

Predation on nests by the Western Whip Snake

The Western Whip Snake *Coluber viridiflavus* is abundant in Malta and is found in a wide variety of habitats preferring the drier areas. Quite a number of birds' nests are preyed upon by this snake. The worst sufferers are the ground nesting birds namely the Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* and the Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*. However, nests of low-nesting species such as the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*, Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* and Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* are also frequently taken. The percentage of predated nests is highest amongst the second broods which coincide generally with late spring or early summer and due to the higher temperature then, the *Coluber viridiflavus* is more active.

20% of 351 nests of the above mentioned species which were under investigation were presumed to have been taken by this snake. This could only be an underestimation as not all the nest record cards of the other 80% were complete and therefore nests could have been preyed on during the last stages of the fledging period. The percentage of nests taken by this snake varies according to the species as follows:

Species	No. of nests under observation	% predated
Short-toed Lark	14	50%
Corn Bunting	25	36%
Spectacled Warbler	95	20%
Sardinian Warbler	142	12%
Fan-tailed Warbler	75	21%

There are reasons why there is such a difference among the predated species' nests. The Short-toed Lark, which has the highest percentage, builds the nest usually on bare ground with little or no cover and its breeding season is relatively late, nest building starting in late April. The second highest is that of the Corn Bunting. This species also builds its nests on the ground or just above it but usually amongst the vegetation. The Fan-tailed Warbler and the Spectacled Warbler, which have the next higher percentage, both build the nest generally within 30 cm above the ground. The Spectacled Warbler nests in dry localities in the open countryside. The Fan-tailed Warbler prefers damper localities but as its breeding season runs well into early summer its preferred areas such as Xem-xija and Ghadira are quite dry by then. It is not surprising that the lowest percentage is that of the Sardinian Warbler. This species builds its nest in shrubs or trees within 1½ metres (sometimes higher) of the ground in a wide variety of habitats.

One may mention that on one occasion in early September an adult *Coluber viridiflavus* which was about 140 cm. in length was seen at Ghajn Barrani under a *Ficus carica* holding a live male Sardinian Warbler in its mouth. On another occasion in July one was seen high up in a concrete electric pylon in Marsalforn Valley by the Victoria/Marsalforn Road, 7 metres above the ground, taking the contents of a *Passer hispaniolensis* nest.

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