

ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES (SPRING 75 TO SPRING 76)

Joe Sultana & Charles Gauci

Polygamy in *Cisticola juncidis*

Since the first nests of the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* were found in 1973 at Xemxija and Ghadira (*Il-Merill* 13:11-13) we have followed with interest the colonization of new areas. In *Il-Merill* no. 15 we reported its establishment in several new localities including Gozo.

During spring 1975 we suspected that one of the three males at Ghadira could have more than one female, as both newly fledged young as well as a nest containing young were present in one territory at the same time. This year there were again three males holding territory at Ghadira; one on the southern side of the pool, one further inland beyond the pool, and the third on the northern side.

The male on the southern side, suspected of being polygamous, had 5 females this year. Two of these laid identical eggs — white ground colour speckled with small brown spots. The other three had different types: white with no spots, white with large terracotta blotches, and very light blue with small purplish brown spots. Eight nests were located in the male's territory from early May to early June. They were all built within 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet above the ground in *Inula crithmoides* growing amongst the Sea Rush and scattered reeds; the farthest two being less than 150 yards apart. Of these only 4 nests (in all 20 young) were successful; another containing 5 eggs (later 4!) and the other three (2 containing newly hatched young) had their contents robbed probably by a snake.

F. Smith, who helped in our observations at Ghadira, had noted last year that the male builds the outer part of the nest which is then completed by the female. It recurred again this year with at least three nests found in their earliest stages.

This nest-building behaviour and polygamy in the Fan-tailed Warbler is not mentioned by C. Harrison in "A Field Guide to the Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of British and European Birds" — Collins 1975. However similar observations had earlier been reported in Japan by T. Motai, 1973, (Misc. Rep. Yamashina Inst. Orn. 7:87-103). In his paper (in Japanese) the author states that he studied the behaviour of a male *Cisticola juncidis* throughout one breeding season from early April to mid-September. He noted that the male built the outer part of nests which were lined by the females. In all it constructed 20 nests, eight of which were used by different females. He states that only on two occasions did females use more than one nest at the same time. In the paper it is not clear how many females lived in the male's territory. The author also noted that an unused nest may be cannibalized by the same male to build another nest. (Information taken from an abstract by A.S.C. in "Recent Ornithological Publications" *Ibis* 117 (4) 1975).

C. Harrison's Guide gives 'no information' on nesting and the nesting period.

When the young hatch they are atricial and they take 13-14 days to leave the nest. The mouth of the young is orange yellow with two black spots on the tongue.

F. Smith this year observed fully-fledged young eating grasshoppers 1 $\frac{1}{4}$

inches long and noticed that the Fan-tailed Warbler 'walks' like a Pipit on the ground.

This species now has spread to many localities and singing males have been noted holding territory in at least five new places, including Rabat where M.V. Gauci has found two nests.

Further notes on the Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia Cetti*)

In *Il-Merill* No. 15 we reported that a pair of Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* had colonized Xemxija where it bred in the thick Tamarisk grove. Unfortunately after raising a second brood the birds deserted the area. The male was last heard in October (1975) and did not return last spring to breed. One of the young which was ringed on 18th May 1975 crossed over to Gozo and was 'controlled' at Ramla Bay on 3rd November 1975.

However this year Cetti's were found breeding at a new area at il-Kuncizzjoni while the three pairs at Wied il-Luq raised successfully two broods each. The young of the second brood (eleven in all) left the nests on 19th-20th July and were still in the company of their respective mothers after 20 days. The three nests were built around bramble strands under a canopy of bramble and other vegetation cover. They were constructed of dry reed blades lined with fine grasses and a few feathers.

Three Interesting Breeding Notes

Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapa striata* were absent from the 1975's list of breeding birds; however, this year a pair remained to breed once again at Buskett. The nest was built in an arrow-shaped sign-post (approximately 12"x4"x4") whose front glass was broken by a stone which was still in the sign-post. The nest was built between the stone and half of the broken neon-tube inside the sign-post hanging from a tree about 18 feet above the road. On the outside the nest was covered with lichens and hardly contained any cup. When the nest was located on 13th June, it had a 5-day old pullus and 3 eggs of a greenish blue colour speckled all over with reddish brown spots. As expected the three eggs never hatched. When the area was visited on 6th July the fully fledged young was seen being fed by the male not far from the nest-site. In the sign-post we noted that another slightly smaller nest was built beside the old. On closer examination the female was found to be incubating a clutch of five other eggs in the old nest while the new smaller nest was empty. On the latter's edge there was one broken unhatched egg from the earlier brood, probably removed by the parents from the old nest. Unfortunately once again only one young hatched.

