

Five New Breeding Bird Species for the Maltese Islands

Between 2003 and 2009, no fewer than five new species of birds bred for the first time in Malta. These were the Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* in 2003 (Sultana 2003), the Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* in 2006, the Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* in 2007 (attempt failed) and 2010 (attempt succeeded), the Coot *Fulica atra* in 2008 (Raine *et al.* 2009) and the Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* in 2009. This short note details the first confirmed breeding records of each of these species, using the standard categories of breeding evidence used throughout Europe and as specified by the European Bird Census Council (EBCC).

Collared Dove

With only eight records up to 1994, the Collared Dove was a vagrant before the year 1999 (there are no records between 1995 and 1998). From 1999 onwards it was recorded annually, with sightings increasing each year (Sultana & Gauci 1982, Coleiro 1990-91, Coleiro & Attard Montalto 1992-94, Mercieca, Mallia & Sultana 1999). This increase of sightings in Malta corresponds to the range expansion of the Collared Dove, which started spreading from its original range in Western Asia reaching Europe in the early 1930s (Snow & Perrins 1998). By the late 1990s it had colonised most of Europe and North Africa.

Following a phone call to one of the authors (RG) by a Santa Maria Estate (Għajn Żejtuna) resident on 16th August 2003 saying that “doves” were present in his garden, the site was visited early in the morning of the following day. Five adult Collared Doves were present in the area and a nest, containing two almost fully feathered chicks, was found in the garden, confirming the first breeding record. The nest site was located in an Aleppo Pine Tree *Pinus halepensis*, 3.5 meters above the ground.

Little Grebe

The Little Grebe was considered as a very scarce migrant in the past as their preferred habitat was very scarce. After the creation of Simar Nature Reserve by Birdlife Malta in 1992, the Little Grebe was recorded more often as it started to winter at the reserve.

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On 16 December 2005, five adult birds were recorded at Simar Nature Reserve. Two birds were seen engaged in territorial behaviour and the presumed pair was also seen performing a courtship display and carrying nest material. On 20th December the presumed pair was seen chasing away a male Wigeon *Anas penelope* from their territory and on 22nd December, one adult Little Grebe was seen carrying nesting material. On 10th February 2006, a nest with two recently hatched chicks was finally located by one of the authors (RG), thus confirming successful breeding. On 17th February, three chicks were seen along with one of the adults, suggesting that one of the chicks was away from the nest site when it was initially discovered on the 10th. This record is also of interest in

that it is a very early breeding record of the Little Grebe in Europe, which normally breeds much later, between late February and May (Snow & Perrins 1998).

Little Egret

Although the Little Egret is a regular migrant, both in spring and autumn, it is very difficult for this species to breed in the Maltese Islands. This is because it is a colonial bird and therefore, due to the lack of suitable, undisturbed habitat, it is very difficult for a colony to be established. This is also exacerbated by widespread illegal hunting in the islands, with Little Egrets often being targeted by poachers.

On 24th June 2007, following a report that Little Egrets were present in the vicinity of a private bird park at Salina, the area was visited in the morning. A pair with a nest containing three eggs were shown to Denis Cachia and the authors by the owner of the Salina Bird Park. This Bird Park includes several large aviaries containing a wide range of imported bird species, including Little and Cattle *Bubulcus ibis* Egrets breeding colonies. The pair of Little Egrets were breeding

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inside the bird park area, on top of a big aviary where the captive egret colony were breeding. The location was revisited again on 2nd July and the adult female was still incubating. On the 25th July, an adult was still incubating the eggs. As this was longer than the incubation period should have taken, it was expected that the eggs were not going to hatch. The authors later learned that one of the adults was shot illegally by poachers. It was later confirmed by the owner of the Bird Park, after the nest was abandoned, that two of the eggs were fertilised and one was addled (K. Mallia pers. comm.). This record confirmed the first breeding attempt by this species, although it was not successful.



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The failed nest in 2007

On 29th May 2010 the nest of a pair of Little Egrets was again located from outside the Salina Bird Park by Denis Cachia and an adult bird was seen incubating. As in 2007, the Little Egrets were breeding on top of the aviary, just above the mixed captive-bred egret colony inside.

