banks of the lake is gradually readjusting to the ecological manipulation; two fine reserves are now supported by the lake.

Hwange National Park is the largest in the country. Situated in a typical savannah setting to the west, this is the most popular and organised in the nation. Zimbabwe has a good reputation in nature safeguarding: reserves are well tended (British standards are still adhered to) by dedicated rangers and accommodation in the larger reserves is comfortable in the form of cosy huts, chalets and camping sites with full amenities. Poaching and illegal hunting is now minimal. The key sites for game-viewing, which are spread throughout the reserves, are very accessible by surfaced road or tracks. During the hot season, when water is sparse, animals congregate at these locations to cool off and predators are attracted by the gathering of potential prey. A cheetah hunt on a clear full moon is indeed an unforgettable experience. As the terrain gets wetter, animals disseminate widely over the Park, making it more difficult to chance upon them. The varied landscape provides each distinct wildlife sanctuary with a degree of uniqueness. While the dense canopy of conifers and montane vegetation is typical of

the Rhodes Nyanya Reserve in the Eastern Highlands, steep granite rock faces adorned by smoothly eroded giant boulders characterise the Matopos Park, home of the agile klippiespringer and Verraux's eagle. The massive Baobab trees, their fat trunks and roots storing up to 1000 gallons of water, and the ever-present flat-topped acacias, so typical of the African savannah, provide shade for multitudes of animals ranging from plovers to giraffe, from impala to lion. Features peculiar to other sites include an abundance of rock paintings and the intricate Great Zimbabwe, a remarkable collection of remains dating well over 1000 years.

After a turbulent history, Zimbabwe – formerly Rhodesia – is still coming to terms with itself ten years after achieving majority rule from its former colonial leadership. During our two week sojourn, we managed to roam freely and extensively all over the country by self-drive car, visiting the most important localities and enjoying the natural wealth of the place. Unhindered by the slight military presence, we were charmed by the peaceful atmosphere now prevailing and the friendly, helpful nature of the people. The 90,000 expatriates still live in relative luxury, but the social extremes of other countries throughout the continent are less evident. Zimbabwe today is doing its best to promote its image worldwide in an effort to attract foreign investment and appeal to the tourist in search of a different holiday. And being only nine hours away by a cheap air route from Malta, the temptation is irresistible!

Dennis Falzon



Yellow-billed hornbill, a widespread species.

Ray Galea

WORLD CONFERENCE

Every four years several members of the worldwide International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) get together to share their knowledge and experience with one main thought in mind – saving the world's birds.

In November 1990 the venue was Hamilton, New Zealand. It was the twentieth World Conference and in spite of being held in such a far country there was a record attendance – 320 delegates from 57 countries. The Malta Ornithological Society, being ICBP's Malta member organisation, was there too. Thirteen resolutions were adopted.

Student Workers

Five student workers were employed at the MOS office in summer '91. Seconded to MOS by the Environment Department, the students did valuable work at the office.

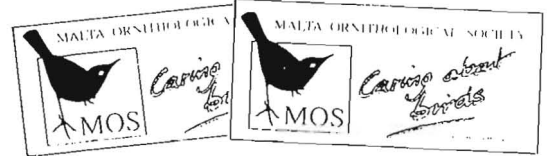
Birdweek

A series of activities marked the first week in April as Bird Week. During the week, the public was invited to illustrated talks on birdwatching, migration and breeding birds. The week's activities culminated in an open day at the Għadira Nature Reserve. Television crew recorded the releasing of a night heron by Dr. Stanley Zammit, Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment. The bird was brought to the Reserve after treatment and a period of rest at the Injured Birds Unit.



Glyn Davies, a founder member of the Malta Bird Reserves Overseas Committee (MBROC) passed away in May 1991. His loss will be mourned by many, particularly by those who remember his sterling work in providing training for Maltese ringers as early as 1965. Until recently, Glyn remained a zealous worker for MBROC, creating a strong awareness abroad of conservation problems in Malta.

Elizabeth Coxon, co-founder and colleague, remarks of Glyn: "All in all, we shall not see his like again."



