

THE CETTI'S WARBLER *CETTIA CETTI* IN MALTA

J. Sultana & C. Gauci

The Cetti's Warbler *Cettia Cetti*, 5½ ins in length, has all its upper-parts dark rufous brown. It has a greyish white throat and belly while its breast and flanks are washed with light brown. Its short whitish supercilium is only conspicuous at close quarters. Instead of the usual twelve tail-feathers of most passerines this species has only ten, which form a much rounded tail. The under-tail coverts are broadly tipped whitish. The wings are rounded too, and rather short.

Its skulking habits in dense and coarse vegetation make it very difficult to spot. However, its presence is very often betrayed by its loud striking song of abrupt bursts resembling 'chee wee, chee wee, Chee wee you'. It is mostly found in thick vegetation and reedbeds near water. Though mainly a sedentary species showing some local wanderings, the easternmost populations migrate to eastern Iran, southern Afghanistan and north-west India.

The range of the Cetti's Warbler is southern Europe, north Africa, Mediterranean Islands and south western Asia to Iran, northern Afghanistan, Kirghiz Steppes and Russian Turkestan. Three subspecies are generally recognized; the nominate race is the one found in countries bordering the Mediterranean.

G. Despott included the Cetti's Warbler in his various lists of the Birds of Malta on account of a specimen seen stuffed in a private collection. It was labelled 'Malta —Aprile1901'. The only other record of the Cetti's Warbler previous to 1967 is that of one reported by Roberts as seen by J. Bailey at Wied Znuber, Hal Far, on 21st September, 1951.

Since members of the MOS Ringing Group started visiting Wied il-Luq & Girdenti Valley, in autumn 1967, the species has been noted present annually throughout the year. Eight to twelve males were regularly heard singing during the breeding seasons in these adjoining valleys. Farmers at Girdenti remarked that they had been hearing that type of distinctive song for the past fifteen years.

Girdenti Valley and Wied il-Luq form one of the greenest areas in Malta where freshwater is present throughout the year. Both contain a long stretch of reeds, intermingled with thickets of brambles, trees and other vegetation, flanked on both sides by cultivated fields. The uncultivated water course of Girdenti Valley contains more tangled and thicker vegetation than that of Wied il-Luq.

The Cetti's Warbler is also recorded annually outside these valleys, especially in autumn; most records come from Mtahleb and Bahrija. Breeding in these areas, which offer adequate habitat, could not be ascertained as no visits were made during the breeding season. Other birds were recorded at Ghadira (1.11.67 (2) and 9-11.12.70); Bingemma (3.3.69); Chadwick Lakes (29.8-29.9.72 and 9.9-21.10.73); Rabat (22-26.7.73) and in Gozo, at Lunzjata (5.10.70) and at Ghajn Barrani (end of 8.71).

A male ringed at Mtahleb in October 1970 was retrapped several times at Wied il-Luq between May and September, 1971. This may support the

possibility that a number of the birds recorded in various localities in autumn are the offspring of successful broods reared at Girgenti and Wied il-Luq. There is also the possibility that occasionally a few birds may arrive in autumn from nearby countries.

The Cetti's Warbler shows conspicuous population fluctuations in Europe. One of the main reasons is the high mortality rate during long and severe winters. The series of mild winters from 1948 to 1961 helped the Cetti's Warbler to push its range northward in France and from 1960, vagrants started to appear in Western Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and England. According to the farmers of Girgenti it was about the mid-fifties that singing males were first heard there, coinciding with the series of mild winters afore mentioned.

There is no doubt that the Cetti's Warbler is now a resident species in small numbers. From October 1967 to October 1973, 56 birds were ringed in Malta. These comprised 24 full grown males, 19 full grown females and 12 juveniles/pullii. Of these only 6 were trapped outside the Girgenti/Wied il-Luq area. Most full grown birds have been retrapped several times in successive areas, with the longest period between ringing and retrapping dates being 4 years.

