

BirdTalk

BirdLife Malta Newsletter

Issue 68

November - December 2001

BirdLife Malta is the Society for the protection of birds and their habitat. It is the Partner of BirdLife International in Malta

Out of reach, by default!

The Egyptian connection and the stuffed-bird syndrome

Bird lovers always react with mixed feelings when they hear that Customs have made a haul of dead birds. One of course feels glad to learn that killers and smugglers of protected birds have been caught and eventually punished. On the other hand, to witness the sheer waste of life on seeing press pictures of the dead birds is a sad experience indeed. One such story concerns the recent arrest of three Gozitan hunters.

Many Maltese hunters visit Egypt during the open season, officially to shoot wild duck. True to form, several of them choose to disregard the law and pull the trigger on any bird that falls within range, whether or not it is protected. Enforcement in Egypt is poor since the authorities are much more concerned about tourism than wildlife. So our "cowboys" make the best of the situation and freely collect the kill, which they then try to steal into Malta on re-entry.

Following one such shooting spree to Egypt in December, three hunters apparently lost their nerve at the last moment and abandoned their bags at the airport just before passing through Customs. The bags, however, were seized by Customs officials and found to contain 160 bird skins. Most of the birds were protected species such as vultures, flamingoes, owls and kingfishers. The owners were traced to Gozo and brought in for questioning.

Since 1993, Customs officers have seized over 1000 bird skins. Well done for that! However this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Hunters run these risks for one of two reasons, either to enrich their

own pathetic collections of stuffed birds, or else to sell the skins to other collectors. Trade in bird skins is a booming business in Malta - the recent haul had a street value of over Lm7000. The rarer the bird, the heftier the sum. A griffon vulture would fetch over Lm1000.

To men with a total lack of conscience, such figures are too attractive to ignore. It is a gamble which too often pays off, aided by minimal enforcement in Egypt and a glaring loophole in the Maltese regulations: there is at present no way that local enforcement officers can verify the date a specimen was stuffed and mounted! This means that no matter how many protected birds the police may find in a stuffed bird collection, the collector can always bluff his way out of trouble by claiming that the specimens in his collection were mounted *before* the bird regulations came into force, and therefore *before* the birds became protected!

There are, of course, ways around this problem - tagging for one. Placing a tamper-proof tag on the freshly mounted specimen is the normal method, and BirdLife Malta has for years been pressing the authorities to start putting this system into practice,



Stuffed turkey for Christmas? No, stuffed marsh harrier... for the fun of it!

which would enable the Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) team to clamp down on the illegal trade. But so far this plea has fallen on cloth ears. There is indeed no serious will to improve matters. Apparently, things were *intended* not to be watertight.

And so the collectors grin and stay out of reach, the police stand by in frustration unable to finish their job, the skin trade stays healthy, the cool hunters keep pulling the triggers, while the birds... well, those just keep getting killed!

BirdLife Malta pictures

Michael Sammut

BirdLife Malta wins website award

We're very proud that the BirdLife Malta website won the **Non-Profit and Voluntary Website** category in the DataStream Malta Web Awards.

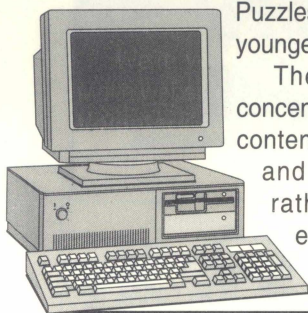
As the largest and oldest nature organisation in Malta, BirdLife Malta feels it is appropriate to have a website of a high standard. Our website is a showcase of what the Society does to protect birds and nature in Malta.

The BirdLife Malta website gives useful information about the organisation itself and its various sections and committees. The website has pages dealing with Klabb Huttaf (the junior section), Publications, Conservation, Education, Research, Press Releases and Bird Reserves. Another page includes a selection of useful and interesting links to other bird related websites, both local and foreign.

