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

It was reported that a large 'eagle' was shot at Xagħra, limits of Żabbar, 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 — 40 from cere to tip) and 69 (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 "Ajkla tad-denb abjad") in the list of rejected species stating that there are no documented records. Giglioli (Avifauna Italiana — 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 — 1863). Aridono (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.

Richard Gauci-Zammit & Raymond Teixeira

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

Acrocephalus scirpaceus

While bird-watching at Salina on 26th July 1975, we heard frequent calls of young birds coming from a cluster of reeds. Chrogonicus comments 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 (for trapping) the adult male (still holding a small white spider in its beak) and four fully fledged young. The adult had a small broad patch and its wing and tail were 65 mm and 33 mm long respectively. The wing length of the four young birds ranged from 57.0-55 mm and their short tails ranged from 35-45 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 25th and 26th July in the same area. On four other dates from 8th to 12th August only the adult male was observed and heard. It was not seen or heard when the area was visited again on the 20th 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.

Richard Gauci-Zammit & Raymond Teixeira

The Barbary Falcon in Malta

In 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta' (1975) the authors (Sultana, Gauci & Beaman) put the Barbary Falcon Falco peregrinus, which following Vaurie 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 barbarius (= Falco pellegrinos) listed as occurring in Malta in 1850 and 1885 by E.H. Giglioli (Avifauna Italiana — 1907) could have been the brookei subspecies of the Peregrine.

Writing on the 'Ornithology of Northern Africa' in Ibis (1859) Vol. 1 Tristram said that the "Falco punciatus is said to have gained a claim to the European list, having been shot in Malta by Col. H.M. Drummond". Wright (List of the birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo — Ibis 1 (1) 6 — 1884) included Falco barbarius (Syn. F. punctatus) 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
thought that he was mistaken. In the second appendix Wright (Ibis (4) 1 — 1865) mentions an immature Falco peregrinus obtained on 4th May 1864 which seemed to approach Falco barbatus in the ruddy colouring of the under surface.

The only two documented records were listed by Giglioli in his ‘Avifauna Malte’ (1907) as Falco barbatar (= Falco peregrinoides). The first was an adult male obtained by Goli in 1850 and was at the Natural History Museum of Florence and the second was picked up at the Valletta Market on 22nd March 1885 and was in Dresser’s Collection.

Knowing that the Manchester Museum houses Dresser’s Collection, one of us wrote to Dr. M.V. Hounsome, Keeper of Zoology, of this Museum enquiring about the birds collected in Malta which were in Dresser’s Collection. Dr. Hounsome was kind enough to send us a comprehensive detailed list which included a specimen of Falco peregrinoides. The specimen was found by Dr. D. Bruce at the Valletta Market on 22nd April 1885. In his correspondence Dr. Hounsome confirmed that the specimen was an immature Barbary Falcon, probably a male, with the following measurements: Wing — 262 mm; Bill (with a worn tip) 15 mm; Tarsus — 44 mm; and Tail very worn) — 140 mm. Dr. Hounsome added that the plumage of the specimen is very worn, possibly suggesting it was a captive bird, but that this could equally well be due to abrasion in its north African habitat.

This specimen is undoubtedly the same one mentioned by Giglioli, though this author gave the month as March and not April as labelled at the Manchester Museum.

In view of the above information we think that this species should be reinstated in the list of the birds of Malta.

We owe much to Dr. M.V. Hounsome for the information which he unhesitatingly communicated to us.

Joe Sultana, Charles Gauci & Mark Beaman.

The occurrence of an American Purple Gallinule in Malta — Porphyrio martinica a possibly escaped bird

Variants from North America are recorded annually in Europe mainly on the Atlantic coast and for obvious reasons few are recorded further inland or in the Mediterranean.

On 2nd February 1978 the author was informed by Mr. C. Galea of Malta that he had mounted a bird which he believed was an Allen’s Gallinule Porphyrio martinica. However, on examining the specimen I found that it was an American Purple Gallinule Porphyrio martinica. It had been shot at Sultana in the autumn of 1977.

The breeding range of this species is from the Southern United States of America southward to Northern Argentina. It has however been recorded in Europe at considerable distances. We owe this record to Mr. C. Galea of Malta who kindly communicated the details of the capture.

| Joe Sultana, Charles Gauci & Mark Beaman |

The following is a description of the specimen. The beak was red with a yellow tip with a frontal plate that was dark, almost black (due to post mortem darkening). The head was purple and the wings and back were green while the shoulders were blue. The under-tail coverts were white. The belly was black while the breast and neck were purple. The legs were yellowish green and the feet yellow.

The measurements (in mm) were: wing 180; tarsus 62; bill 42 (feathering to tip, i.e. top of frontal plate to tip) and 28 (from base of frontal plate to tip); toes 53 (inside), 68 (middle), 58 (outside) and 41 (back).

There were no fat deposits in the body and the plumage and feet were in perfect condition. This suggests that if the bird was not wild it had either been long escaped or it had been kept in a large well conditioned aviary. When the contents of the stomach were examined apart from a few tiny pebbles, combined Canary grass seeds Phalaris canariensis, seeds of one of the sedges Carex and an unidentified composite. The latter is one often associated with canary-grass. The presence of Canary grass may indicate captivity. Carex is a plant of wet places and the bird may have ingested it after its escape.

Thanks are due to Mr. R. L. Lanfranco for his comments on the stomach contents and to Mr. J. Sultana for examining the specimen and commenting on the above notes.

John Attard Montalto.

Copulation in the Fan-Tailed Warbler

From 06.30 to 07.00 hours on 10th June, 1978 a female Fan-tailed Warbler Cisticola juncidis was regularly observed close to a partly built nest at Wied il-Qisa, Buskett. A male was singing intermittently on another part of the large territory (ca. 2.43 hectares), where at least another two females (one feathering newly fledged young) were present. At one time, the male came over to the partly built nest we were watching and started ‘dive-bombing’ the female, which was skulking in nearby vines. The male uttered its ‘zip ... zip ...’ song rapidly as it dived to within a foot of the ground. It then rose, circle round, and repeat the process. After about twelve such dives, the female flew up to the top of a 1 m high fennel stalk and started quivering her wings. The male instantly alighted near her and the birds then copulated. Immediately after copulation, which lasted about 2 seconds, the female seemed to tinkle over, but held on to the twig and hung upside down. The male continued clinging to her wings and dangled upside down as well. Both birds stayed motionless in this position for about two minutes before their combined weight was finally too much for the female. They then fell down, the male still clinging to the female. From our position we could not see the birds on the ground, as they were hidden by vines. After a minute we moved in order to try to locate them. They only flew off when we were within 2 m of them, the male rising first.

Charles Gauci & Mario V. Gauci