

The occurrence of the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Malta

It was reported that a large 'eagle' was shot at Xaghjra, limits of Zabbar, on 25th November 1977, while resting in a tree. V. Sammut, J. Sultana and the author saw the specimen at a taxidermist and found it to be an immature White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*. This is the first documented record of this species in Malta. The following is a description and biometrics of the specimen.

The feathers of the crown, cheeks, lores, nape and neck were of a small lanceolate shape and dark chocolate brown in colour, becoming lighter near the tips. When gently lifted they showed white bases; the white was totally concealed when the feathers were resting in the normal position. The chin was light in colour, speckled with brown. The mantle was also of a chocolate brown colour, the individual feathers having paler edges. The lower back was lighter. The upper wing coverts were very pale, and being a heavily mottled brown, produced a blotchy effect. The remiges were dark chocolate brown. The under-tail coverts were all white with brown tips and a tinge of brown along the central shafts. The light area thus produced, gradually merged into darker brown on the lower belly, becoming darker towards the breast. The rectrices had a white inner web, mottled brown and ending in a brown tip. A narrow brown fringe also bordered the white vane on the distal side of the feather shaft. The outer webs were of a uniform chocolate brown.

The upper mandible was very dark grey (almost black), the lower mandible being slightly lighter especially at the base. The cere was similar in colour to the beak. This could have turned into such a colour because the bird had been dead for some days. Immatures should have a greenish cere. The tarsus and talons were yellow in colour the latter having black claws. The feathering reached half way down the tarsus.

Biometrics (in mm): wing — 610; tail — 330 (tail graduation — ca. 60); tarsus — 90 (approx. as the ankle could not be located properly due to the way the bird was mounted); longest claws — 38 (inner right) and 39 (inner left); beak — 46 from cere to tip) and 59 (from feathering to tip).

According to Brown and Amadon (Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World — 1968), the tails of immatures are longer than in adults. In fact the specimen's tail exceeded that of an adult female (the longest) by 10 mm. The specimen belongs to the nominate race.

Sultana, Gauci, Beaman (A Guide to the Birds of Malta — 1975) included the White-tailed Eagle (with the Maltese name "Ajkla tad-denk abjad") in the list of rejected species stating that there are no documented records. Giglioli (Avifauna Italica — 1886) had given the species a Maltese name, for which reason it was included by Blasius (Ornis von Malta und Gozo und den umliegenden Inseln — 1895). Ardoino (Gli Uccelli di Malta — Elenco sinottico — 1928) had listed it as accidental in October, but gave no documented records. All other local ornithological works omitted it without any mention.

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