

THE BREEDING POPULATION OF THE BLUE ROCK THRUSH *MONTICOLA SOLITARIUS* ON COMINO ISLAND IN 1988

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Introduction

For the past 15-20 years, Comino was visited annually in spring, mostly by members of the Malta Ornithological Society. Records of birds seen were always kept and the Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* was always listed. Estimates of the breeding population were always based on the number of birds seen. Five to ten pairs was the usual estimate. The authors of this paper tried to monitor the exact number of Blue Rock Thrushes breeding on the island in 1988.

The Blue Rock Thrush is a fairly common breeding resident in the Maltese Islands. It is mainly found breeding along sea cliffs, but some pairs are still to be found inland along hills, rocky valleys as well as in some fortifications. The nest is mostly built in crags in cliff faces. (Sultana & Gauci 1982).

The Study Area

The island of Comino separates the main islands of Malta and Gozo and occupies only 2.6 sq.km (1 sq.mile). The Upper Coralline Limestone rises from the sea to 75 m on the south-west side, from where it slopes towards the north-west. It is an exposed and barren island with little remaining agriculture except in the Santa Marija valley. Comino has a coastline of about 9.6 km. (Boffa 1966).

Method and Results

The island was visited twice for this census - on 17th and 30 April 1988. Observations were mostly based on singing males. At this time of year females will be in the nest incubating; in fact no females were observed during either visit. A male singing, displaying, or calling the characteristic alarm call more than once in the same area was counted as a breeding pair. Both visits started early in the morning from Santa Marija bay, walking very slowly along the cliffs, covering practically the whole of the island's coastline. Only a few places were not covered as they did not offer suitable habitat for the breeding of this species.

1st Visit - 17th April 1988

- 1 The first male Blue Rock Thrush was observed singing and flying for short distances close to the cliffs about 900m to the east of Santa Marija bay. This bird was also noted flying towards a small chapel in this same bay. This chapel must be a watchpoint marking its territory because it was watched going there several times, even in past years.
- 2 The second bird was seen and heard singing twice; once on a small stone hide at Il-Hamra and then at a point some distance away from the Redoubt at Il-Miskta.
- 3 Close to the Comino lower another singing male was present. It was later seen on the cemetery walls.
- 4 At laħ il-Mazz a male was observed chasing another male bird, probably the one seen earlier close to the lower (no: 3). This behaviour made it clear that these two birds had overlapping territories and were nesting somewhere along the cliffs below.

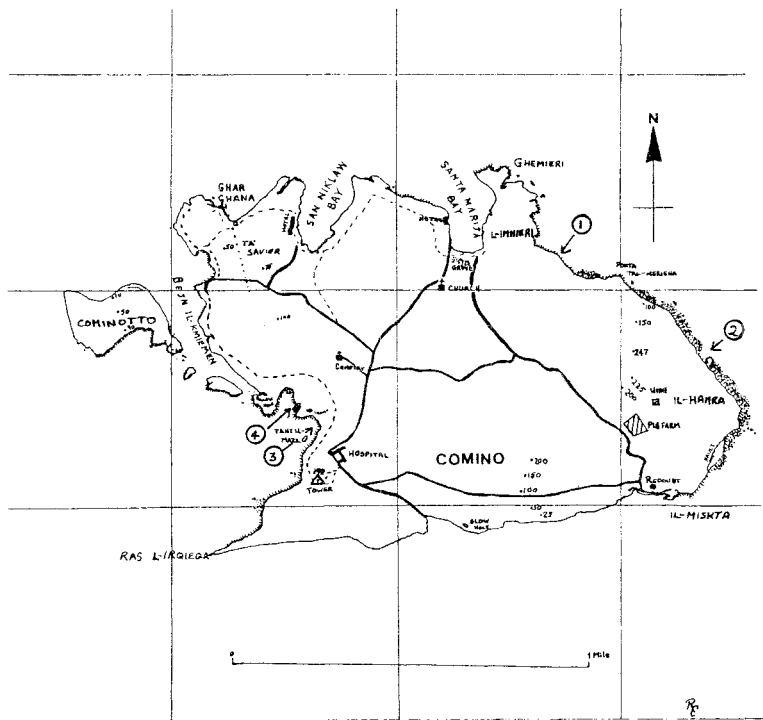
Another singing male was later observed perched on an electricity pole at Ta' Savier. As this place does not offer ideal breeding habitat for this species it was assumed that it was one of the males seen chasing each other at laħ il-Mazz. Observations ended at the starting point, i.e. at Santa Marija bay.

2nd Visit - 30th April 1988

This visit started at the same time and place as the previous one and the same route was taken.

- 1 At a point between L'Imnieri and Il-Ponta tal-Merieha, a pair of Blue Rock Thrushes was uttering alarm calls to each other very frequently and excitedly, on the rocks

No other birds were seen during this visit. On both visits no Blue Rock Thrushes were observed on the smaller islet of Cominotto, although observations were only made from Comino. After these two visits it was concluded that the breeding population of the Blue Rock Thrush on the island of Comino was made up of four pairs.



Map of Comino showing breeding areas of 4 Blue Rock Thrush pairs in Spring 1938. Numbers 1 to 4 (circled) refer to numbers in the text. Names of places mentioned in the text are all marked on the map.

Similar exercises in the future will show if the population of the Blue Rock Thrush on Comino is a stable one or not. If the population will remain the same for several years it can be assumed that this island can only hold four pairs. There are many suitable nesting places where these birds can nest but the feeding areas on top of the island play an important part in the territory of such species.



A typical nesting-site of the Blue Rock Thrush on Comino Island, with loose rocks beneath the cliffs. (Photo : Raymond Caruana)

It is also a fact that stealing of young from the pairs at Taht il-Mazz takes place every year. This might also have an effect on the breeding population of this bird on the island.

Summary

A census of Blue Rock Thrushes breeding on the island of Comino in April 1988 located 4 singing males, observed during two visits by the authors. No birds were found breeding inland. Inland nesting is practically impossible as all ruins and other buildings on the island are all subject to human predation and disturbance. All birds observed were breeding in almost inaccessible parts of the cliffs. It is also to be noted that the four pairs located all chose a habitat with loose rocks beneath the nesting-site.

Acknowledgement

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References

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