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MOSY STICKER '91



The hoopoe was the 1991 bird of the year, shown here on the gift sticker received by MOSY members (design V Falzon)

MANAGEMENT COURSE

Paul Portelli, director and Joseph M. Mangion, treasurer, attended a four day course on business management for bird protection. The course, attended by officials from four European bird societies, was organised by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and held at the Society headquarters at Sandy, U.K.

Participants to the course were given intensive lectures by Bob Kent, management consultant for voluntary societies.

As a follow up to the course, MOS council members attended a two and a half day course on management. The group was lectured by Mr. Kent who was sent to Malta by the RSPB.



Back to Square One ... Talks suspended

The talks between MOS and the shooters' and trappers' association, which were reported in the last issue of BEV, have been suspended.

While addressing their annual meeting the president of the shooters and trappers association, Mr Victor Vella, was reported by the Times to have said that the talks have been temporarily stopped by the shooters and trappers association because they were offended by a letter written by MOS President in the press. Mr Vella feared that the hobby of 'hunting' was under threat of abolition. He cited EC membership, the signing of conventions, more nature reserves and the extension of Għadira reserve as some of the threats that lay ahead.



Paul Portelli

MOS AT IL-HADDARIN

As part of an educational drive on the natural environment, Dr. Stanley Zammit, Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment, launched a series of green Sundays. The stunt consisted of a variety of activities organised by

government and voluntary nature organisations and distributed over ten Sundays. MOS was invited to take part in the first of the series, held at Buskett. Besides setting up display boards, the Society's president and director contributed to a radio interview and public forum.



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ... NEW LOGO

The Society's annual general meeting, held in March of this year proceeded with the president's address, director's and treasurer's reports and was followed by a discussion of amendments to the statute. The meeting concluded with the passing of resolutions dealing with:

- the preservation of Ta' Ċenċ
- requesting a review of the bird protection regulations and their enforcement
- pointing out the obligation of the authorities to help NGOs financially
- protesting against the allocation of Government land to hunters and friends of their association.

During this meeting, the new MOS emblem, designed by Victor Falzon, was launched.



Mizzieb: Malta's largest woodland, occupied without title by the shooters' association.

Joe Sultana

The Rape of the Garigues

Edwin
Lanfranco

The Maltese landscape is sculpted in rock. This predominance of rock creates a harsh, bleak effect. Such is the impression one gets from a brief encounter. Nevertheless, the lunar landscape can be fascinating to those who are ready to accept this endless, rocky sculpture. The impression of bleakness is at its highest in summer – though few would venture into the rocky scape in the torrid heat. But even in summer this apparently harsh land teems with life: grasshoppers, bugs, wasps, bees, mantids; the golden thistles and later, the lilac earth-thistle, still lifeless, and the graceful seaside squill – also lifeless – rearing their heads and breaking the harshness of the rocks. Finally the rains arrive and the rocky expanses burst forth with life.

The varied geology and topography of the Maltese Islands offers a variety of different habitats. The most characteristic of these is that which is known technically as garigue. The term actually refers to the type of vegetation established on the rocky areas of coralline limestone, forming what is known as a karst landscape. This type of landscape occurs mainly in the west of Malta, topping the Gozitan highlands and practically covering the whole of Comino. The

garigue community is dominated by a variety of shrubs, usually low and hemispherical with small, crowded, evergreen leaves. These leaves are usually stiff, often with a thorny feeling and eminently suited to endure the scorching summer sun. In Maltese we usually refer to this community as *xagħri*, although the term is used to denote steppic communities, largely devoid of shrubs, which occupy karstlands when these are subjected to stresses such as grazing or burning which preclude the settlement of shrubs.

Flora

There are many kinds of garigue. Low garigues, usually dominated by Mediterranean thyme are only a few centimetres above the rock surface, often actually hugging the rock, while high garigues with Mediterranean heath or tree spurge may grow to a height of one metre. Amongst a rich variety are: garigues with germander and others with the beautiful, endemic Maltese spurge, garigues with scrubby kidney vetch, high garigues with rosemary favouring their slopes and rarely, garigues with rockrose.

