

# Bird-talk



NEWSLETTER OF THE MALTA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ISSUE 10

FEBRUARY 93

## Swans on a one way ticket

**Yes it has happened again !** Some mindless, selfish and self proclaimed sportsmen have managed to eradicate a number of mute swans in less than two days, for what seemed to the swans as a temporary stop-over on our Islands.

On Sunday, 10 January , a flock of around 24 graceful white mute swans were noticed in the vicinity of Ghadira Bay. On Monday morning, Charles Gauci, the warden at the Ghadira Nature Reserve called the MOS office to inform that a swan was resting in the Reserve. The MOS Director Paul Portelli was already becoming worried because since that evening there would be almost a full moon, this could prove to be of a disadvantage to the swan.

The Director made all the necessary arrangements with the television crew of P.B.S.Ltd. to go and film this unusual visitor for the eight o'clock news. Imagine the sight of this and maybe other swans placidly enjoying our mild winter weather. One must remember that the last recorded sighting of mute swans in Malta was in 1985.

**But, how foolish we had been. We had underestimated the odds.** At around 11.00am Charles Gauci informed us that the swan had left the Reserve. Once it left the protection of the Reserve it needed all the luck it could get. By 11.30 am we received a phone call informing us that some hunters were coming ashore at Xemxija with a dead swan as their victim. On receiving the information Paul Portelli informed the Police Head-Quarters and tried to contact the St. Paul's Bay Police Station, which was closed. The Police at the Qawra Police Station had no vehicle, so they could not take any action. Paul Portelli drove to Xemxija but by the time he arrived the swan killers had left. But, at Bahar ic-Caghaq a number of persons were seen coming ashore with a dead swan. The Police Head-Quarters were immediately informed of the incident.

The media gave good coverage to the swans' fate, but it took the police four days to start investigations and only because the incident was reported in the press.

Following this, the police arraigned in Court, Renato Micallef, Dennis Micallef, and Antoine Micallef charged with having , on January 11, while at sea, shot or tried to shoot at protected birds. They were also charged with having hunted birds during the closed season.

Mute swans are protected by law but it should be pointed out that the closed season does not start before May 22 . Are we not entitled to appreciate this little wildlife that we have ? Why is it that a hunter should put to an end, a creature whose sole intention in coming to Malta is just to follow its natural instincts.

### Swans also shot down in Greece

Greek ecologists found some 500 wild swans which had been killed by hunters. The swans were deposited in front of Parliament in Athens. We can only give moral support to our Greek colleagues in their efforts to protect birds.

# Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association

## Raptor Report

The Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association is an American Association which specialises in the conservation of raptors. Lately it has written to MOS to acquire information about including Buskett Gardens as an internationally recognised Migratory Raptor Site. This inclusion will further strengthen the need to protect the illegal hunting of birds there.

The data was compiled in a very good presentation by Mark Falzon. The Association is also preparing an article titled "Shooting Galleries - migratory raptors in jeopardy" for the American Birds magazine which is distributed by the National Audubon Society of the United States. In this article, an account of the hunting situation in Malta will be mentioned.

## European Bird Art Awards 1993

The second edition to the European Bird Art Award will be held again this year. The 1992 edition proved to be a big success, it attracted entrants from all over Europe. The winner was an oil painting of Tufted Ducks.

This Award is to promote birds in an art form such as paintings on paper or canvas. The prizes which are sponsored by Swaravski Optik KG. will include a first prize of 1000 pounds sterling and the runner-up a telescope and carrier bag. Minor prizes of 10 x 42 SLC binoculars will also be awarded. The closing date in England is 1 May 93, so do not leave it too late. All paintings short-listed will be published in Britain's top selling Bird Watching magazine.

## *from our youths*

The latest MOSY activity was a three day camp in Gozo. There they planted 300 shrubs in an area known as il-Harrax. It was hard work but it was worth the effort. The Victoria Scout Group also participated in this event. The MOSY would like to thank all those who helped in the project. This activity was part of the campaign "Insebh Malta" organised by the Secretariat for the Environment.