A very popular page in the website lists all the recent bird sightings in Malta. More than 35 members contribute their birdwatching records (via email) for inclusion in this page. The page is updated almost daily and includes an archive of records for previous months. A banner showing the current weather in Malta is also displayed on this page.

Interactivity in the website is provided by means of a Guestbook and a monthly Poll. There is also a Jigsaw Puzzles section for the younger browsers.

The website concentrates more on content, functionality and ease of use rather than excessive graphics.



W I N N E R

Nonetheless, the website is well-illustrated with photographs and drawings.

The website, now in its fourth year, was originally designed and set up by Konrad Pizzuto. For the past 15 months it has been in the hands of Denis Cachia. Various members, especially Council members and active birdwatchers, regularly contribute material and ideas for the website, and constantly make valid criticism when necessary. BirdLife Malta is also very grateful to Kemmunit for their support.

The award presentation ceremony, held on 1 December 2001, was excellently organised and the coverage of the event on television strengthened its prestige. BirdLife Malta's webmaster Denis Cachia attended the event and received the award on the Society's behalf.

BirdLife Malta would like to thank DataStream for the honour of this award.

Excerpts from a birdwatcher's log:

4 Nov 2001 - Qawra, pm

1 CORMORANT (SHOT)
 "...Yes of course it was shot. Two speedboats started chasing it. The bird outsmarted them and turned round, heading for St. Paul's Islets. Undiscouraged, and wanting to regain their pride the hunters followed it, a third boat joined forces (otherwise the bird would be in advantage!!). One boat on the left, one on the right and one waiting at the point of the Islets. The bird seemed safe heading inland, then it made an awful mistake and turned out to sea again. A barrage of shots, the bird was hit and tried to fly away, but smashed into the sea. The boats closed in, the bird dived to avoid them, as it surfaced the final barrage, a final splash in the sea and the dead bird was picked up by the throat..."

1 Dec 2001 - Qawra

"...hunters on a dinghy shot down a black-necked grebe that had been spotted by another dinghy... the situation ended in an argument in which one hunter picked up the dead grebe from the water and threw it on board the other boat. A hunter on the latter boat picked up the grebe, pulled off its head, then threw it back into the sea with anger."

Such barbaric activity (which brings to serious doubt our nation's claim to civilised behaviour) is sadly very common nowadays at sea around our shores, where police monitoring and control are still virtually inexistent.

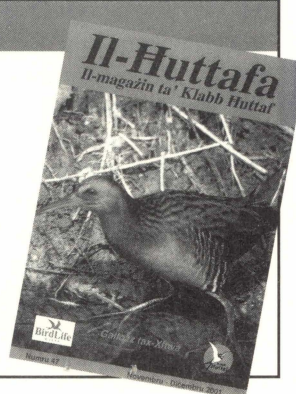
Killing birds at sea, away from police, tourists and those @#*\$* BirdLife watchers is becoming a very attractive alternative for the bird killer, and as society becomes more affluent, fast seacraft comes within reach of more "field sportsmen". What happens out there is anyone's guess, but one shudders to imagine what massacres take place. This relatively new fad may well be the cause of the dearth of larger (=hunnable!) birds seen in recent years in Malta. No wonder the landbased hunter hates his floating counterpart!

Junior Mag

The latest issue (No47) of **Il-Huttafa** deals with birdwatching hotspots in the cooler months of the year, a close look at the woodcock, a feature about Filfla's history, as well as the threats of light pollution and deforestation.

The cover shows the elusive water rail, a marshland bird that while not uncommon, is not easily seen (let alone photographed!) due to its skulking habits.

Il-Huttafa is the bimonthly magazine for Klabb Huttaf, the junior (Under 16) section of BirdLife Malta. Subscription to the club or to the magazine is Lm2 per annum.



New posters...

