

BirdTalk



BIRDLIFE MALTA NEWSLETTER

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Editorial Board: Ian Mifsud (Editor), Desirée Falzon, Victor Falzon

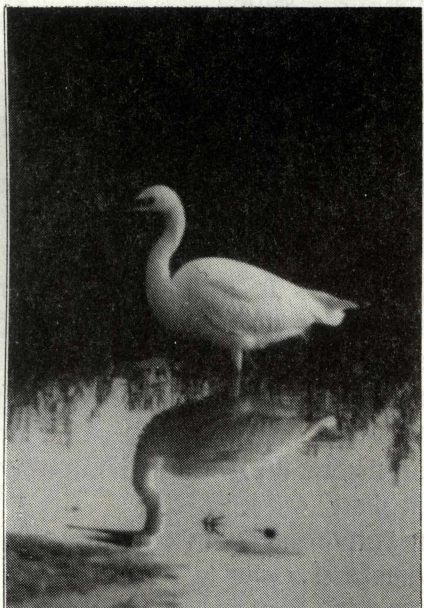
Hundred and One.. (No, not Dalmatians!)

Spring is always a busy time at Ghadira nature reserve. Birds landing or leaving singly or in small flocks is a normal sight at this time of year.

Still a flock of 101 little egrets is not quite the order of the day! Such a group landed at Ghadira during the night, and were a pleasant surprise for the warden who opened the birdwatching hide in the early morning. By that time the egrets had spread over the reserve, concentrating in pockets where food was plentiful. The birds graced the pools' edges for a few more daylight hours, then resumed their journey to their nesting grounds in Europe.

The egrets were this spring's highlight for the reserve, but other interesting bird observations were also recorded. Members may recall last year's breeding pair of little ringed plovers. This year a pair attempted breeding again, and as we go to print they are incubating. A Kentish plover was also seen displaying breeding behaviour. However, with no partner in sight, the bird left the reserve to look for a mate elsewhere! Also eyecatching were a pair of black-winged stilts, who last month gave promising breeding displays - nothing came of it! Maybe next year...

Joe Sultana



Little Egret

Reserve Briefs

Thanks

A big thank you to those volunteers who helped run Ghadira nature reserve at weekends for the past eight months. Thanks to them, thousands have had a chance of a closer look at nature.

Closed

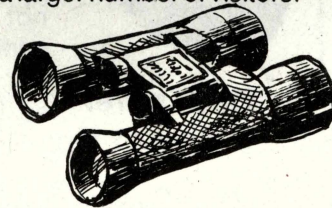
As usual, the reserve will be closed to the public for the summer months. Summer is a quiet time at Ghadira for birds, if not for the warden! The reserve will open again in autumn.

Going through Changes

This year major alteration works are in the pipeline at Ghadira, mostly around the visitors' centre. Pending approval by the Planning Authority, the centre will be modernised and interpretive facilities (e.g. audiovisual) made available to the public. When complete, the centre should accommodate a larger number of visitors.

Donation

Ms Jackson from BirdLife International recently visited Ghadira and was impressed by the conservation work being



carried out there. On her return to England and determined to make a practical contribution, she donated 6 binoculars to the reserve. Thank you, Ms Jackson, we're sure they'll come in very handy!

Where has all the money gone?

Several thousand liri have so far been spent to convert Is-Simar from barren land into a nature reserve. The massive excavation works, the construction of three birdwatching hides and a fence around the perimeter of the reserve have consumed most of the funds. BirdLife has recently also applied for permission to build an environmental education centre at Is-Simar. It is estimated that this project alone will cost at least a further Lm50,000. Conservation is indeed expensive nowadays!

**BirdLife is deeply grateful
to all who responded
to the plea for donations
made earlier this year.
More in next issue of BirdTalk.**

Green New World

Millennia of human interference have virtually denuded the Maltese countryside of woodland cover, with only two tiny groves of the original stock remaining.

As humans, we cannot but feel guilty for all the destruction that has been done. Somehow we must atone and start on the road to reverse the damage.

