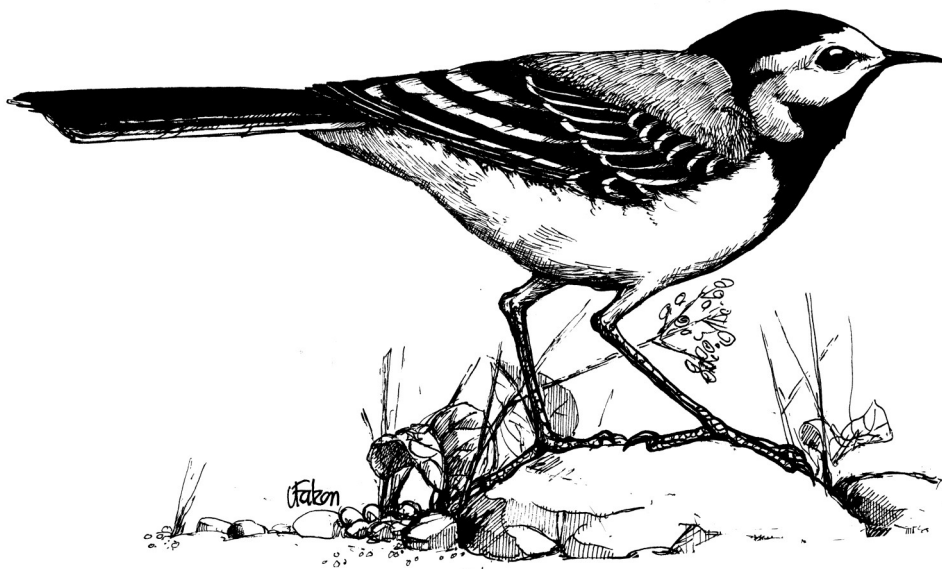


Il-Merill

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Il-Merill is the ornithological journal of **BirdLife Malta**. It serves as a medium for the publication of articles and short notes dealing with any aspect of ornithology having a bearing on the Maltese Islands and the Mediterranean. It also carries systematic lists of birds recorded in the Maltese Islands as well as bird ringing reports. Articles and short notes for publication should be addressed to:

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Textual references must follow the format contained in the following examples: As Dollard (1957) argues; Dollard's (1957) study; (Dollard 1985); (Dollard 1985, pp. 23-6).

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Curry-Lindahl, K. 1981. *Bird migration in Africa*. Academic Press, London.

Stettenheim, P. 1972. The integument of birds. In *Avian Biology*, D.S. Farner & King, J.R. eds., pp 2-54, Academic Press, London.



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ERRATA

II-Merill No. 22 (1981-83)

Foreign Ringed Birds Recovered in Malta

Page 54: Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (ring no. Helsinki D-85.226). This is a misprint and should read **Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus***. (NB. This recovery appeared correctly as Honey Buzzard in the more recent IL-MERILL No. 24 page 46).

II-Merill No. 28 (1992-94)

Ringling Recoveries

Page 71: Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* Ring no. **S4.121** should read **S4181**.

II-Merill No. 30 (2002)

C. Galea Bonavia & C. Gauci. Population of Common Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* occurring in the Maltese islands.

page 18: Significance level "**p < 0.05**" in Table 4 should read "**p > 0.05**".

R. Galea. Breeding records of Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* for the period 1992 to 2001.

Page 37, 2nd paragraph: San Anton Gardens. The sentence "In 1995 this pair had 1 fledged young" should read "In 1996 this pair was seen feeding a single fledged young on 6 August".

R. Galea. The Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* nesting on Comino.

page 39: The date "**8 April 1990**" (1st line, 2nd Paragraph) is a misprint and should read "**8 April 1995**"

ADDENDA

The following records of birds were inadvertently left out from the systematic lists published in earlier issues of this journal.

Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii*

1 (ringed recovery) was found dead off Delimara on 10 October 1998.

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

1 ringed at Lunzjata on 24 October 1995.

Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*

1 ringed at Tarġa Gap on 8 November 1994.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*

1 ringed at Lunzjata on 21 September 1995.

Semi-collared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata*

1 ringed at Lunzjata on 13 April 1992.

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica*

2 singles ringed at Lunzjata on 1st and 5 November respectively in 1993.