A nest of a Quail *Coturnix coturnix* at Ghajn Lukin, in Xagħra, Gozo, had worse fate. It was situated in a cornfield and was only found after the farmer had unknowingly broken all but 2 eggs while the corn was being harvested in the third week of June. When the contents of the two eggs were examined, it was noted that the young would have hatched in three or four days time. The eggs had been laid in a shallow hollow with a few feathers probably shed by the female and had not been put there as a lining. Successful breeding of the Quail in Malta is almost impossible due to gross human interference.

Due to this same interference, the Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*, too, has decreased much as a breeding bird though odd pairs attempt to breed annually.

Last year a pair was seen with fully fledged young in early July at Il-Handaq and this year a pair raised at least three young at RAF Luqa. These were noticed on 16th July one or two days after they left the nest and two of them and the female parent were trapped and ringed. The day before a young bird of a different age was seen with an adult not far away in the same area.

Great Reed Warbler Moulting in August

A Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* which was trapped for ringing at Wied il-Luq (35°51' N, 14°25' E) on 21st August 1975, was found to be undergoing wing moult. According to Svensson's 'Identification Guide to European Passerines', the bird was judged to be in its second year due to its extremely worn plumage.

The moult had just started, with the 1st and 2nd primaries (numbered descendantly) and the 7th secondary (numbered ascendantly) missing. Most greater coverts were also missing but the tail and bastard wing were old. The lesser and median coverts were in active moult while contour feathers were just starting.

The bird was retrapped nine days later (on 30th August). On this occasion the 1st and 2nd primaries were half grown, the third was just out of the sheath and the 4th was missing while 5th-10th were old. The 1st secondary was also missing; the 7th was half grown and the 9th in pin; 2nd-6th and 8th were old. Both wings were proceeding together at the same rate. The tail and alula had not yet started and all the greater coverts had just emerged from the sheath. All the body and the rest of the wing coverts were in active moult. When the bird was released it could barely fly and dropped into the nearest cover twenty feet away.

According to Williamson (Identification For Ringers: I, B.T.O. Guide No. 1) the Great Reed Warbler has a complete post-nuptial moult in winter quarters in Africa. The Great Reed Warbler is a spring and autumn migrant in Malta passing from late March to early June and from early August to early November. Occasional birds are also recorded in July. It has been twice recorded in winter in Malta. The first, which was trapped and ringed on 12th January 1973, was in heavy body moult with old, heavily abraded remiges and rectrices but with the greater coverts in pin. The other, trapped and ringed on 12th December 1975, showed no sign of moult (V. Cilia *pers. comm.*).

The first Lapland Bunting recorded in Malta

During the first three days of November 1975 small influxes of winter visitors occurred in various localities. Chiffchaffs (35+), Dunnocks (42+), Robins (140+) and Stonechats (30+) were recorded on the first at Ramla and Lunzjata Valleys in Gozo. An unusual influx of the Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* also occurred and 15+ were seen on each of the 1st-3rd November at Lunzjata, the highest number ever recorded for 1 day in Malta. These buntings were noted frequenting some fields in which maize was growing. While bird ringing in the area by J. Grech and one of us, a stouter type of bunting was seen on the 2nd in the company of Reed Buntings. It was noted running on the ground in a ploughed field and was flushed towards the maize fields where it was caught in a mist-net. On closer examination it turned out to be a first year male Lapland

Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*.

Its black breast band could be seen when spreading the breast feathers and it had broadly streaked flanks with its underparts and sides white. It had a relatively short-tailed appearance, probably due to the noticeably long upper-tail coverts. Its lesser median coverts were greyish, broadly edged buff unlike the rustic ones of the Reed Bunting with which we could compare in the hand. The buffish edges of the median and greater coverts gave it a double wing-barred appearance. The streaks on the head roughly formed two head stripes running from the forehead towards the nape. It had a rather long hind claw (12.5 mm) which was longer than the toe.

Its wing-point was the 3rd primary which was almost equalled by the 2nd and the 4th, with the 6th primary being 15mm less than the wing-point. It was emarginated on the 3rd and 4th and seemed slightly to be also on the 5th.

