

Spanish Sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* feeding on swarming winged ant *Camponatus barbaricus*

On the morning of 14 July 1992, moderately large numbers of winged ants belonging to the species *Camponotus barbaricus* were observed emerging from nests in Mdina, Howard gardens in Rabat and at Fleur-de-Lys in the Birkirkara area. *Camponotus barbaricus* is the largest species of ant recorded in Malta. It is widespread. Nests are usually constructed in soil but sometimes extend under stones. Most of the nests in Mdina were in cracks in masonry. The workers are mainly nocturnal and omnivorous. This species occurs in Spain and Italy and is common in North Africa. It is one of more than 44 species which are known to occur in the Maltese islands (Schembri & Collingwood 1981, S. Schembri pers. comm.).

Emerging alates (winged male and female ants) were observed from 08.30hrs. onwards. Sparrows were watched feeding on the winged ants between 08.30hrs and 09.30hrs. Only winged ants were taken and all captures by Sparrows were made after a short (approximately 10m) flight from an elevated perch. The sparrows made no attempt to capture the winged ants as they emerged from their nests before taking flight. This may have been due to the presence of many aggressive large workers accompanying the alates at the entrance of the nests. The sparrows appeared to detect each prey item visually, flew up to make an easy capture and returned to their perch or to the ground in order to subdue their prey. Two sparrows were seen manipulating single large winged ants in their bill before eating them. A Moorish Gecko *Tarentola mauritanica* and a small Maltese Wall Lizard *Podarcis filfolensis maltensis* were also observed feeding on winged ants.

Spanish Sparrows do not usually eat the worker castes of ant species. Ant workers may not be profitable prey because of their small mass. Their powerful mandibles make it necessary to kill the ant before swallowing it. Failure to do this might result in the aggressive workers biting the lining of the crop or gizzard of the bird. Thus the handling time might be too long and the quantity of meat provided too small to justify the effort of trying to capture and subdue the workers. Alates, on the other hand are not aggressive, have weaker mandibles and seem to have a thinner cuticle. Most important of all, they are larger. Whereas living female alates which were weighed were found to have a mass of about 0.0845g, a male (weighed after it had been dead for one day) weighed 0.0055g and a worker weighed about 0.0267g. It was not possible to determine whether the sparrows were feeding on male or only on female alates. If they were feeding exclusively on females, the sparrows' choice might have been conditioned principally by the size of the females. It would be interesting to learn whether smaller species of winged ants are also eaten by the sparrows. More observations of sparrows feeding on identified species of ants are required in order to clarify this point.

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Reference

Schembri, S.P. & Collingwood, C.A. 1981. A revision of the Myrmecofauna of the Maltese Islands. (Hymenoptera, Formicidae) *Ann. Mus. Cic. Stor. Nat. Gonova*. 83: 417-442.

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~~Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* hawking insects offshore~~

~~On 10 Dec 1993, at 15.45hrs., a Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* was seen flying offshore at Qawra, ca. 200m from the coast. It was being observed hawking insects after a heavy downpour. Suddenly the Starling dived straight into the water, making a splash. After hitting the water, the Starling flew up again with a prey item in its beak and returned back to shore.~~

~~Charles Coleiro~~

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