

## Short Notes

### Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata tyrrhenica* breeding in Malta

The Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* is polytypic with the nominate race *striata* occurring in Europe with the exception of Corsica, Sardinia and the Balkans, and spreads east across the Ural Mountains. On the islands of Crete and Cyprus along with the Levant east to the Caucasus one finds the race *neumanni*. The race *inexpectata* occurs in the Crimea while the race *balearica* is confined to the Balearics. The race *sarudnyi* occurs in Transcaspia and eastern Iran east to the Himalayas while the race *mongola* occurs in the south-east Altai, east through northern Mongolia. The race *tyrrhenica* occurs on Sardinia and Corsica (Cramp & Perrins 1993). Apart from Corsica and Sardinia *tyrrhenica* also occurs in the Tuscany archipelago, and presumably along the Tyrrhenian coast of mainland Italy and on the island of Ischia (Brichetti & Fracasso 2008). Iapichino and Massa (1989) gives only the nominate as occurring in Sicily, but Corso (2005) reports that some individuals approaching *tyrrhenica* are seen along the western side of the island (Trapani, Mt. Cofano, Zingaro and on Pantelleria), but also claiming that some of these may belong to the race *neumanni*.

In Malta, the Spotted Flycatcher is a common spring passage migrant from mid-April to early June. It returns in smaller numbers in autumn from mid-August to mid-November; it is a rare but annual breeding visitor (Sultana & Gauci 1982). For a complete review of past breeding records the reader should refer to Sultana & Gauci (1973, 1975, 1976, 1979, 1983) and Galea (1987, 1991, 2002). To date only the nominate race has been noted to occur in the Maltese Islands (De Lucca 1966; Sultana & Gauci 1982).

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Figure 1. Inner courtyard of the NMNH and location of broods 1 and 2.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> May 2009, a pair of Spotted Flycatchers was noted courting inside the inner courtyard of the National Museum of Natural History in Mdina. The courtyard with its 20 metres high walls, water fountain and potted plants appeared to provide few places where such a pair could build a nest and breed. Nevertheless, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June an almost completed nest was located at the base of a hanging chandelier under the alcoves in a secluded part of the courtyard; the nest was 280cm above ground. For the following three days both birds kept adding material and at the same time, the male kept offering morsels to the female which she readily accepted.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> June the first egg was laid and two days later the nest contained three eggs, coloured light blue with dark red lines; one was slightly smaller than the other two. Two chicks hatched around the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June while the third egg never hatched. The two pulli fledged on the 30<sup>th</sup> June. In the meantime another incomplete nest was located in another chandelier on the opposite side of the courtyard; this nest was also about 280cm above ground but in a more disturbed area of the courtyard. In the following weeks both adult birds were still present close to the first nest and an inspection of the nest on 20<sup>th</sup> July revealed 3 eggs, same size and colour of the two larger eggs from the previous brood. On 16<sup>th</sup> August all three chicks fledged successfully and the following days were regularly seen on the roof of the museum until the 28<sup>th</sup> when no sign of adults or chicks was noted.

On close examination of the Mdina pair, these birds were mainly rusty-brownish in coloration unlike the greyish

plumage seen in the usual migrant birds of the nominate *striata*. Darker rusty shades were noted along the flanks and throat. The throat markings were finely streaked rather than spotted as in *striata* and these almost merged with the rest of the flank feathers; this plumage is characteristic of the race *tyrrhenica* (Brichetti & Fracasso 2008). All Spotted Flycatcher nests found locally have always been located in wooded areas (Buskett, Addolorata Cemetery, Howard Gardens, San Anton Gardens and Ta'Qali National Park). This pair chose to nest inside a building surrounded by high walls with the only access to the outside is by flying up onto the roof.

This is the first time that the race *tyrrhenica* is reported from the Maltese islands not only as a passage migrant but also breeding.

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## ~~Unusual nesting behaviour in Zitting Cisticolas *Cisticola juncidis*~~

~~In Malta, Zitting Cisticolas *Cisticola juncidis* typically nest in rushes, grasses or shrubs, where they build a bottle-shaped nest out of grasses and cobwebs (Sultana & Gauci 1982). In 2010, I recorded two nests of this species built in sapling Aleppo pines (*Pinus halapensis*). Both nests were approximately 95 cm off the ground and were woven into the upper branches of young pines. They were found on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May and were 5 metres apart. The first nest was completely built and appeared to have already been used (the young seemed to have fledged), while the second nest was in the process of being built by a male. A few days later it was completed but was never used. This area is part of the first plantings carried out in the Foresta 2000 afforestation project, with tree planting undertaken six years ago and there are many Lentisk (*Pistacia lentiscus*) shrubs which are now over a metre high. The Aleppo Pines that the nests were located in were replanted three years ago after a vandal attack destroyed 1000s of tree saplings in the area.~~

~~In 2009, a used Zitting Cisticola nest was also found in a metre high Aleppo Pine, in a Cypress/Pine grove where long grass is not usually present. Nests found previously in the area have always been in various grasses or Fleabane (*Dittrichia viscosa*) and always at a much lower height above the ground. The area in question holds up to 5-6 singing males in spring, but the population surrounding the area is much higher.~~

~~There is only one published record of a Zitting Cisticola nest in Malta situated in similar conditions — a nest found in a grove of Tamarisk trees and situated two metres above the ground (Sultana & Gauci 1982). However, there are no published records of this species nesting in the tops of Aleppo saplings in Malta.~~

#### Reference

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