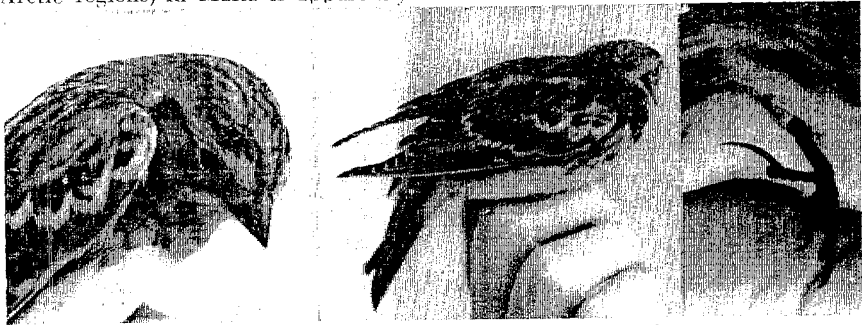
The following day (3rd November) a Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* was also trapped for ringing in the same area with other Reed Buntings, providing valuable material for comparative studies. This occurrence of the Rustic Bunting is the 6th dated one for Malta (see MOS 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta' p. 145).

Below is a list of some measurements in mm. and weight in gm. of the Lapland and Rustic Buntings which were ringed.

	<i>Lapland Bunting</i>	<i>Rustic Bunting</i>
Wing	91	75.5
Tail	68	58
Tarsus	21	19
Bill	12	13
Weight	21.2	17.4

The wing-length of 11 Reed Buntings which were ringed during 1st-3rd November had a range of 74-80 mm with a mean of 75.8. Their weight ranged from 15.3-20.0 gm with a mean of 17.3.

The occurrence of the Lapland Bunting (which is an inhabitant of the Arctic regions) in Malta is apparently the farthest south ever recorded.



The Lapland Bunting photographed before release.

(photos by J. Sultana)

Unusual Influxes in Spring 1976

Spring this year, saw influxes of scarce, rare and vagrant species due to unusual meteorological conditions in the latter half of March. A persisting belt

of low pressure along the Mediterranean and the northern coast of Africa east of Malta must have obstructed the northward journey of many species which were pushed westwards towards the Central Mediterranean where the weather was relatively milder. In Malta, a NE moderate wind (Beaufort 2-5) prevailed during the last week of March with an overcast from the 24th to the 30th.

The Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*, usually a scarce spring migrant, was very common on 27th-29th with up to 200+ on 28th in Gozo alone. In the same weekend a male Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia* was trapped in Gozo by a local trapper. The specimen, the fourth known record of the species in Malta was seen in captivity by J. Grech and one of us.

The eastern Collared Flycatcher also made its first appearance in Malta when two males were recorded — the first on the 25th (see F. Smith's article in this issue of *Il-Merill*) and the other was trapped and ringed by J. Grech at Lunzjata on 30th.

Two other vagrant species the Ruppell's Warbler and the Isabelline Wheatear were also frequently observed. Up to 1975 the Ruppell's Warbler *Sylvia ruppelli* had been known to have occurred 16 times (A Guide to the Birds of Malta p. 116). In March and early April this year at least eight were recorded. The Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* was recorded singly or in pairs on up to 7 dates from 27th March to 10th April. Three other birds (S. Borg pers. comm.) had earlier been taken by collectionists in March this year. This species, which was first recorded in 1969, is known to have occurred 11 times up to 1975.

~~BOOK REVIEW:~~

~~ANOTHER VIEW OF MALTESE ORNITHOLOGY~~

~~Dominic Cutajar~~

~~"BIRDS OF THE MALTESE ARCHIPELAGO". D.A. Bannerman & J.A. Vella Caffiero, published by the Museums Department, Valletta. Pages xxi + 550. Price £M3.75.~~

~~The significance of this new book on Maltese ornithology is not easy to assess as it follows too closely on the MOS's publication "Guide to the Birds of Malta" which had overhauled the scientific status of most Maltese birds. Unfortunately the present authors were unable to take this revision in consideration and as a consequence its overall scientific value suffers in comparison; instead it had to rely for such information mostly on *H-Merill* No. 5 which covered occurrences to 1970 only.~~

~~I have to qualify the statement that the present writers were not able to utilise the MOS "Guide" — for suddenly and suspiciously we meet two notices which makes one think. About the Lapland bunting (p. 511) we are told that the authors learned about it through "confidential information" (!) but it appears to have been lifted bodily from the MOS "Guide" complete with its Maltese~~