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10 Euro

Up-date on breeding status and review on Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora* when away from the breeding sites

Dietrich Ristow

Introduction

This journal has already carried a comprehensive account on Eleonora's Falcon as to its status at the breeding colonies and the available data about migration patterns and wintering grounds (Ristow & Wink 1992-94). The article could be summarised as follows: While immatures are typically hundreds of miles away from the native island in the year after fledging, as adults they show extreme natal philopatry when breeding. Their main winter quarters are in Madagascar, and data during migration are scarce (Ristow & Wink 1992-94). It is not the purpose of the present contribution to repeat the same general information about the occurrence by presenting new data when sufficient data had already been published. Rather, this review focuses on new information and publications when these are supplemental to the former.

Breeding population status

The population at the northern colony in Morocco is down to 12 pairs, but numbers in the southern colony have tripled as a result of conservation measures (Aghnaj 2002). Numbers were stable in Tunisia (Azafzaf 2004), Italy (A. Baldami, F. Spina pers. comm.), Croatia (Piasevoli & Scetavic 2001), and Cyprus (Warne 2000; Paton 2002; Wilson 2004). However they showed a gradual decline in Crete (Ristow 1999) followed by a dramatic acceleration in decline of 15 % per year in two large colonies off Crete which was linked to the wide-spread illegal use of a nerve poison (Ristow 2001; Tsatsakis *et al.* 2001). The world population previous to the poisoning was estimated at 6300 breeding pairs (Ristow 1999), but cannot be given presently, because Greece harbours 75 % of the falcon's world population and the extent of the poison abuse is unknown. Furthermore, NGOs in Turkey failed for two decades to confirm the report made of a single breeding site in their country. When a reward was posted on the internet raptor discussion group in March 2003 to be paid if a second person could be named who had seen the breeding site, the deadline passed without an attempt to collect the money. So the correct status is that at present there has been no breeding record of this species in Turkey up till now.

Vagrants

That immatures at the breeding season show up far away from their native colony was demonstrated again by two records from the Cape Verde Islands (Heinze & Ristow 2003; Thomsett 2005). 2 individuals south of Bica da Cana in Madeira on 18 August were also vagrants during the breeding season (Birding World 15: 374). 1 and 2 individuals at Janzour in Libya on 22 and 27 July 2004 (Gaskell 2005) were non-breeding vagrants during the laying season; also singles at Wadi Kaam on 10 October 1965 and 17 October 1966 (Bundy 1976) were a bit too early for normal migrants. A single falcon above the Azraq wetland in Jordan on 14 June 1995 (Andrews *et al.* 1999) was a typical vagrant in the Mediterranean for June (compare also new ring recoveries below); similarly singles in Israel on 20 and 29 June and even one on the Golan 12 July 1986 (Shirihai 1996). A dark morph individual was seen on Mayotte/Comores July 1992, an archipelago within the wintering range of this species (F. Néri in Louette 2004). There is a second record for Hungary at Kunmadaras 22 September 1987 (Magyar *et al.* 1998), a first for Cameroon of a dark morph adult heading south in the savannah region near Mapanja 2400 m above sea level on the south-western slopes of Mt Cameroon in the afternoon of 29 November 1996 (Hivekovics & Palatitz 1998), and a first for Ivory Coast on 12 April 2001 (Thomsett 2005). There are several sightings logged in Germany, but doubts persist on their correct identification.

Migration and Wintering

For north-western Africa, definitive migration observations are scarce. There is still only one sighting from Mauretania at Banc d'Arguin on 4 November (Mahé 1985). In Morocco, when the sightings in the Atlantic coastal range near the breeding sites are left aside, then there remain only two sightings at the Mediterranean coast near Melilla on 5 April

1990 and near Mdiq on 30 April 1993 (Thévenot *et al.* 2003). There is a possible winter record from Algeria of a bird seen on 17 December 1977 at Colombi Islet (Isenmann & Moali 2000). In Tunisia, apart from the few though well known migration observations at Cap Bon, single falcons were seen inland, apparently on migration, at Bou Hedma on 14 April 1985 and at Selja/Gafsa on 25 April 1995 (Isenmann *et al.* 2005), but flight directions were not given.