For those of you who missed this camp and would like to help conserve nature, be rest assured that 1993 is going to be full of MOSY Conservation Activities.

## Hunting at Sea

Following the meeting the Hunters Association had with the Parliamentary Secretary for Environment, Dr. Stanley Zammit as regards hunting at sea, the MOS has received the following statement from the Secretariat.

### Shooting at sea

*" Please refer to your letter dated 10 December on the subject in caption.*

*The Hon. Parliamentary Secretary has been misquoted. The Secretariat has not reconsidered its decision to prohibit the shooting at sea and is currently drafting proposals for amendments to the existing regulations which would make the relevant enforcement easier in practice."*

**MOS has been campaigning  
for years for the abolition of  
hunting at sea.**

**Would you like to buy**

**books at reduced prices !**

**Do you have a difficulty in finding  
particular Nature Books ?**

Contact the MOS Nature Shop for further  
details on tel. 230684.

## Shetland Islands Oil Spill

The news of yet another large oil spill may not be new, but definitely the effects it will have on wildlife and the environment will remain. These disasters remind us of the way man is continually taxing the world we live in to the limit whereby certain species of birds, fish and flora, besides us humans, are disrupting natural behaviour patterns.

Once again this time on the Shetland Islands a fully laden crude oil tanker has run aground, this is considered to be one of the worst kinds of environment disasters one can imagine. This tanker was carrying twice the amount of crude oil as the Exxon Valdez which ran aground in Alaska some time back. The Shetland Islands are home to a variety of birds and other wildlife. According to an ornithologist who studies the area, the effect that this crude oil has on birds is in most cases fatal. Some birds die almost immediately trapped in the oil, others die as a result of the poisoning which occurs when the birds try to clean their feathers. Certain colonies take many many years to recuperate their losses.

The clean-up of this particular oil spill had to be suspended due to the effect the chemicals, which were being used to break down the crude oil, were having on the local population.

This sort of news might not necessarily effect us but, the thought comes to mind. What would be the consequences if this should happen on our coastline ? Are we prepared ? Do the authorities have the necessary equipment and know how to handle such a situation ? In the Maltese Islands, being the size that they are, the effect would be of damage in various ways. We could be restricted from enjoying our clear blue sea. The tourist industry could be adversely effected with low arrivals and last but definitely not least the damage that could be inflicted on nature itself. No matter how small an oil spill we cannot afford any sort of mistake . MOS hopes that the authorities have taken note of such a distant but similar situation and take stock of how prepared we are for such an eventuality.



### VOLUNTEERS

How can you help MOS?

MOS needs volunteers to help in:

- fund raising
- recruiting new members
- helping in fairs
- helping deliver leaflets door to door
- helping out at events involving public

If you are interested, write to or phone  
Peter Camilleri at MOS.

# The Mute Swan ( Ic-Cinju Mutu)

The mute swan is a very rare visitor to the Maltese Islands. An adult mute swan is completely white. Young birds are brown retaining their brown plumage until they reach adult hood. An adult male mute swan weighs over 11Kg. As its name implies this swan is the least vocal of swans but by no means mute. It utters short grunts and hisses but does not honk as other swans. Eight species of swan are found of which three occur in Europe.

The original breeding grounds of the mute swan are the steppe lakes of central asia. but has now become a tame bird of urban and suburban lakes having been domesticated by the Greeks and Romans. The mute swan is nowadays found throughout Europe except the extreme north and south. It has recently been introduced in the Veneto region in northern Italy where a stable population has been established.

The swan is a partial migrant . In very cold weather swans from the Baltic Sea mainly from Lithuania have been far as far away as Scotland in the Mediterranean and one may assume that the swans seen along the Maltese coast originated in this area.

In December 1985 all the birds in a flock of 12 were shot around the Maltese coast. One of these birds spent a day at the Ghadira Nature Reserve before being shot in Mellicha Bay.

It is illegal to shoot or attempt to shoot at swans. It is also illegal to shoot whilst afloat within three km of the shore.