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The successful nest in 2010

On 5th June 2010 the nest was still under incubation (D. Cachia pers. comm.). When the park was visited on 26th June 2010 the nest contained four young. The owner of the park confirmed that the nest had contained four eggs in early June 2010. On 21st July 2010, four almost fully fledged young were present, and were seen moving about on top of the aviary (D. Cachia pers. comm.). This record confirmed the first successful breeding by this species. Unfortunately, most of the newly fledged birds were eventually illegally shot by hunters adjacent to the Bird Park, along with at least one of the breeding pair.

It is to be noted that besides the breeding pair, there were up to seven more wild Little Egrets in the area of the park, using the bird park for their roost and visiting Ghadira Nature Reserve daily for feeding. It is likely that the food for the young was also brought from Ghadira Reserve, which is about 6km from the nesting area. Furthermore, two of these Little Egrets were regularly seen carrying nesting material to a corner of Ghadira Nature Reserve in late July and early August (R. Vella pers. comm.). However, the birds eventually left the area.

Coot

A small number of Coots winter at Simar Nature Reserve each year, arriving in late October and leaving by the end of March. On 23rd March 2008 an adult Coot was seen carrying nesting material (a long reed stem) at Simar Nature Reserve.

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On the 16th April it was observed behaving in a territorial manner as it was very aggressive towards a Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and a Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* and breeding was suspected. On 19th April breeding was confirmed as a family party of two adults and five chicks were observed by F. Grice, N. Carter and S. Downing. On 20th April, six chicks (not five as seen previously) were observed accompanied by their parents. These chicks eventually fledged and remained at the reserve throughout summer.

Pallid Swift

The Pallid Swift, a species which could have been overlooked in the past, is a regular migrant in Spring and Autumn.

On 24th May 2009 the cliffs at Dwejra Gozo were visited and three Pallid Swifts were observed calling and chasing each other and going under the area known as the Azure Window. Breeding of Pallid Swift was thus suspected. On 7th June the area was visited again in the morning by the authors, accompanied by Gilbert Haber. Over 15 Pallid Swifts were observed entering a large cave further along the cliffs from the Azure Window. The birds were seen entering crevices in the cave's walls with food balls in their mouths. On the 4th July 2009 the site was revisited and 25+ Pallid Swifts were seen entering the sea cave with most of them carrying food balls in their mouths further confirming that they had young in the nests. These sightings were sufficient to confirm breeding under the EBCC criteria 'ON' – "Adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indication Occupied Nest (including high nest or nest holes, the contents of which cannot be seen) or adults incubating".

Also of note was an illegally shot Pallid Swift that was found at Marsascalea Chapel on the 26th June 2009. Several Pallid Swifts had been noted at this site on multiple occasions over the previous weeks and were seen actively prospecting. The dead Pallid Swift was found to have a brood patch, indicating probable breeding (Jean Paul Fiott pers. comm.). Pallid Swifts with brood patches were also caught in the summer of 2009 during ringing studies in Mдина (Mario V Gauci pers. comm.).

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~~Re-assessment of the Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* record of 1957~~

~~A thorough examination of the National Ornithological collections housed at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in Mдина was undertaken by the author from 2002 to 2006. This entailed taking a photographic record for each specimen, as well as a new digitized cataloguing system. This exercise also included the identification of every individual specimen as well as cross-referencing dates and any previous publication references. Several interesting specimens, previously unreported or misidentified and reported in past works were found in the reference collection. Among these specimens the author found one bird listed as a Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*, which was labelled as taken at Tal-Handaq on 2nd November 1957. This specimen was first reported by Vella Gaffiero (1975) on whose authority the record was also published by subsequent authors (Bannerman & Vella Gaffiero 1976 and Sultana & Gauci 1982).~~

~~In the old acquisition register of the museum there are three entries for Rock Sparrows (0442, 0443 and 1682). The first two are undated but are labelled as belonging to the late A. Sammut of Naxxar, whose collection was acquired by the museum in 1974. The third bird was the Tal-Handaq specimen, as mentioned above. On close examination the first two birds were correctly identified as Rock Sparrows but the 1957 specimen was misidentified. The latter bird turned out to be a female Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* covered with greenish-yellow dye on the throat, wings and flanks. In view of this the 1957 record of Rock Sparrow must be omitted from the Malta list.~~

~~Vella Gaffiero (1975) mentions two skins housed at the NMNH: the 1957 one and another taken by Dr. De Lucca on 17 October 1955. However the later specimen is not included with the list of specimens donated to the National Museum by V. DeLucca and C. DeLucca (Ms. at NMNH), and attempts to locate it has proved futile.~~