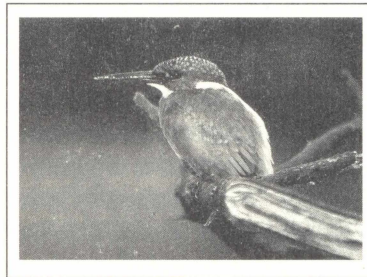
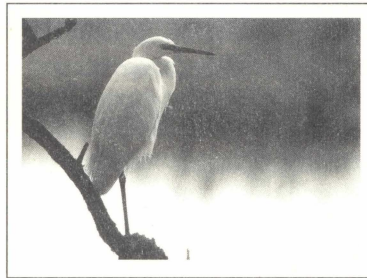


In November BirdLife Malta published the fifth and sixth poster in the *Hieles, Haj u Sabih* series. The new posters feature the **common chaffinch** (photo by Victor Falzon), a popular finch, and **hoopoe** (photo by Denis Cachia), a protected species but which too often falls victim to the shotgun due to its attractive pattern. Such posters are very useful tools for educational purposes, and the Society uses them for promoting the beauty of birds alive in their natural habitat.

BirdLife Malta distributes these posters freely in schools to help teachers visually drive home the environmental message. The Society also sends a copy of these posters to its junior members.

BirdLife is grateful to the EPD for sponsoring the printing of these posters.

New cards...



A set of two all-occasion cards are now available for sale from BirdLife Malta. The cards feature two stunning photographs of a **little egret** and **common kingfisher**, both taken by BirdLife Malta photographer Michael Sammut. The cards do not carry any specific message - in this way they can be used for a variety of occasions.

The cards are available either singly at 15c each or in packs of 8 (4+4) at Lm1 per pack. Call BirdLife Malta office, or pay a visit to Ghadira nature reserve.

All profits from sales of these cards will go for bird protection.

Ghadira weekend opening hours

January 09.30am - 03.30pm
Feb-May 10.30am - 04.30pm



A dear friend...



Herbert E Axell
MBE (1915-2001)

BirdLife Malta has learnt with deep regret of the passing away of Herbert E Axell MBE. Bert, as his many friends fondly knew him, is synonymous with Ghadira Nature Reserve. It was he who designed the original plans and actually supervised the engineering works in the early 1980s. He did this voluntarily and with great dedication, using his vast experience in such projects.

Bert's first appointment with the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) was in 1951 as warden at Dungeness in Kent. In 1959 he became Senior Warden at Minsmere in Suffolk. In 1975 he was appointed RSPB Landuse Adviser, planning new reserves in England, Spain and Malta. In later years he travelled widely, lecturing in various countries.

In 1960 he was awarded the RSPB Medal for Bird Protection, the MBE in 1965 for his innovative conservation work at Minsmere, and a Winston Churchill Fellowship in 1975. His publications include *Minsmere: portrait of a bird reserve* (1977), *The Birds of Britain* (1978) and *Of Birds and Men* (1992).

Bert Axell has passed away but his legacy to birds and conservation remains, not least at Ghadira.

New President!!!

Due to pressing commitments, Dr Antoine Vella has recently had to withdraw from President of the Society, a post he has occupied since January 1999. On behalf of the Society, the BirdLife Malta Council sincerely thanks Antoine for his years of service and dedication in a position which at times could be stressful!

At a recent Council meeting, Mr Joseph M Mangion was elected by unanimous vote as the new President of the Society. Joseph joined BirdLife Malta in 1980 as a young member, since which time he has occupied various posts on committees and working groups within the organisation. Since June 2001, Joseph has also been vice-president of BirdLife Malta. He is also a qualified bird ringer. On behalf of the Society, the Council



Joseph Mangion

wishes to thank Joseph for accepting this challenging role and promises him full support in the on-going struggle for bird protection.

birdlife malta pictures

Elizabeth Coxon Award

The **Elizabeth Coxon Award** is a prize awarded annually by the Klabb Huttaf Committee to a young member who stands out for dedication in conservation work. This year's prize goes to **Saviour Spiteri** for his level of commitment in leadership and sheer physical work for BirdLife Malta. Congratulations Saviour, and thanks!

Elizabeth Coxon is a UK member of BirdLife Malta and has been a staunch supporter for more than 30 years!