With this ambitious mission in mind, BirdLife volunteers have over the years collected seeds from native stock and carefully tended them at the Ghadir nursery. Among the seeds were acorns from the native oaks of Wardija, as well as from Buskett.

Those acorns are now vigorous saplings, bursting with life and ready to be transplanted in the open. Thanks to the dedicated effort of volunteers and the Ghadir warden, there are at present about 500 young trees of native or naturalised species.

These include **White Poplar** *Populus alba*, **Carob** *Ceratonia siliqua*, **Bay Laurel** *Laurus nobilis*, **Fig** *Ficus carica*, **Myrtle** *Myrtus communis*, **Olive** *Olea europaea* and of course **Holm Oak** *Quercus ilex*.

Restoring native woodland is no short term project! But we are sure that if not us, at least the next generation will enjoy the fruit of our efforts, and hopefully sustain them.



Holm oak



Bay Laurel

Small Islands

The Mediterranean Islands Project (also known as the Progetto Piccole Isole) is a research programme in which BirdLife Malta has taken part for the past eight years. The project's main aim is to study the spring migration of small birds across the Mediterranean.

Co-ordinated by the Wildlife Institute of Bologna University, the project is now in its ninth year. The project is carried out concurrently in 14 different localities around the Western Mediterranean, particularly on islands of the west coast of Italy and the Balearics. As in past years, BirdLife Malta manned its field station on Kemmuna. Kemmuna is the southernmost station of the project.

This year's migration season was good - our station logged a new bird for the project: **Isabelline Wheatear**, normally an eastern species.

Also interesting were the 91 wood chat shrikes ringed during the three-week period of the project. Woodchat shrike is an irregular breeding bird for our islands.

"Pay up, shooters!"

In 1993 the Shooters' Association accused BirdLife Malta of giving the country a bad image during a fair in Berlin, Germany. This, of course, was a blatant lie, and BirdLife lost no time in taking the Shooters' Association to court for slanderous reporting. Only last month the case was settled: BirdLife won the case with Lm600 compensation, which the Shooters' Association will have to fork out.

School Nature

BirdLife is helping set up a nature area at St Joseph Junior Lyceum in Paola. A 5000m² section of derelict school ground has been taken in hand by Michael Grima, a teacher at this school (and longstanding active BirdLife member), into an area suitable for wildlife. BirdLife has supplied the school with trees and shrubs, and helped instal a drip-irrigation system. The schoolboys themselves have done most of the manual work, such as digging a pond and planting trees.

The nature area was officially opened by Dr Stanley Zammit Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment on 5 June, appropriately World Environment Day.

BirdLife urges teachers to create such areas of natural interest within their schools. The Society would be happy to provide trees and assistance to interested teachers where possible.



WANTED

FULL-TIME SECRETARY

BirdLife seeks to employ a person to perform secretarial duties at the Society's office. The ideal candidate should:

- be able to work on his/her own initiative
- have good knowledge of Maltese and English
- be conversant with word-processing.

Applicants please write to:

The President • BirdLife Malta • POBox498
Valletta CMR 01

KLABB HUTTAF

The Young Members' section of BirdLife Malta was set up in 1969 to look after a handful of young members. Over the years the section developed into an active body known as **Klabb Huttaf**, with well over 1600 members all under the age of 14. All of these youngsters are in the care of a busy group of ca.25 dedicated volunteer Youth Leaders led by a Working Group.

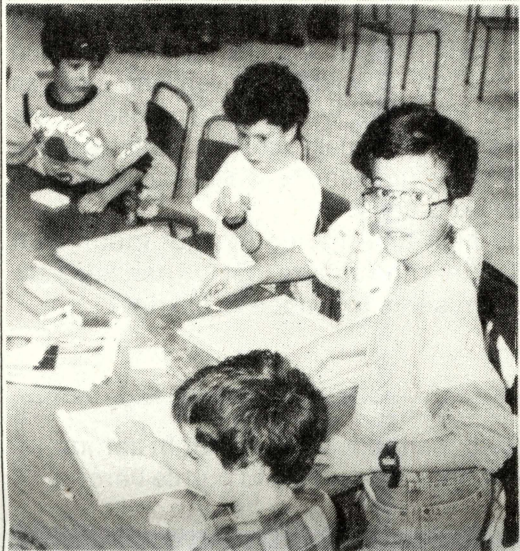
Klabb Huttaf organises a variety of outdoor and indoor activities, all very well attended. Last year the club kicked off a system of Local Groups to organise activities for Huttaf members on a more local basis. Four such Local Groups have so far been established, each with its own newsletter. The aim is to eventually have such units all over the country, all of them doing outings of their own. This would take some pressure off the national outings, which can sometimes get rather overpopulated!