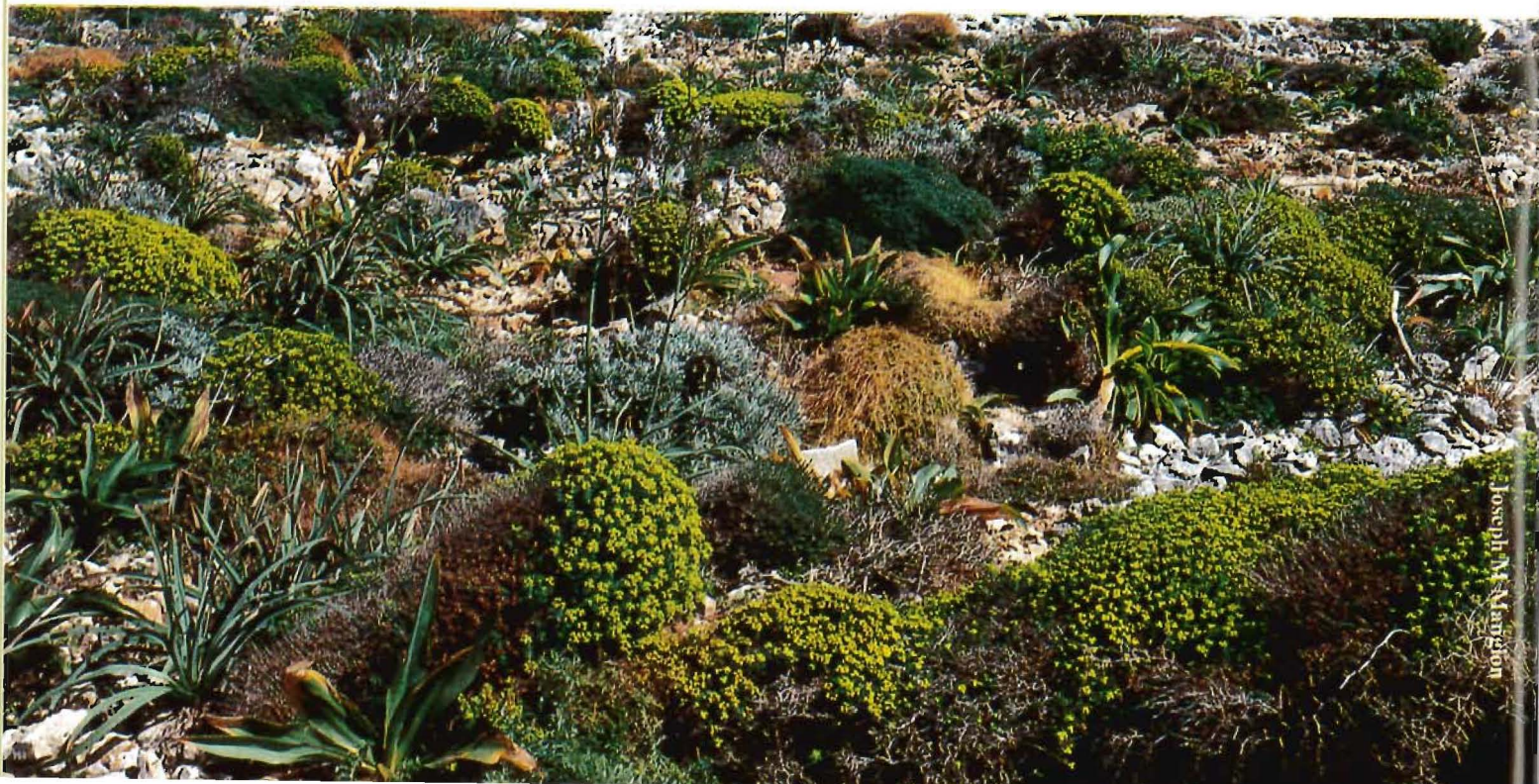
There are also mixed garigues whose dominant shrub is hard to pinpoint. There are garigues on plateaux and

garigues on the slopes of rocky *widien*.

During the mild, wet season, the garigue bursts forth with colour. The autumn pioneers are the graceful flowers of the small bulbs: autumn squill, meadow saffron, autumn narcissus, autumn crocus. Bridging the gap between the last of the autumnal bulbs and the first of the winter blooms is the autumn buttercup. The winter display of colour involves too many species to single out and spans a continuous effort till the end of spring. Here, all dry out, leaving the shrubs once more lords of the garigue.