New observations in the Middle East are as follows. In Lebanon there are 2 records in April, 1 in September, and 2 in October (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999). In Syria, 3 individuals were sighted over Palmyra oasis on 7 November 2002, and the assumed date for a captured juvenile as “mid”-October 2002 (Serra *et al.* 2005) seems to be too early for the season. In Jordan there are four records - on 25 April 1996 at an unspecified location (Andrews *et al.* 1999), 1 individual near Dana village 22 April 2000 (I. Andrews), 1 individual in April/May 2004 at Dibbin Forest (C. Hewson), and 1 dark morph individual at Aqaba sewage works 20 Apr 2004 (I. Andrews). In Israel the total per season had been up to 21 individuals in spring and up to 44 individuals in autumn (Leshem 1994; Yosef 1995; Shirihai 1996). The daily maximum were 33 adults on 23 April 1999, counted on migration at 900 m altitude on Mt Yoash/Eilat; these were singles during the morning, 7 individuals between 12:30 and 14:30, 18 in parties of 5-6 individuals between 14:30 and 15:30, and singles during the evening (B. Granit). All these data show a regular passage in the Middle East, but numbers are too small and in autumn too early in the season to explain substantial migration of the Mediterranean breeding population. For Egypt, a separate account of the observations is in preparation (T. Coles). There are no records from the Sudan (Nikolaus 1987, pers. comm. 2005).

A clarifying statement about Eleonora's Falcons wintering in the Mediterranean seems to be appropriate. G. Cant (1978) wrote about a sizeable wintering population in the south Aegean Sea, which was quoted in Cramp & Simmons (1980, page 329) with the remark “confirmation desirable”. Gilbert Cant was a journalist by profession, and it was his job to report what other people say. That is why Ristow & Wink (1992-94), when quoting Cant in their review, acknowledged Cant's own observations, but simply deleted the rest. In the meantime, his unsubstantiated comments regarding wintering Eleonora's Falcons was revived in two serious scientific publications without a note of caution. Since the publication of Cant's comments however, and in spite of increased observers' activity, nobody confirmed Cant's claim by a similar observation. The status should be considered to remain unchanged, i.e. ‘exceptionally only single falcons may be seen in the Mediterranean during winter’.

Additional or new data from the East Africa/Madagascar region are as follows. A total of 7 individuals on Hadibu plain, Socotra Island/Yemen on 14+16.Nov. 1997 (Clouet *et al.* 1998); several December/January records in Ethiopia and Kenya (Thomsett 2005), an accidental capture of a juvenile at Kiambu outside of Nairobi on 28 February 1988 (T. Coles), and another Kenya sighting at the golf course by the lake of Kakamenga Forest, Kisumu on 1 Dec. 1991 (P. R. Bono); 3 records from Mozambique in March/April (Parker 1995); four to six records from South Africa, i.e. an imprecise one in “summer” 1977 (Macleane 1988), 1 individual at Kwa Zulu-Natal on 2 November-18 December 2001, 1 individual at Vaalkop Dam on 10-12 January 2002 (Bull. ABC 9, 2002, 150), and a further light morph and an hour later a dark morph adult near St Lucia on 2 April 2002 (M. Wink), and finally 1 individual on 6 February 2005 in Kruger National Park (Bull. ABC 12, 2005, 189). A supposed sighting in Zimbabwe was not accepted by the national rarity committee (Hustler *et al.* 1990).

There were no recent publications with better data about the status in Madagascar. This is a pity since the wintering quarters could serve to monitor trends in the world population of the species, at a fairly low level of effort. For example, from standardized raptor counts of wintering migrant and resident species in Madagascar's open habitats, the frequency ratio between species such as Eleonora's Falcon, Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, and Madagascar Kestrel *Falco newtoni* would be a convenient tool to evaluate population trends. It is desirable that such monitoring be initiated. There are better data now from the Indian Ocean archipelagos. There are at least 16 records on the Comores in October-January and 3 in April-May during 1983-2003, all of between 1-4 individuals each (Louette 2004). The Seychelles Rarity Committee accepted 23 records from 1971-2002. These were all sightings between 31 October-17 February, and all of single birds except one record of 3 individuals (A. Skerrett pers. comm.). From Mauritius there are another 29 records from 1993-2002, all between 10 December-20 February and all of 1-4 individuals each (M. Nicoll). For Reunion see the section on ring recoveries below. No record from Rodrigues (Showler 2002, *pers. com.* 2005). – An alleged record out in the Indian Ocean (Beaux & Voisin 1983) referred in reality to a Hobby *Falco subbuteo* as can clearly be seen from the facial pattern in the published photograph when comparing this with the diagnostic differences for the two species illustrated in Figure 2 of Ristow & Wink (1992-94).