Saviour busy plastering away at the Kemmuna ringing station!

mark gauzi

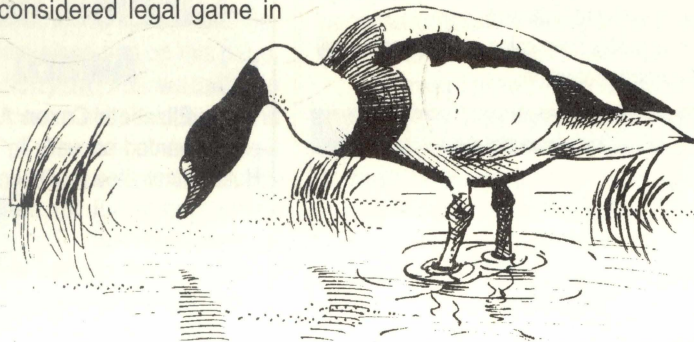
birder's log

by joe sultana

November 2001 saw the last of the trans-Saharan migrants. By mid-November all those migrants that winter in Africa south of the Sahara (eg. swallow) had disappeared, while those that winter in the Mediterranean basin, such as the robin, settled down in their wintering area. The list of birds seen on any outing in the countryside in November and December should have included some finches (**common linnets** were quite evident this year), **robins**, **common chiffchaffs**, **pied wagtails** and **grey wagtails**, **hedge accentors**, **common stonechats**, **meadow pipits** (in smaller numbers this year) and **song thrushes**.

Sky larks should also have figured in your list. This species, once abundant and widespread in Europe, has decreased dramatically in the last few years. Who would have thought that the familiar "alwetta" would be classed as a vulnerable species! The same has happened to the song thrush. Unfortunately, both species are still considered legal game in Malta!

The dedicated birdwatchers who spent hours on end in November and December braving the seaspray to scan the horizon with their telescopes, particularly from Qawra, recorded good numbers of **great crested grebes**, **great cormorants** and **northern gannets**, plus various gull species, with **black-headed gull** giving the highest figures. Ducks too appeared in good numbers. Flocks of **Eurasian wigeons**, **pintails**, **northern shovelers** and even **common shelducks** figured frequently on birders' logs. In the last weeks of the year classic v-formations of wild geese (mainly **greylag geese**) rewarded the watchers' patience - geese are not a common sight in these parts. **Moorhens** and **water rails** were a common sight at Ghadira. Some rare species such as the **common gull** and various **skuas** were also logged during November and December, and a **smew**, a vagrant species for Malta, completed the picture.



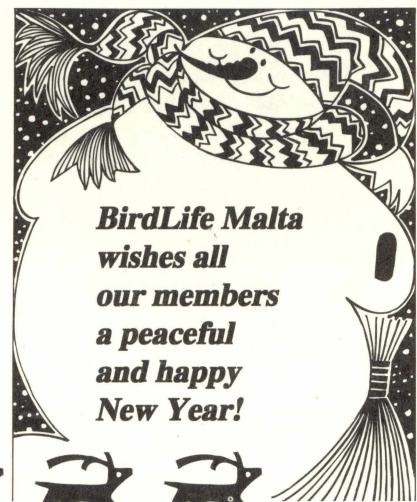
Crime and Punishment

The prosecution of Daniel Giordmaina made the headlines in December, when he was fined the maximum penalty of Lm500 and had his shotgun confiscated for an indefinite period. Giordmaina was seen by BirdLife Malta people shooting down an osprey from a main road leading to Rabat!

A further 14 hunters were sentenced in November for bird crimes, with fines ranging from Lm10 to Lm70 (plus two suspended jail sentences) for contraventions such as being in possession of illegal species, overloading the shotgun, hunting without licence, hunting close to residential areas and hunting in the close season. Prosecutions were all made by members of the ALE.

BirdLife Malta congratulates Magistrate Dr T Micallef Trigona for his no-nonsense approach: it is an encouragement to all who work for the end of such barbaric behaviour.

BirdLife Malta also urges the ALE to sustain their worthy efforts. It is only in this way that the criminals will ever come to respect the law.



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