

~~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 Luzzjata 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 Gaffero, 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. Unluckily the 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 *Il-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

nomenclature; there is also the correction of the date of the occurrence of the Dipper (p. 333-335). Among serious researchers, confidential revelations can have no serious scientific standing, still less reliability; to my mind the whole procedure is unethical.

The co-authors of the "Birds of the Maltese Archipelago" divided responsibility for the material; it appears that the descriptions and distribution are the work of Dr. Bannerman, while the local status fell to the lot of Mr. Vella Gaffiero. This division was not always neatly observed, as in the case of the Blackcap (p. 391-401) where Dr. Bannerman trespassed into his colleague's territory and on top of everything, only to contribute a conflicting and tendacious version. This could be confusing to the unwary, but when yet another writer enters the scene to declaim a tiny paragraph of his own — as in the case of the Snow Finch (p. 513-515) — the effect becomes slightly comical.

Perhaps in this instance, one may pardon such eagerness as at stake was a new "record" of a species for Malta which — to heighten the dramatic event — had lain mysteriously hidden for six years in the private records of an active ornithologist who had ample opportunities to publish from several quarters. Why? There lies an enigma which demands forthright explanation if the incident is to achieve scientific credibility.

In spite of such oddities as described above, the book holds much information of value for the enthusiast. Most old publications had interpreted the scene as revealed by shotgun-ornithology, since their sole source of information was the gun. Then the scientific work of the MOS added a new dimension, as the present co-authors acknowledge at almost every page of their book. But the new book appears to emphasise most of all the collectors' point of view, since it culls most new evidence from specimens in private and public collections. In a way this is inevitable for Malta, but it is also a lamentable throw-back to the bad old days. Future scientific work should rely less and less on these unhealthy habits and construct in main its evidence from primary work of research. It will be instructive if from the present experience, we realise and appreciate the importance of our own positive, methodical and planned research. This should be the vista for future work, a challenge to our intelligence which we must not miss.

Unfortunately the two co-authors take on a rather antagonistic attitude to MOS workers which is often unfair as the latter have been the sole group in Malta to have consistently over the years initiated and followed a progressive programme of research. Thus the Sooty Shearwater (p. 528) reported in the MOS "Guide" was rejected in the present work because it "lacks specificity". True enough but the specimen is available for examination, a precaution which MOS have not failed to carry out. By the same standard and reasoning, the present work errs in taking note of many specimens in private collections lacking reliability and all sorts of specificity. In the case of the Sooty Shearwater the co-authors have put "record" in inverted commas and I myself yearn in fact to see more worthwhile original studies in ornithology, rather than this childish craze and rash reportage of new "records" and even priority in inventing new outlandish nomenclature in vernacular — all of which, objectively and at a distance, will one day look pathetically silly.

I was distressed to find traces of apologetics on behalf of shooting and taxidermy especially of rare and locally-extinct birds. The account of the Jackdaw

goes a long way to absolve shooters apart from being inaccurate. On the Lesser Spotted Eagle, the co-authors quote Etchebar & Hue about it being "almost impossible to separate from the Spotted" (p. 69). This is untrue even if coming from such high authority, as the "Flight Identification of European Raptors" will bear out; one has merely to learn about it and try hard. On the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (p. 181) we are asked: "Had it not been collected and preserved, how many would ever have believed in its existence?" Here we have yet another instance where a dead "record" is more important than the live bird. Then on p. 511 the co-authors seem to gasp with surprise that MOS ringers liberated the Lapland Bunting caught in their nets and ringed! Luckily a healthier view of this matter is reflected in the note on the Barn Owl. So there are two approaches, but as dignified human beings unimpressed by the glorification of personal "records", we frankly prefer the humane, the gracious and the life-enhancing rather than the unnecessary butchery which even "scientific" consideration will never justify. E.M. Forster, as I recall, wrote that if a person kills an albatross he calls himself "a sportsman", if he then stuffs it, he calls himself "a naturalist"!

Again the decrease in numbers of turtle-doves is duly blamed on insecticides; have we strangely forgotten the annual heavy toll taken in Mediterranean countries among which our country enjoys some "record"? How is it that these chemicals spared the Collared Turtle-doves?

