

~~Xenophobia, provided that it is sufficiently mobile for the choice to be meaningful. The phenomena are most easily observed in birds but might also be found in other animals.~~

~~The author would like to thank Dr. C.M. Perrins for commenting on an earlier draft of the manuscript.~~

### **References**

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Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1988. Ringing report for 1986-87. *II-Merill* 25: 41-52.~~

~~Martin A. Thake~~

~~MAT - 169 Fleur de Lys Rd., Birkirkara BKR 02, Malta~~

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## **~~Male Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* run over by a car while fighting~~**

~~Fights among Spanish Sparrows are common in February in Malta. The fighting birds flutter close together and push, grasp or scratch at one another with their feet. The fighting birds inevitably lose height, and sometimes fall to the ground, still locked in combat.~~

~~On 14 Feb 1989, I was seated in a moving car on my way to work when two sparrows locked in combat appeared ahead of the car in a side road at Msida, a built-up area. They floated down to the ground just ahead of the car, and looking back through the rear window, I could see that one of the sparrows had been run over and lay crushed on the road surface. Later in the day, I returned to the scene of the incident on foot, and I could ascertain that the crushed bird was a male Spanish Sparrow.~~

~~This observation shows just how absorbed the birds were as they fought. The near approach of a bright red car passed unnoticed long enough for one of the fighting birds to be crushed by the wheels.~~

~~Clearly, models of fighting behaviour which ignore the risk of predation on the combatants by an alert predator, are simplistic when applied to fighting among prey species.~~

~~Martin A. Thake~~

~~MAT - 169 Fleur de Lys Rd., Birkirkara BKR 02, Malta~~

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## **Interspecific territorial behaviour among three species of *Turdidae* wintering in Malta**

This note reports the results of several years of casual observations, and two winters in which observations were carried out more carefully. The behaviour of wintering Robins *Erithacus rubecula*, Stonechats *Saxicola torquata*, and Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros* has been observed in Malta for several years.

Their niches are largely separate because these species occupy different habitats. The habitats they occupy while they winter in Malta are listed in Table 1. The Maltese countryside is very varied topographically and severely disturbed by agriculture and urban development. As a result, many areas occur which *prima facie* might seem suitable for more than one of these species.

**Table 1**  
**The habitats of some species of Turdidae wintering in Malta**

<b>Robin</b>	Woodland, maquis, farmland containing scattered trees and gardens
<b>Stonechat</b>	Rocky garigue steppe and farmland containing few trees
<b>Black Redstart</b>	Rocky garigue steppe near cliffs, some urban areas, especially bastions and in agricultural land at relatively low density

**Table 2**  
**Data (from Cramp 1988) relating to the niches of 3 species of Turdidae wintering in Malta**

<p><b>Robin</b>  Bill length: male 14.4mm, female 14.2mm.  Weight: 17.7g.  Habitat: places where cool shady moist cover is available. Patches of open ground and song posts also necessary.  Food: Invertebrates, especially beetles, also fruit and seeds in winter.  Feeding behaviour: feeds by flying down from a perch to take prey from the ground; also feeds by hopping over the ground and picking items off the ground.</p> <p><b>Stonechat</b>  Bill length: male 14.9mm, female 15.1mm.  Weight: 15.3g.  Habitat: dry plains and hillsides, often submarginal for agriculture.  Food: Invertebrates.  Feeding behaviour: locates prey from an elevated perch and flies down to the ground to take it. Sometimes hawks flying prey or chases prey on the ground.</p> <p><b>Black Redstart</b>  Bill length: male 15.2mm, female 14.9mm.  Weight: 16.5g.  Habitat: Rocky, stony, boulder strewn, broken or craggy terrain, including cliffs.  Food: Invertebrates and fruit; sometimes seeds.  Feeding behaviour: takes items off the ground, flies down from a perch to take items off the ground and sometimes catches insects in flight.</p>
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The fact that the three species are partly separated by habitat is hardly surprising in view of the considerable degree of overlap which these birds show in size, bill length, diet and method of feeding. It is interesting to note that these three species are also separated on the breeding grounds by virtue of their occupying separate habitats (see Table 2 & more information in Cramp 1988).

