

SHORT NOTES

Irruption of Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* during 1990

The Common Crossbill is a very rare visitor to the Maltese Islands but in some years irruptions and small influxes occur; on such occasions it is frequent, and its metallic call often heard. Unfortunately when such irruptions occur most of the birds are trapped or shot and it is difficult to make proper counts and observations of such birds. The last known irruption took place during summer of 1990 (Coleiro & Attard Montalto 1992-1994) and the following is a summary of sightings, mainly as observed by local birdwatchers.

Age and Sex of birds trapped for Ringing	Numbers
Adult Males	8
First Year Males	3
Second Year Males	1
Males (Not aged)	2
Adult Females	8
First year birds (Not sexed)	3
TOTAL	25

Table 1. From 1 to 8 July 1990 a total of 25 Crossbills where trapped and ringed at Wied il-Luq, Buskett, and their sex and age was recorded.

Date	Place	Nos.	Date	Place	Nos.
24/6	Buskett	11	3/8	Ghadira	1
30/6	Buskett	13	4/8	Buskett	1
1/7	Buskett	25	5/8	Bingemma	1
2/7	Ghadira	1	10/8	Valletta	2
2/7	Buskett	21+	15/8	Bingemma	7
3/7	Buskett	20+	18/8	Buskett	2+
4/7	Buskett	35+	19/8	Buskett	1
5/7	Buskett	52	25/8	Buskett	2+
6/7	Buskett	25	25/8	Chadwick Lakes	c6
7/7	Mtarfa	1	25/8	Bingemma	6
7/7	Buskett	40+	25/8	Dwejra, Malta	3
7/7	Bingemma	1	25/8	Ghadira	1
8/7	Buskett	30	26/8	Buskett	5+
8/7	Rabat	16	29/8	Sliema	1
9/7	Buskett	10+	30/8	Ghadira	1
9/7	Birzebbuga	1	31/8	Ghadira	6
11/7	Buskett	3	1/9	Buskett	1
14/7	Ghadira	1	1/9	Bingemma	1
14/7	Buskett	1	2/9	Buskett	1
19/7	Ghadira	2	2/9	Buskett	1
21/7	Buskett	2	2/9	Chadwick Lakes	1
22/7	Ghadira	1	4/9	Dwejra, Malta	2
22/7	Rabat	1	20/9	Mdina	1
24/7	Ghadira	1	17/10	Xemxija	1
26/7	Birzebbuga	2	18/10	Buskett	1
28/7	Sliema	1	18/10	Ghadira	1
1/8	Zejtun	1	26/10	Buskett	2
2/8	Ghadira	8	27/10	Buskett	2
2/8	Buskett	1	10/11	Buskett	2
2/8	Birkirkara	1	21/11	Buskett	1
2/8	Victoria	5+			

Table 2. Birds observed by birdwatchers in various areas of Malta and Gozo from 24 June to 21 November 1990. On some dates there were more than one record per place. In such cases only the highest count is recorded.

Crossbills feed on the seeds of Pine trees (*Pinus sp*) and they also need plenty of fresh water to drink, especially during the hot summer months. Buskett with its Aleppo Pine *Pinus halepensis* groves and the fresh water source at Wied il-Luq was the main area visited by this bird. Correspondingly most of the observations and counts took place there.

First recorded during 1990 were 11 birds at Buskett on 24 June. Peak dates were during the first week of July when the highest count of 52 was made on the 5th. For a complete list of sightings see Table 2. After the first week of July numbers started to decrease dramatically as most of the birds were either trapped or shot. In July over 100 birds were reported caught by bird trappers and shooters from the Buskett area alone. Other birds were reported taken from places like Mizieb, Addolorata Cemetery, Bahrija, Delimara and l-Ahrax. Records of up to 7 birds were logged on several dates with the last sighting of a single bird at Buskett on 21 November.

25 birds were trapped and ringed during five ringing sessions at Wied il-Luq, Buskett from 1 to 8 July. The highest catch was on the 7th when 15 birds were trapped from near the water source in just one hour. This was early in the morning when the birds came down to drink. Their weight varied from 38.0g to 48.5g with a mean of 42.25g. Sexing and aging was possible in most birds handled. 14 birds (56%) were males, 8 (32%) were females and 3 (12%) were unsexed first year birds (see Table 1).

There have been 6 other irruptions and/or small influxes of Common Crossbills recorded in Malta. The first occurred in July 1909 when over 200 birds were caught; and others seen in October (Caruana Gatto 1910). A small passage took place in the second week of July 1916 (Despott 1917). A rather heavy passage took place in mid-October 1929 (Despott 1930) and another large irruption was recorded from August to October 1930 when a total of 550 birds were caught in three localities

(Despott & Conti Meli 1931). Sporadic individuals were recorded until the next small irruption which occurred in September 1963, when over 50 birds were trapped near Rabat. A small influx took place from July to September 1972 when at least 14 birds were recorded (Sultana & Gauci 1982).

Acknowledgments

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References

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Raymond Galea – 'Osprey' Ganu Street, Birkirkara BKR 06, Malta. raygalea@global.net.mt

~~A Linnet's *Carduelis cannabina* nest on Gozo~~

~~On 11 March 1990 at 1420 hrs while walking through an area of garigue largely dominated by Tree Spurge *Euphorbia dendroides* and Wolfbane *Periploca angustifolia* a female Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* was flushed ca. 4-5 meters away from me. This piece of garigue is very near a sea cliff in the NE part of the Island of Gozo. On a closer examination, a nest containing 5 eggs was found in a 75cm tall Tree Spurge. It was very well concealed by the leaves, 45cm above the ground. A bulky cup of dry grass, plant stems and small twigs, lined with hair, down and feathers. The eggs were bluish white with some purplish spots and speckles, mostly at the wider end. On 17 March it still contained 5 eggs.~~

~~The site was last visited on 24 March at 1315 hrs, when five young of 6-7 days were present in the nest. Some grey down was still present, mainly on the head. Gape flanges were pale pink and the inside of mouth a pinkish-red. The pulli were ringed. On both three occasions the female came calling very near while I was examining the nest.~~

~~This is the first record of a Linnet breeding in a Tree Spurge. Nests are usually built in Carob *Ceratonia siliqua*, Olive *Olea europea*, Citrus *Citrus sp.* and Almond *Prunus dulcis* trees, but also in overhanging bushy plants on steep slopes or cliffs (Sultana & Gauci 1982). The Linnet is a very common autumn migrant in the Maltese Islands, repassing in smaller numbers in spring. It is common in winter. A few pairs try to breed occasionally, mostly in Gozo.~~

References

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~~Raymond Galea – 'Osprey' Ganu Street, Birkirkara BKR 06, Malta. raygalea@global.net.mt~~

~~Male Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* raising young by itself~~

~~During a survey of the population of Spectacled warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* in early June 1999, a nest containing four healthy young, nearly ready to fledge, was located in the morning of 5th June in a Golden Samphire *Inula crithmoides* plant at Il-Hotba tal-Qasam in the north-western part of Gozo. The nest was observed for more than an hour and only the male was seen, feeding the young frequently and regularly. The site was visited again in the afternoon to confirm that only one parent was feeding the young and again, for more than two hours, only the male could be seen. One assumes that a predator must have taken the female and the male was able to continue to raise the young by itself.~~

~~Joe Sultana – 3, Dar Gajdor, Gajdor Street, Xaghra, Gozo XRA 104, Malta. jsultana@global.net.mt~~