Dr. Bannerman accuses MOS of including new records without descriptions -- but in each case he is referring to the Systematic List where such descriptions are out of place. Still Dr. Bannerman admitted the Olive-tree Warbler mostly on theoretical grounds on account of "the proximity of some of its breeding grounds". For no one can expect the unreliable Ardoino's mention to be taken seriously while the 1966 record appears to have been acknowledged as in serious doubt. On such slim and doubtful evidence, the species ought to have been relegated to the Doubtful List.

On four separate points the undersigned found himself in violent disagreement. We learn that the Herring gull is increasing rather rapidly and has reached 250 pairs; a recommendation to destroy its nests on Filfla follows. My information is precisely the reverse and that recommendation appears irresponsible. The Sardinian warbler, it is stated, forces its young to leave the nest by stopping feeding; but in fact feeding continues even after the nest is abandoned.

The Blue Rock Thrush is said to migrate, for singles were observed at Salina and around Mdina from October to January which is considered conclusive evidence! It sounds like an ornithological joke. On the Cretzschmar's Bunting, Dr. Bannerman seems to maintain that its occurrence has been overlooked "by MOS active members" (i.e. ringers). If this bird really occurs in the numbers as maintained in the book, it is the Cretzschmar's Bunting which has been evading the ringers' nets -- not the other way round!

One might further add that there never was a Gozo Ornithological Society as referred to twice in the book; also one of the authors claims that one of his "perennial" activity is bird-ringing -- a statement which needs considerable qualification!

All in all and taken with some reservation, the new book is a considerable addition to the subject. The layman is bound to find it of more value especially

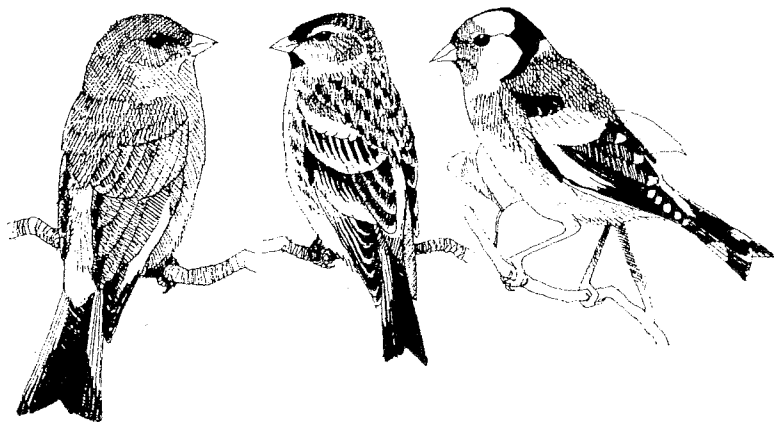
as it is beautifully illustrated in colour — except for some incredibly short-tailed wagtails as well as some of the warblers. I confess that I was more captivated by the original line drawings many of which are the work of two Maltese bird-artists, Charles Borg and Sammy Borg. The first of these uses a heavy but most accurate touch which vividly creates the bird; Sammy Borg employs a much lighter stroke, suggesting the feathery quality of the bird; most of all I loved his ethereal evocation of the Great White egret. Congratulations to both artists.

The Museums Department too deserves to be congratulated for its enterprise in producing a magnificent book on birds. There is a lot that can be done in the field of natural history and the present experience should help to avoid future pitfalls. Above all we should learn that co-operation between local researchers is most essential especially in those fields where a highly evolved interest already exists. If this lesson is absorbed, then this book will have achieved its most significant objective.

As regards Dr. Bannerman, his knowledge of ornithology is both vast and most impressive, even if at certain points it is beginning to appear slightly dated; but his knowledge of local ornithology is entirely derivative. Thus his forays into the local scene remain unsatisfactory, lacking both in impartiality and critical approach. Mr. Vella Gaffiero was forced to take on the account of Maltese ornithology of which his grasp is not always certain. Indeed it is too vast a subject for one person to tackle even in a life-time as the heroic example of Dr. De Lucca bears out. The days of personal saga — at least in this field — are over.

I have indeed been critical of some of Mr. Vella Gaffiero's notes and views, but in fact there is much that one may commend as well. The real point at stake demands a rigorous co-operative effort the need for which will be more pressing in the future than at present. Indeed I feel I ought to say more. What Maltese ornithology now needs is a comprehensive, long-term and methodical rationalisation of future research. The proof of our serious dedication to the scientific aspects of ornithology lies in our ability to translate the above task into reality.

22/8/76.



Greenfinch, Siskin & Goldfinch.
(line drawing by R. Ingram)