Wasteland

Despite its beauty, the garigue has received a bad press. There has long been a tendency to regard land which is unsuitable for agriculture as wasteland. As a result, the garigues have been ravished by man's greed and ignorance. The Maltese have always been builders. Ever since the first people set foot on the Islands, some 7000 years ago, they started quarrying to build in stone – and have never ceased! Quarrying and building have never been carried out more frenetically than in the past 20 years. Blatantly visible from the air are the ever-increasing gaps pocking the countryside and ruining the garigues, breaking through cliffs and *widien*, creating huge, irreparable gashes. How long can we continue to quarry? How much more of our countryside can we afford to sacrifice to quarrying?





Three major threats: quarries, tipping and trapping sites.

Underlying all this is a scramble for larger, more spacious, more luxurious housing. The small, self-contained villages have now spread like a cancer over the surface of the land. As soon as a new road is constructed, an infection of buildings spreads along it so that Malta – and Gozo – are fast becoming one city. The remaining pockets of 'rock waste' have become a convenient dumping ground for rubble and a haven for rats which wreak havoc on wildlife. Unfortunately, even people supposedly educated, who should know better, often advocate the development of "useless rocky land that we may not waste good agricultural land".



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Alex Cachia



Pyramidal orchid

Victor Falzon



Giant orchid

Jewels of the garigue

Among the prizes which the garigues yield to those who are receptive to their beauty, those which are perhaps the most beautiful and intriguing are the orchids. Orchid flowers generate most seed, yet are often amongst the rarest of plants. As a family, the orchids are amongst the richest in species, yet few have a wide geographical range. In order to germinate, an orchid seed must strike a partnership with an appropriate fungus. The seedling spends the first few years underground, totally dependent on the service of its fungal companion. After emergence of the first few leaves, the orchid can start to utilize solar energy to build its own food and after some more years, it is ready to flower. The author has been following the progress of certain orchids for over twenty years. The flowers are exquisitely designed to attract bees. Their hues and shapes trigger off the urge which makes bees converge on them. Some actually simulate bees in shape to stimulate reproductive and territorial behaviour. The bee's trophy is nectar, produced in abundance by the orchid. To get at this nectar, the mouth-parts of the bee must come in contact with the pollen masses (*pollinia*) which adhere to them and are duly carried off to the next orchid visited. In Malta, there are records of 22 species of orchids. Some of these are now extinct while in the case of some others, only one or two specimens are known to exist. Let us enjoy the orchids, by all means – in their natural habitat!

Hare-brained afforestation projects

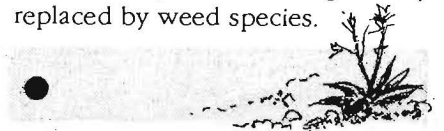
The Maltese have always been a nation of travellers, which is quite understandable. Considering that we are confined to such a small, overcrowded territory, we periodically feel the urge to move out and see some of the outside world. But, faithful to the Maltese expression, 'the neighbours' food smells better', the novelty of the tree-covered expanses of our neighbours looks more inviting. Even if we lay aside the fact that we had many more trees in the past which we ourselves dispatched, it should be realized that our particular landscape is neither superior nor inferior to any other. It is just different, suited to our particular situation. I have seen visitors coming from countries replete with trees and mountains and rivers, envying our 'bleak, harsh' karstlands with their rich array of flowers and other creatures. Still, some have thought that we could improve on nature and have thus embarked on hare-brained afforestation projects resulting in thousands of acacias and eucalypts let loose in our garigues. Going the whole hog, why don't we import herds of kangaroos and families of koalas to match the new landscape! I have nothing against acacias and eucalypts as such. They are magnificent trees, like all other trees and plants, for that matter. But their place is in Australia, or if we must have them here, they should be confined to public gardens and avenue strips. They are, however, certainly anathema to the garigue. When this type of afforestation takes place, irreparable harm is caused to the garigue vegetation and all the organisms which this supports. Afforestation is a delicate matter and should be carried out scientifically with a feeling for the natural vocation of the landscape.