Ring Recoveries and Migration

New ring recoveries became available from nestlings marked on the Canary Islands (Rodriguez Godoy 2000), Columbretes (Belenguer *et al.* 2004), and Crete (Table 1), adding 14 records to the former total of 34. Three June recoveries of the Canary falcons are remarkable. These were birds in Morocco after almost 2 and 6 years from the date of ringing respectively, and in Algeria after 9 years, demonstrating the distance away from the (native) breeding sites in this month. A fourth recovery is of a 23 month old individual in Morocco in mid-July 2002 (A. Martin, F. Rodriguez Godoy pers. comm.). Fortunately, the recoveries of three 3-5 months old juveniles from the Columbretes give information on migration and wintering: One was found 30 km inland, east of Relizane/Algeria, i.e. strictly south of the Columbretes, on 31 Nov. 1988; the second found dead in Madagascar January 2003, and a live bird in Bras Panon/Reunion on 30 November 2000. Four of the new Cretan recoveries (Table 1) conform to the former results reported on immatures and breeders.

Ringed (Sept)	Date of Recovery	Recovery Site	Distance travelled (km)	Sex	Age
2000	17/11/2000	Busia Kenya	4,065	male	2.5 months
1996	28/08/1998	Misilmeri/Palermo, Italy	1,171		1 year
1996	20/05/1998	Patara/Fethiye, Turkey	293		1 year, 9 months
1996	16/07/2004	Crete	29	female	8 years
1986	07/08/1996	Crete	57		10 years

Table 1. Recent recoveries of Eleonora's Falcons, ringed as nestlings off Crete.

However, the female recovery deserves a more detailed description because extra-pair-fertilization has not been proven yet in this colonial species (Swatschek *et al.* 1993), and the 8 year old individual was over 25 km away from the nearest breeding island in the courtship season. It was in very good condition with big fat reserves (Keiser's fat score: 6.5) and bulging breast muscles. The multigranulated ovary measured 25x20 mm, average ova size was 3 mm, and a single ovum of 8 mm was in the beginning of the Fallopian tube. The specimen is now with the Iraklion Natural History Museum to determine its cause of death (M. Ivovic).

The fifth Cretan record is of a live juvenile during migration in Busia/Kenya at the border between Uganda and Kenya, just 50 km north of Lake Victoria, the locality lying more or less on the shortest route between Crete and Madagascar. This matches with the well-known recovery of a Canary falcon shot in Mali which had been just south of the shortest route between the Canaries and Madagascar. All these recoveries on migration are not really surprising, as with no prior data available the assumption of a simple straight migration route is reasonable. Why, then, is there the wide-spread belief that all Eleonora's Falcons including the Atlantic population, migrate through the Red Sea and then along the African east coast to Madagascar?

To understand why such an error could be perpetuated so persistently, it is worthwhile to study the history of the case. After quoting the sighting of a single individual from the gulf of Suez and 3+2 individuals from Sheikh/Somali, i.e. 50 km inland, Stresemann (1954) wrote in a magazine that on their way to Madagascar, the falcons "*migrate presumably along the rocky coast of the Red Sea and Somalia ...*" and later finished his essay "*... as there is no record from the west coast of tropical Africa, we must presume that the Atlantic population circumvents Africa in the north to reach Madagascar.*" For reasons not explained, Stresemann was fixated on the idea that Eleonora's Falcons must migrate along coastlines. Perhaps he had been led astray by the archipelagic breeding habits of the species, but as with all falcons the Eleonora's Falcon is a land bird by origin and should migrate in a similar fashion to other falcon species. The fact that raptors in general can migrate through the North African desert and Sahel belt has become readily apparent from raptor counts at Cap Bon in Tunisia. However Walter (1979) overlooked these points. In his book, he began with two correct scientific statements "*we know nothing about the migration route in the late fall period or how the falcons migrate*" (Walter 1979, page 272), and continued to quote Vaughan's sceptical remark in 1961 about Stresemann's suggestion "*it is unlikely*" (page 274), but then finished with a map of the "*probable migration route*" (Fig. 49, page 276), i.e. as much above the sea as possible: from the Canary Islands and Morocco to Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean and Red Seas, along the coast of Africa to Mozambique and finally to Madagascar. Without a single piece of data to support this supposition, the advertising appeal of the drawn figure repressed the published words of caution and failed to explain how the falcons would be able to roost without drowning. It also ignored the simple conclusion to the contra-

