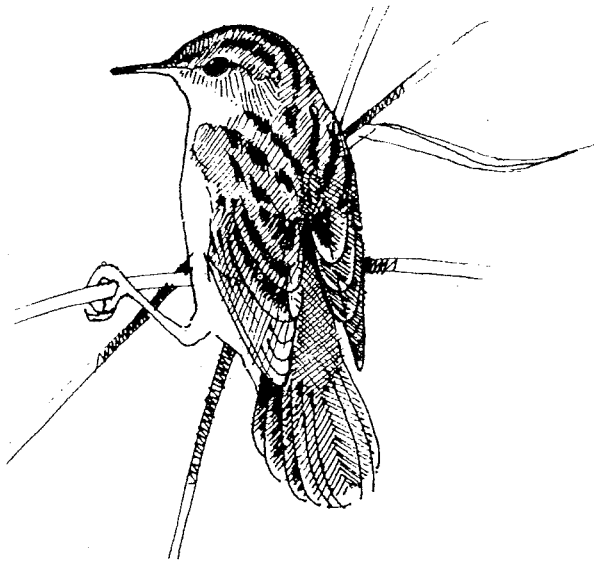


## THE FAN-TAILED WARBLER *CISTICOLA JUNCIDIS* A NEW BREEDING SPECIES FOR MALTA

The Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*, only four inches in length, is one of the smallest European birds. It is brownish, being paler below. The upper parts, except for its rump which is yellowish rufous, are heavily streaked. It has a short, rounded, dark tail which, when fanned, shows black and white tips to all but the two central feathers. Both sexes look alike though the male is slightly brighter in spring. During the breeding season the male patrols the area, flying 'feebly' high above during most of the day with an undulating flight, while it utters a series of 'zip' calls which seem to be synchronized with each wave of its flight. As such it is very conspicuous and attracts attention, otherwise it is very secretive and rarely flies any distance before hopping into cover.



Line drawing by R. Ingram

The Fan-tailed Warbler was first included with the Birds of Malta by N. Ardoino in a list which he compiled in 1893 and which was posthumously published by the Societa' Storico-Scientifica Maltese in 1928 with a biography by G. Despott. Ardoino's 'Gli Uccelli Di Malta — elenco sinottico' listed the Fan-tailed Warbler as scarce in early September. From 1967 (the year of its first documented records) till 1972 the Fan-tailed Warbler was recorded annually on a total of eighteen dates, sometimes up to four together, mostly at Salina (Il-Merill Nos. 5, 8 & 11). The first four birds which appeared at Salina in 1967 were also reported by C. De Lucca in a brief notice in the 'Ibis', the journal of the British Ornithologists Union.

wherein the author stated that three of the specimens 'were shot and preserved' (1967, 'Ibis' 109:623). As a result of the latter statement a strongly-worded protest signed by twenty-five prominent ornithologists appeared in the same journal. In their communication they condemned the needless killing of such birds for identification purposes in a place like Malta when these can be identified adequately by other means ('The Collecting of Rare Birds' 1968, 'Ibis' 110: 211-212).

In 1973 the Fan-tailed Warbler was found breeding for the first time at Xemxija and Ghadira. Xemxija was first visited by members of the M.O.S. Bird Ringing Group in January, 1973. It was subsequently visited regularly and a male was noted present. In March breeding was suspected as the male was intensively working up the area with his peculiar noisy flight. At times it was also suspected that two birds were present. On 27th April a female carrying food led us to a curiously built nest in a small patch of a type of wild oat *Avena sterilis* surrounded by a larger patch of Boar-thistles *Galactites tomentosa*. The nest contained young but, owing to its structure and as we did not wish to disturb a nest of a newly found breeding species, the young were not counted. Unfortunately the young were taken very probably by a snake as the nest was found empty and holed at the bottom on 2nd May.

The pair built a second nest which was discovered on 2nd June in an uncultivated field overgrown with *Phragmites communis* and the wild species of Lesser Canary-grass *Phalaris minor*. The nest which was built in the latter plant contained five young. The vegetation was being cut down by a farmer to use it as fodder, but on explaining to him the importance of the nest he agreed to leave the field undisturbed till the young leave the nest. So this time, the young, which were ringed, left the nest successfully in spite of the fact that the farmer's cat had a litter of kittens within six feet of the nest. When the empty nest was examined an added egg was found. This was of a bluish colour with very faint pinkish and light brownish blotches. The pair must have had another brood in the area, which was not visited before September, as five other birds were noted without rings.

In the same year (1973) Ghadira was frequently visited till early May and no Fan-tailed Warblers were noted. However, on visiting the area on 11th and 12th July a pair was noted feeding at least two newly fledged young. This pair is still present this year and by the end of March (1974) its first brood had already left the nest. In another area not far from Ghadira proper another pair was noted and a nest containing six eggs was discovered on 6th April 1974. It was built in Sea Rush *Juncus maritimus* and the eggs this time were white with pink and light brown freckles. This new area had not been visited the year before (1973) and the species must have bred there too as a very old nest was found in Sharp Rush *Juncus acutus*.

The nest of the Fan-tailed Warbler is peculiar both in its shape and structure. In shape it is like a wide-necked bottle or an open deep round purse. All the nests found so far were built within two feet above the ground. The blades of grass in which it is built are also incorporated into

the structure which is neatly woven with vegetable down, cobwebs and fine blades of dry grass.

The Fan-tailed Warbler is the fourth species which has been added to the list of Malta's breeding birds since 1966. The other three are the Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* (Bull. B.O.C. (1)89:29-31); the Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* (Il-Merill 10:10); and the Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* (Il-Merill 12:7-9).

We are grateful to S. Borg and L. Attard for helping us to locate the nest at Ghadira and to Edwin Lanfranco for identifying the plants which are mentioned in the text.

J. Sultana and C. Gauci.

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### ~~A PLEA FOR SAVING AUDOUIN'S GULL~~

~~For several decades we have known about the endangered existence of *Larus audouinii*. The World Wildlife Fund names this rare species on its Red List. Audouin's Gull nests only in the Mediterranean and is reduced to an estimated number of 1,000 to 1,800 birds.~~

~~While numbers of European gulls increase as a result of anthropogenic influences the population of Audouin's Gull decreases; how fast is not known.~~

~~The breeding success is diminished by various factors: fishermen, tourists and photographers disturb adults during the breeding season. Eggs and fledglings are frequently and lastingly exposed to solar radiation and often die. Oologists collect eggs indiscriminately.~~

~~In cooperation with the World Wildlife Fund I have started a programme of collecting every information about colonies, pairs and breeding success to form a broad and reliable basis for a study of the population dynamics and the general state of the species. I request that ornithologists and bird watchers from Malta make available their data on *Larus audouinii* that the combined knowledge can be used to reach this goal and hopefully save the species.~~

~~Only full cooperation will make it possible to institute an efficient conservation programme.~~

**Hans Witt.**

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~~Editor's note: *Larus audouinii* does not breed in Malta. Any sight records of this species will be reported by the M O S to the author.~~

(See drawing on Cover 3)