

IL-MERILL

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A melodious bird song echoing along a Maltese rugged cliff-face heralds the presence of Malta's national bird – the Blue Rock Thrush. It is locally known as *il-Merill* and its scientific name is *Monticola solitarius*. The Blue Rock Thrush is about eight inches in length. The male's plumage is deep blue with blackish wings and tail, while that of the female is brownish grey finely barred underneath. The male is well known for its song which is usually delivered from a favourite promontory rock or during its short display flights.

This species is resident, inhabiting sea-cliffs, hill ridges, steep rocky valleys and disused buildings in remote areas where it nests in holes and crags. Due to human interference its population has decreased, however, it is still present in good numbers at and around sea-cliffs which afford it with some adequate natural protection.

Though protected by Maltese law its young are frequently taken away by some people to be reared by hand. The males then are kept and caged for their song. This habit of stealing the young for caging has been taking place for more than a century. In fact Charles A. Wright (1864) had written that "its progeny are sure to be taken by country-lads, who find a ready sale for them in the town". Wright also mentioned that the Maltese used to suspend a piece of red cloth and a cowry-shell in its cage to protect the bird from the evil eye.

The male and female pair for life and do not wander far away from their breeding quarters. They build a somewhat untidy nest with roots and fine twigs and frequently use the same nest-hole year after year. The eggs of the first brood (it rears two in a season) are laid about late March and number four to six, usually five.

*A male Blue Rock Thrush carrying food (a lizard) to its nesting hole.*



By Courtesy of M. D. England/ Malta Ornithological Society.





By Courtesy of M. D. England/Malta Ornithological Society.

*Blue Rock Thrush feeding fully fledged young at entrance of nesting hole.*

They are of a pale bluish colour varying in the amount of fine reddish spots which are occasionally lacking. They are chiefly incubated by the female for about fifteen days while the male patrols the surrounding area uttering wailing calls at one's approach. Both parents feed the young regularly during the day making sure no one is close by before entering the nest-hole. Their food consists mainly of grasshoppers, worms, beetles and small lizards. After about another fortnight the young birds leave the nest but hang around for some more days during which they are still fed by the parents urged by their hungry calls. When they learn to fend for themselves the parents chase them away.

In 1971 the Blue Rock Thrush was featured on the 5d and 10d stamps together with the national plant *Widnet il-Bahar* in a set of four

stamps issued by the Postal Authorities and in 1972 it was depicted on the £M20 gold coin. The Blue Rock Thrush is also the emblem of the local national bird society – The Malta Ornithological Society.

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#### REFERENCES:

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