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

It was reported that a large 'eagle' was shot at Xaghira, 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 — 530 (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 89 (from feathering to tip).

According to Brown and Amadon (Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World — 1968), the tails of immatures are shorter 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 "Ajla tad-denb 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 — 1892). Aridomo (Gli Uccelli di Malta — 1948) had listed it as accidental in October, but gave no documented records. All other local ornithological works omitted it without any mention.

An addition to the list of the breeding birds of Malta — the Reed Warbler Acrocephalus scirpaceus

While bird-watching at Salina on 26th July 1977, we heard frequent calls of young birds coming from a cluster of reeds Phragmites communis growing at the fringes of the water. These calls resembled those of young birds begging for food. On further investigation we saw a Reed Warbler Acrocephalus scirpaceus carrying food and observed it feeding a fully fledged young. This was later confirmed by J. Sultana who visited the area at our request. He also heard and observed the same calls and behaviour.

Next morning we accompanied J. Sultana and C. Gauci to the area and after setting up a mist-net trapped (for ringing) the adult male (still holding a small white spider in its beak) and four fully fledged young. The adult had a small brood patch and its wing and tail were 65 mm and 53 mm long respectively. The wing-length of the four young birds ranged from 57-60.5 mm and their short tails ranged from 35-43 mm. These measurements suggested that they couldn't have moved far from their nesting area.

The young were again seen being fed by the adult male (carrying a ring) on the 28th and 29th July in the same area. On four other dates from 8th to 17th August only the adult male was observed and heard. It was not seen or heard when the area was visited again on the 19th and 23rd August. It is worth mentioning that at no time was the adult female observed.

This is the first known breeding record of this species in Malta, where it is a fairly common autumn migrant, though generally very scarce in spring.

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The Barbary Falcon in Malta

In ‘A Guide to the Birds of Malta’ (1973) the authors (Sultana, Gauci & Beaman) put the Barbary Falcon Falco peregrinoides, which following Verreaux, was treated as a species, in Appendix I — Rejected Species — as it was felt that its inclusion in the list of the birds of Malta required proper confirmation (see page 153). Due to the confused nomenclature at that time of the Falco peregrinus brookei the authors stated that the 2 examples of Falco barbary (= Falco peregrinoides) listed as occurring in Malta in 1839 and 1886 by E.H. Giglioli (Avifauna Italica — 1886) could have been the breeder and species of the Peregrine.

Writing on the ‘Ornithology of Northern Africa’ in 1839 Vol. 4 Tristram stated that the Akla pinnaceus is said to have gained a claim to the European list, having been shot in Malta by Col. E.M. Drummond. Wright (List of the birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo — Bus. 11 Ch. 6 — 1886) included Falco barbary (Syn. F. pinnaceus) with a query mentioning Tristram’s statement. Wright wrote that Mr. Tristram had informed him that Colonel Drummond had fancied the bird shot by him was a small Peregrine, but Mr. Tristram