Though breeding was thought to have occurred in 1968 and 1969, as the species was present throughout the year, the first definite proof was obtained in 1970 when on 13th April a pair was trapped for ringing at Girgenti. The female had a clear brood patch and was carrying a small caterpillar in its beak. A year later, on 23rd May, 1971, 4 newly fledged birds were seen at Wied il-Luq. They were trapped together with the adults which had already been ringed (the female on 15th September, 1969 and the male on 16th August, 1970). Two more newly fledged young were seen nearby in late July.

The first nest was discovered on 14th May, 1973, at Wied il-Luq. It contained four young and was situated under a fig tree, overgrown with ivy and brambles, growing over a wall above a wide canal. It was built upon a small projecting ivy twig among dead strands of bramble, about 14 feet high from the ground, above a small stream. It was loosely constructed with dry grasses and reed blades lined from the inside by fine grasses and feathers. Its shape was very slightly oval, 12x11 cm. on the outside and 5x4cm. on the inside; the depth was 5 cm.

On the same day a newly fledged juvenile was trapped at Girgenti. On 20th May, 1973, another family group was trapped at Girgenti; it consisted of 2 newly fledged birds and 2 adults (both adults had been ringed at the same spot on 13th April, 1970). Another family party of 4 juveniles was present at Wied il-Luq at the end of July.

The Cetti's Warbler appears to rear two broods between April and July. None of the males had the slightest evidence of an incubation patch. Only the female was noted bringing food to the young of the nest found at Wied il-Luq, though the male was singing nearby.

Note on sex identification through wing length (measurements in mm.) and weight (in gm.)

Williamson (1968) gives wing length at 58-64 for males and 51-57 for females. He remarks that a few females 59-61 are probably wrongly sexed. Svensson (1970) gives 58-67.5 for males and 54-60 for females. Our measurements (maximum chord) agree with Williamson: the range of 24 full grown males was 58-64 and of 19 full grown females 51.5-57.

Weight is also helpful. 24 males had a range of 13.6-16.9 (one was 12.5) with a mean of 14.7. Nineteen females weighed 10.3-13.4 with a mean of 11.5 (Most weights were recorded in the morning. Most birds retrapped in late afternoon regularly registered an increase of about 1 gm.).

NOTE ON MOULT

Adults moult after breeding. Males seem to start earlier than females. A male on 26th August had just finished, another was in an advanced stage on 10th August (moult completed when retrapped on 22nd August) and a third was in an advanced stage on 25th August.

A female had not yet started moulting on 4th August, one on 20th September was in an advanced stage and others, on 23rd September and 27th September, had just finished.

Juveniles have a body moult between mid-July and early September. It is thus possible to age birds in June-September according to plumage condition.

References:

- Despott, G. 1932. Ornitologia delle Isole Maltesi. *Riv. Ital. Orn* (2)2: 119-136
- Gauci, C. 1968. The Occurrence Of The Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* in Malta. *Malta. O.S. Quart Bull* (1)2:7-8.
- Gauci, C. 1970-71 News from the Ringing Group. *Il-Merill* 1:13-14; 2:14-16; 3:11-13; 4:11-13.
- Gauci, C. & Sultana J. 1971. Systematic List for 1967-1970. *Il-Merill* 5:1-24.
- Gooders, J. (Ed.) 1969. Birds of the World. 7:2080-2081. London: IPC Mag. Ltd.
- Roberts, E.L. 1954. The Bird of Malta. Malta: Progress Press.
- Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1968-1969. Bird Notes/Systematic Lists. *Malta O.S. Quart. Bull.* (1) 1:10-19, 2:10-17, 3:9-16, 4:6-13; (2) 1:25-28, 2:5-10, 3:11-16 4:11-19.
- Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1971-1973. M.O.S. Ringing Group Reports 1967-70, 1971, & 1972. *Il-Merill* 6:1-15; 8:1-34; 11:1-36.
- Svensson, L. 1970. Identification Guide to European Passerines Stockholm: Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet.
- Vaurie, C. 1959. The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna, Passeriformes. London: Whiterby.
- Voous, K.H. 1960. Atlas of European Birds. London: Nelson.
- Williamson, K. 1968. Identification for Ringers, 1. Oxford: Brit. Trust Orn.