Bird trapping sites

For the nature lover – and I believe that all humans are inherently such – going out in the countryside is an exhilarating experience but one which in Malta often turns out to be frustrating. Unfortunately, there are certain people whose method of enjoying nature is to destroy it. One is likely to meet such 'sportsmen' all year round, armed to the teeth with all sorts of

artillery and a strong dose of arrogance. They lord it over the countryside and woe betide the civilized person who may dare to come within sight of these barons. Besides hurling abuse and threats to the unarmed, they are also guilty of causing great damage to the countryside, especially the garigue. The karstlands are peppered with thousands of hides of all shapes and sizes which do not require a building permit or a go-ahead from the aesthetics board. Almost all are accompanied by vast trapping ranges, one of the most damaging factors to the garigues. Large areas are shorn of vegetation and flattened to accommodate the

trapper's nets. Trappers have also become technologically adept, using herbicides to rid them of the natural vegetation. Acacias and eucalypts are planted around the site in order to attract birds. No longer content to walk several kilometres to their hides weighed down by weapons and cages, many have actually cut access paths that they may conveniently park their vehicle besides their hide. Small wonder that the garigues are fast degrading and that the natural indigenous vegetation is being steadily replaced by weed species.



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ERIC HOSKING

—An obituary

Eric Hosking, the famous bird photographer, died last February in his London home at the age of 81. Besides being a master technician with his photographic equipment, he was an ardent bird protectionist and a skilled ornithologist. With these attributes, he was well equipped to serve as president of the Nature Photography Society, as vice-president of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, of the Natural Society and of the British Naturalists' Association. In 1977 he was appointed OBE and his fellowship included the Royal Photographic Society and the Zoological Society. In the course of his 60 years as a bird photographer, Hosking photographed about 2000 species of birds which were reproduced in at least 800 books worldwide including several which appeared on the front cover of *il-Merill*.

Eric Hosking was born in London on October 2, 1909. As a boy his greatest attraction was the aviary at the London Zoo. He started photography when, on his eighth birthday, he was given a five-shilling Kodak Box Brownie. He produced such good results with this simple camera, that after two years his parents bought him a 30-shilling plate camera. In no time his hobby replaced his homework completely and at 15 he decided to leave school. On one occasion in 1937, while Hosking was clambering up to a hide for a night vigil, a tawny owl clawed him in the left eye. Although he eventually lost the sight of this eye, he nevertheless did not lose his affection for owls. This is well explained in his autobiography *An Eye for a Bird* (1970) where he wrote of the way owls had lured him since he was a child.

When in 1939 he was on the dole, an old school-friend who was working at the Sunday Dispatch asked him to photograph a sea lion at the Zoo. Hosking produced such a good photo that it was published taking up half the back page of the newspaper. For Hosking this was the beginning of a successful career. The following year he produced his first book, *Intimate Sketches from Bird Life* followed by *Birds of the Day* (1944) and *Birds of the*



Night (1945) which featured some of his finest photographs of owls. When in 1942 Julian Huxley and James Fisher started the *New Naturalist* series, Hosking was recruited as photographic editor. His numerous photographic expeditions abroad started in 1956 when he was persuaded by Guy Mountfort to head the photographic team to the Coto Doñana. Over the next two decades he undertook numerous expeditions to bird sanctuaries in Pakistan, Jordan, Israel, Galapagos Islands, Sri Lanka, Rhodesia, Tanzania, the Seychelles, India and the Falklands. In his seventies, alone, he covered Alaska, Greenland, the Canadian Arctic, Madagascar, Singapore and the Kalahari Desert. Some time before he died, he visited Kenya and returned with thousands of new pictures.

Besides the publications already mentioned, Hosking has others to his credit, namely *Birds in Action* (1949) *Nesting Birds, Eggs and Fledglings* (1967) *Eric Hosking's Owls* (1982) *Antarctic Wildfowl* (1982) and *Just a Lark* (1984). From 1960 to 1976 he was the editor of *British Birds*. His interest in birds went further than bird photography and birdwatching. He collected statuettes of birds, bird paintings and particularly bird books. In his foreword to Peter Tate's *A Century of Bird Books* (2nd Ed. 1985) he wrote "... almost all my life I have had a passion for books on birds. My library consists of many works which testify not only to my need of them as

a photographer of birds, but also to my love of reading".

