

### **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 Marsascala 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 Mdina (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 Mdina 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.



In the meantime a new undated specimen has been included in the Museum collection (catalogue reference Orn.2869). This bird formed part of a confiscated collection of illegally shot birds that was received by the Museum on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2008. The presence of a number of North African birds accompanying this specimen throws strong doubts on whether this particular bird was taken locally, and it is suggested that this particular record is not accepted. It can therefore be concluded by the above review that there are only two Rock Sparrow specimens confirmed as taken in Malta housed in the NMNH collection.

The Rock Sparrow is listed as a vagrant to the Maltese Islands, with at least 10 records. A review of past records up to 1982 is found in Sultana & Gauci (1982).

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### ~~First record of the Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* in the Maltese Islands~~

~~On 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2002 a bird which when extracted from a mist-net at the Ghadira Nature Reserve was presumed to be a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, the only leaf warbler usually present at the time, on closer examination turned out to be a Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*. When the bird was taken out of the bird-bag to be ringed it was immediately noticed that it had very white underparts and a conspicuous broad wing bar. Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* initially came to mind; however, the wing formula did not agree with this species.~~

~~**Description of the bird:** Chiffchaff-sized. Upperparts olive-green with a greenish wash on mantle and a conspicuous rather bright greenish tinge to edges of flight feathers. The greater coverts were broadly tipped buffish-white forming a conspicuous wing-bar. The three outer median coverts were also narrowly tipped buffish-white giving a hint of a second, faint wing bar. The underparts were conspicuously white with a few very faint yellowish streaks. The bird had a broad buffish-white supercilium above a rather dark eye-stripe. The outer four tail feathers had a narrow whitish edge on the inner web. The plumage was fresh, indicating the bird was in its first year.~~

~~**Colour of soft parts:** Iris: dark brown; Upper mandible: brown; Lower mandible: yellowish, tipped brown; Mouth: yellow; Tarsus: dark brown, but toes paler (yellowish-brown).~~

~~**Wing formula and measurements:** Emarginated 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> pp, 1<sup>st</sup> p = 7 > pc, Wp = 4-5<sup>th</sup> pp, 2<sup>nd</sup> p = 7-8. Wing length: 58mm. Bill to skull: 11.8mm.~~

~~**Range and movements:** The species breeds in N.E. Europe and Turkestan, the Caucasus and N. Iranian regions, the Himalayan massif from Kashmir east to Kansu, and throughout east Siberia and winters throughout the Indian peninsula east to Thailand. Six subspecies are recognized. (Cramp, S (ed.) (1992) *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* Vol. VI). The National Rarities Committee forwarded the description of the bird to Lars Svensson and to Kevin Baker for their comments. Lars Svensson was of the opinion that there is much in favour of *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus*, the subspecies breeding in the westernmost part of its range, but other points are closer to the subspecies *P. t. plumbeitarsus*, which breeds in the easternmost parts of its range. He was therefore of the opinion that in the probable eventuality that these subspecies are split into separate species this record would have to be reviewed. Kevin Baker commented that the description pointed very strongly to *P.t. viridanus*.~~

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