Meanwhile all members receive **Il-Huttafa**, their much-awaited bi-monthly magazine stacked with news, letters, pictures, activities, competitions etc. From time to time, members also receive various other nature material such as badges and stickers.

Many adult BirdLife members enrol their children in Klabb Huttaf almost by reflex action. If your children are still out there waiting, they're missing out!

So get hold of that pen, fill in the form below and rush us your child's details! It's a 2c8-a-week investment neither you nor your child will regret.

Members of Klabb Huttaf during a craft activity



I wish to give my child a gift membership in
Klabb Huttaf

The following are his/her details

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode _____

Tel _____ Date of Birth _____

I enclose a cheque/PO (payable to BirdLife Malta) to the amount of Lm1.50.

Parent's signature _____

Please note that Klabb Huttaf is open to children under 14yrs old. Membership subscription is Lm1.50 per annum. Send form and subscription to: The Membership Secretary - BirdLife Malta - POBox498 - Valletta CMR 01

photographs: Jason Abisio

Death on the Nile

Egypt is a well-known destination for tourists who go to admire the monuments of the Nile valley. But out in the remote oases, away from the hub, lurks a different type of tourist with a very different purpose... none other than the blood-thirsty bird-killer!

Hunters have for some years discovered that Egypt is as rich in natural history as it is in human history. So it comes as no surprise that hordes of trigger-happy characters repeatedly infest the Egyptian outback with nothing on their sunbaked brains but kill kill kill. And, needless to say, foremost among these are several Maltese marksmen!

Now in Egypt there *are* laws protecting wild birds - there are lists, close seasons, restrictions and penalties. But the Egyptian authorities are reluctant to do anything that may scare off the slightest hint of foreign interest. So the guard is lowered... and the birds get slaughtered in their thousands.

We read and hear various reports of bird carcasses seized by Maltese airport authorities. The biggest haul yet happened a few weeks ago, when

over 400 carcasses were confiscated from Maltese hunters returning from an undercover shooting spree in Egypt. Almost all birds were protected species, with many on the endangered list (e.g. steppe eagle, griffon vulture, black-shouldered kite, blue-cheeked bee-eater... you name it). Several were also in breeding plumage, meaning that their death has also doomed numerous nests.

The culprits are now in court. But don't heave that sigh of relief yet! BirdLife feels that the courts are frequently too soft with such people who openly and repeatedly defy national and international law, and make a mockery of wildlife conventions such as CITES and Bern. We will not be surprised if the offenders are let off virtually scot free, perhaps with a token fine to pay (redeemable a thousandfold when the stuffed skins are sold!)

It is high time the courts get tough with these offenders and ensure that full penalties are imposed. Or is this too much to ask for?

LINE-UP



Is-Simar has been a hit with birds, particularly herons. **Night herons** hunch like witches on tamarisk trees, **squacco** and **purple herons** stalk or just stand around, not to mention **grey herons** and **little egrets**. **Great white heron** has been recorded, and even the rare **bittern** seems to be making the place a regular spring stopover, skulking in the reeds and even booming in the dusk. **Fan-tailed warbler** and **Cetti's warbler** breed in the thick vegetation, as did **reed warbler** last year, making breeding news after 20 years' absence. And of course **moorhens** produce regular explosions of chicks! Hard to believe that only four years ago, the place was just another rat-infested dump!

A2235
Mr. Eric German,
Assistant Librarian,
Melitensia Special Collection,
University of Malta Library,
Msida.

**BirdLife Malta is *the* society for the protection of birds and the environment.
BirdLife Malta is the Partner of BirdLife International in Malta.**