As a photographer, Hosking developed many new techniques in bird photography. He was the pioneer of the high speed flash method which enabled him to catch birds in mid-flight with amazing clarity. His shot of a barn owl in heraldic pose with wings spread and a vole in its beak is probably one of the most famous bird photographs ever taken.

I met Eric Hosking in the summer of 1962 when on a visit to the bird sanctuary of Minsmere. There I was introduced to him by Herbert Axell, a close friend of his and at that time warden of Minsmere. My recollections of him are of a short and stocky person, with a round and cheerful face which portrayed boundless energy. He was very interested to hear about MOS which was then only few months old and after hearing what I had to say about the many problems of a fledgling society, he immediately promised to help. True to his word, he sent about a hundred of his best photographs to MOS to be used in any way beneficial to the Society. These were used for the first time during the Bird Week of 1965 at the Xaghra Cultural Centre in Gozo and eventually in MOS publications. In this respect we will remember Eric Hosking not only as a great bird photographer, but also as a benefactor of MOS.

J.M. Attard

Keeping up with GROWTH



The 1990 membership drive was consistent with an effort to promote a more efficient MOS through circulars, letters and the press. With a 100% increase in local adult membership, the campaign was more than successful. The overseas adult membership continued an encouraging, steady increase.

The box below reveals a concentration of effort on adult membership with a drop in MOS youths. After the 1989 escalation in youth numbers, the Youth Committee was hard put to cope with youth activities whilst drawing on a proportionally smaller group of youth leaders. Thus, although the youth dropout rate was normal, there was no additional ef-



Joseph M Mangion

fort made in enrolling youths. However, in an attempt to solve the youth leader problem, the committee has embarked on a leader training pro-

gramme, including talks, hikes and camps with the scope of encouraging leadership.

| MEMBERS | 1990 | 1989 |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| LOCAL | | |
| Adults | 881 | 493 |
| Life | 30 | 20 |
| Honorary | 4 | 4 |
| Youths | 1,115 | 1,121 |
| OVERSEAS | | |
| Adults | 166 | 135 |
| Life | 47 | 37 |
| Honorary | 6 | 6 |
| Total | 2,536 | 2,051 |



Victor Falzon

FINANCIAL REPORT 1990

BALANCE SHEET

| | Lm | Lm |
|---------------------|--------|--------|
| Fixed Assets | | 11,440 |
| Current Assets | 21,638 | |
| Current Liabilities | 2,755 | |
| Net Current Assets | | 18,883 |

30,323

Accumulated Fund
General Reserve
Earmarked Reserves

27,411
1,550
1,362

30,323

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| Income | 13,579 |
| Expenditure | 8,932 |
| Excess of income over expenditure | 4,647 |
| Transfer to earmarked reserves | 1,135 |

3,512

Accumulated fund brought forward
from previous year

23,899

Accumulated fund carried forward

27,411



Joseph M. Mangion
Hon. Treasurer

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Date _____

What is MOS?

- The Ornithological Society (MOS) is the largest conservation body in the Maltese Islands, with over 2300 members.
- Founded in 1962 by a handful of bird enthusiasts, MOS is also the oldest conservation movement in the country.
- The aims of MOS are the study and protection of wild birds and their habitat.
- MOS conducts ornithological studies and publishes its scientific bulletin – *Il-Merill*.
- MOS runs the Valletta Bird Ringing Scheme.
- MOS organises various indoor and outdoor activities for its members.
- MOS publishes its yearly members' magazine – *Birds' Eye View*.
- MOS has a thriving youth section which publishes its own magazine, to cater for budding naturalists.
- MOS co-ordinates a network of teacher delegates in schools to help convey the conservation message to the younger generation.
- MOS informs people about birds and about threats to birdlife. This is done through public actions, lectures, exhibitions, films, talks, publications and use of the media.
- MOS maintains close co-operation with national and international conservation organisations both in Malta and abroad.



Proposing a new nature reserve