Several years of observation have yielded a few instances of interspecific aggression involving these species. Over the last two years, the following instances were observed and recorded carefully.

8 Dec 1990, at San Pawl tat-Tarġa. Male Stonechat seen chasing a female Black Redstart off its territory.

27 Nov 1991 at Mdina. Male Stonechat seen chasing a female Black Redstart off its territory. In both instances, repeated incursions by the female Black Redstart were countered by an aggressive approach and chase by the male Stonechat.

14 Jan 1992 at Mdina. A female Black Redstart entered the territory of a Robin and perched in a tree. The Robin promptly moved towards the Black Redstart and displaced it from the tree. This female Black Redstart holds territory a short distance away from the Robin territory. The area had been watched for about half an hour daily, four days a week, over two months prior to the incident.

These incidents show quite clearly that the female Black Redstarts were regarded as intruders which could not be tolerated. Examination of Table 2 suggests that dietary overlap might be responsible for this intolerance.

These and other instances of interspecific aggression involving Robins, Stonechats and Black Redstarts seem

interpretable as follows: the Maltese countryside is very heterogeneous and disturbed, and Maltese agricultural land is a marginal habitat for all three species.

As the wintering birds arrive and settle down for the winter, they occupy territories which are unsuitable, and other species settle nearby. As competition for food sets in, one species tries to evict other species of Turdidae in order to secure a monopoly of the food resources in the area. Robins and male Stonechats often evict female Black Redstarts which have settled in agricultural land.

#### Reference

Cramp, S. (Ed) 1988. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Volume 5. (Tyrant flycatchers to Thrushes). Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Martin A. Thake

~~MAT - 169 Fleur de Lys Rd., Birkirkara BKR 02, Malta~~

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### ~~First spring records of the Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*~~

~~The Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* has always been recorded in autumn in Malta, as a scarce migrant, from early September to late November (Sultana & Gauci 1982). In 1994 three birds were recorded for the first time in spring; single birds ringed on Comino on 26th and 28th respectively and one seen at Ghadira Nature Reserve on 27th, all in April. All birds were either females or immature males.~~

#### Reference

~~Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1982. A New Guide to the Birds of Malta. The Ornithological Society, Malta.~~

Raymond Galea

~~RG - "Osprey" Ganu Str., Birkirkara BKR 06, Malta.~~

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### ~~The call note of the Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* in Malta~~

~~The Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* is a very common autumn migrant and winter visitor from early October to early April with concentrations of about 200 birds in winter in areas where food is plentiful, such as Lunzjata in Gozo (Sultana & Gauci 1982). An average of 1000 Chiffchaffs are ringed every year by ringers. It seems that both the nominate race and the subspecies *abietinus* occur, but no attempt has ever been made to assess the percentage of *abietinus* ringed, as the separation of these two races is rather difficult according to Svensson (1984). Some birds do look greyer than others and sizes also differ. But biometrics are not always helpful to separate these two races as wing and tail lengths overlap to a great extent (Williamson 1976). The other subspecies *P.c. tristis* is not difficult to separate from its plumage (Svensson 1984, & pers. obs.), and 2-5 birds belonging to this race are ringed annually.~~

~~An attempt was made to try and note whether there was any difference in the call-note of Chiffchaffs which occur in Malta. The call-note which was very commonly noted was the well-known melancholic 'hueet', but occasionally there was also another different call which can be best described as a low shrilled distress call 'wisst'. Whether this call was of a particular subspecies or not, or whether it was a variance of the usual 'hueet' could not be ascertained.~~

~~On the other hand the call-note of the *P.c. tristis* is quite distinctively different from the other Chiffchaffs' call-note. The *tristis* call can be described as resembling a chicken call 'cheep'. This call was heard from *tristis* birds when they were feeding as well as after being released after ringing.~~