

## Berries as a food source for various species of birds

The relation between birds and berries has often been noted; berries are a source of food for many species of birds, that in turn help in the dispersion of the plant through discarding the seeds, either in their faeces or by regurgitating, after eating the berry (see Snow & Snow 1988).

In the Maltese Islands several species of plants produce berries that have been noted to constitute a source of food for birds. One example is the Mediterranean Buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*, a cultivated and naturalised species which produces berries in summer. Sardinian Warblers *Sylvia melanocephala* have often been noted feeding on the berries of this shrub at Buskett; faeces found on the plant itself contained the seeds as well as parts of the skin of the berry, suggesting that Sardinian Warblers are dispersers of the Mediterranean Buckthorn. The berries of the Small Buckthorn *Rhamnus oleoides*, a closely related species that grows in rocky places, are very often eaten by Subalpine Warblers *Sylvia cantillans*, during their late summer - early autumn migration through the islands.

Another shrub that produces berries which are eaten by several bird species is the Lentisk *Pistacia lentiscus*. At Buskett young plants were found growing a considerable distance away from larger, mature shrubs; some of these young plants were growing directly below perches, suggesting that dispersal is occurring through bird faeces. At Simar, a Lentisk shrub was found growing at the base of Eucalyptus *Eucalyptus* sp. trees commonly used for roosting, as well as in a Tamarisk *Tamarix africana* grove. In this last locality Olive *Olea europea* saplings were also found, suggesting the dispersive role of Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* which frequent the Tamarisk grove and were often observed feeding on the fruits of Olives growing in the area.

Another well-noted relation is that between the Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* and the Ivy *Hedera helix* (see for instance Sultana & Gauci 1982). At Buskett, where Ivy is plentiful, Blackcaps are frequently observed feasting on berries during the winter. Bird faeces around and under Ivy growths are often stained black and contain seeds. By late February berry-bearing stalks are not uncommonly stripped bare - this was noticed in February 1999 for instance. Another species which has been observed feeding on Ivy berries is the Starling. In addition, Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos* (and occasionally Redwings *T. iliacus* and Fieldfares *T. pilaris*, both of which are uncommon winter visitors to the islands) are sometimes flushed from Ivy thickets at Buskett, suggesting feeding; *Turdus* sp. have been widely recorded as feeding on Ivy berries and acting as dispersers (Snow & Snow 1988).

A female Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* was observed feeding on berries of the Nightshade *Solanum* sp. at Mosta in June 1999. The bird crushed the soft flesh, ate the seeds and pulp, and discarded the skin.

### References

- Snow, B. & Snow, D. 1988. *Birds and Berries*. T & AD Poyser, London.  
Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1982. *A New Guide to the Birds of Malta*. The Ornithological Society, Malta.

Alex Casha – "Ave Maria". II-Barjoli Street, Mosta, Malta. pandionlex@mail.global.net.mt

Editorial note: Sultana & Gauci (op. cit.) report that the berries of the Bramble *Rubus ulmifolius* and the Toothed Myoporum *Myoporum tetrandrum* often serve as a food source for migrating Subalpine Warblers. They also record Blackcaps feeding on berries of the Deadly Nightshade *Solanum nigrum* at Lunzjata, Gozo. The editor has observed a Song Thrush feeding on the fruit of the Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* at Ghajn Zejtuna. Blackcaps as well as Spanish Sparrows have often been observed feeding on berries of the Deadly Nightshade in the same locality; when handled for ringing, the undertail coverts of the former species were often noted to be stained a dark purple, no doubt from the faeces. *Sylvia* sp. warblers of various species have often been observed feeding on Lentisk berries on Comino - indeed, the spread of this plant species across the garigue landscape of the island may be related to berry feeding by birds. In addition, various fruits are widely known in the Maltese Islands to provide food for birds - notable examples include the Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* feeding on the fruits of the White Mulberry *Morus alba* and the Japanese Loquat *Eriobotrya japonica*, and various species (notably *Sylvia* sp. warblers) feeding on the fruit of the Fig *Ficus carica*. The relation between birds and berries / fruit in the Maltese Islands, particularly the value of fruit as a food source during migration, is a complex and interesting one and certainly deserves systematic research. See also M.A. Thake "the diet of three Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochrurus* wintering at Mdina, Malta", this volume.