ry "that Eleonora's Falcon normally migrates inland as any other raptor species does" (Ristow & Wink 1992-94, page 8). It is because of this that serious future publications presented data which, their authors claimed, lent support to Walter's hypothesis, when, in reality, they simply demonstrated the distribution of field workers' favourite watch sites. This is why the wrong migration route is still being published in colourful pictures for example in Spain (*Biologia* 7, 1997, 44), Greece (*Oxygen* 14, 2000, 67), and Germany (*Geo* 4, 2002, 48).

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Editorial note

Due to the delay in publishing this issue of il-Merill, there are several recent developments and observations pertinent to *Falco eleonora* research that should be highlighted as they are relevant to the content of this paper. Sadly, Tom Coles died before evaluating the more than 150 sightings of this species that he had compiled from Egypt, including the recovery in Egypt of a nestling ringed on the Canary Islands. Other interesting sightings include a dark morph individual recorded in Armenia on 2 June 2005 (Ananian, V. *et al.*: *Sandgrouse* 29, 2007, 103-105) and two records from Romania – a dark morph adult at the Danube delta on 29 August 2003 (Laszlo Szabo, Baczo Zoltan) and three individuals above the Babadag forest on 21 August 2008. Photographs of two of these birds have allowed identification of these birds as a light morph yearling female and a dark morph yearling female (Gyorgy Szimuly, Peter Csonka). The Bulgarian Rarity Committee have ceased assessing records of this species as there are now more than 100 sightings in the country since 1975. These sightings come from 18 locations at rocky shores of the Black Sea and from 62 locations at inland rocks preferentially near river valleys north of the Eastern and Western Rhodopi mountains (Ankov P. (Ed.) 2007. Atlas of breeding birds in Bulgaria. Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, Conservation series, Book 10, Sofia, pages 182-183). There have also been single records of this species from the Czech Republic (Sylvia 39, 2003, 155-157) and one near Zeebrugge, West-Vlaanderen in Belgium on 5 or 6 June 1997 (Dutch Birding 19, 1997, 134+210). In Malta, the National Museum of Natural History holds three ringed specimens taken locally: one (Vogelwarte 509 38 44) was ringed as a juvenile in a colony off Crete on 17.09.1965 and according to its plumage was probably shot in its first two years of life; the second (Radolfzell GN52276) was ringed as a chick aged *ca.* three weeks at Toro Island, Sardinia, on 22.09.2005 and shot in the same year of fledging; and the third (Athens E003824) ringed as a chick SE Aegean on 16.09.2005 was shot in 2006. Lastly, in the 2004-2006 survey of the Turkish coast 9 breeding sites and 5 possible breeding sites were found, giving a total of perhaps 50 pairs for the country (Ortaç Onmuş at Naxos workshop June 2007).

There is also a Turkish addition to Table 1 in this paper. A male nestling ringed in September 2000 was found exhausted near Işikli on 29 June 2007, approximately 500 km away from its native islet off Crete. Two aspects are worth commenting on regarding this recovery. Firstly, this falcon still had a subcutaneous implanted transponder chip, meaning it had carried this device for more than 6 years. Secondly, males of this age are breeders in their native colony and occupy nest territories in May, but in June the islet colonies are almost deserted of falcons. It therefore appears that during this period, some breeders tend to be further away from their nests than previously thought. Compare the four Canary falcons highlighted above which were recovered in Algeria and Morocco. In the 2004-2006 Greek census a total of 12,300 breeding pairs were counted (Dimalexis, T. *et al.*: *J. Ornithol.* 149, 2008, 23-30), this result being achieved through standardised methods as had been recommended by the BirdLife experts in Ristow (1999). Finally, the likely migration behaviour as stated by these experts is now being revealed by satellite tracking. Studies involve (i) for Sardinian falcons 2003-2005 (Gschweng, M. *et al.*: *Proc. R. Soc. B* 275, 2008, 2887-2896), (ii) for Balearic falcons in 2007 (Lopez-Lopez, P. *et al.*: *Zoological Studies* 48(4), 2009, 485-491), and (iii) for Greek falcons in 2009 as published on the internet at <http://www.ornithologiki.gr/life/falcoel/en/program/satellite.htm>.