

# ASPECTS OF THE SPRING MIGRATION OF SMALL PASSENGERS THROUGH MALTA

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Most of my visits to Malta have been at the time of the Spring Migration through the islands, since this time of year holds a special excitement for me, that is never matched by the flow of migrants at other times. This was no doubt generated by the migrants I witnessed on the occasion of my first visit in April 1965 when Chats, Flycatchers and Warblers were everywhere. Whilst falls of birds comparable to that of 1965 have not been repeated in later years, there is never-the-less the anticipation that this could occur at any time.

Recently members of the Ornithological Society have been systematically recording the numbers of birds passing through Malta, and since 1966 ringing and associated studies of birds has taken place. It is still too soon to draw any conclusions from their records, but one cannot help but notice the great variation in the number of birds recorded year by year.

It is well known that changeable winds have a significant effect on the migratory pattern of small birds, and it is reasonable to assume that drifting occurs in the Mediterranean as much as it does in other parts of the world. Several observers have indicated that in spring there is a steady flow of small migrants through Malta if the wind is light westerly or if it is calm. The occurrence of larger falls of small migrants usually occurs with a sudden deterioration in weather conditions in the area. Thus my own observations of abnormally high numbers of small passerines in April 1965, can probably be attributed to the occurrence of frequent sand-storms on the North Africa coast at that time.

Whilst weather conditions can materially affect the numbers of migrants visually observed each Spring, there is never-the-less a consistent migration of birds through the islands. Whatever the weather may be one can expect to record good numbers of Yellow Wagtails, Wood Warblers, Wheatears, Whinchats, and so on. What force controls the repeated occurrence of these birds in Malta? A number of possibilities suggest themselves, each of which has to be considered.

- a) They are birds following a predetermined migratory route.
- b) They are birds filtering through after landing and feeding in North Africa.
- c) They are birds that have overshot the North Africa coastal feeding strip or failed to find a supply of food in that region.
- d) They are birds that had intended to make the journey from South of the Sahara to mainland Europe in one long flight, but found themselves too weak to complete the journey.

Of the thirty-six species of small passerines which occur commonly in Malta each spring, thirty-four have known wintering grounds to the West or South-West of Lake Chad. The exceptions Icterine Warbler and Collared Flycatcher are probably the least common of the regular migrants and have their main wintering grounds in the Congo. The generally accepted theory that small passerines cross the Sahara on a S.W.-N.E. course suggests that

Malta receives its birds via Tunisia and Libya.

The vegetation of Northern and Central Tunisia at the time of the spring migration is at its best, and offers a plentiful supply of food to a bird which has just crossed 1800 miles of desert. On the other hand Southern Tunisia and Libya offer little or no vegetation, and desert and sea are often joined. A bird reaching the Mediterranean along this stretch of coast-line, is therefore faced with the necessity of going on to find a supply of food.

If we examine the records of the Malta Ornithological Society in more detail we find that.

- 1) No bird ringed at any of the Tunisian ringing stations has been recovered in Malta in the year it was first ringed.
- 2) All birds trapped in Malta are light in weight having consumed all their fat reserves accumulated South of the Sahara.
- 3) Birds landing in Malta tend to spend up to some 4/6 days here, and subsequent re-traps indicate a material increase in body weight during this time.
- 4) No small passerines have been recovered in Malta on a succeeding Spring Migration.

It is therefore tentatively suggested that birds appearing in Malta are either:—

- a) Passerines that have failed to find a food supply on the Northern edge of the Sahara.
- b) Passerines that had intended to make the flight from South of the Sahara to mainland Europe, in one long journey but found themselves too weak to accomplish their desired aim.
- c) Passerines that have overshot the vegetation areas of North Africa probably through favourable weather conditions.

The present available information is meagre and only many years of detailed observations will determine how right or wrong these suggestions are.

If they provoke discussion and further assessment then their object will have been achieved.

References:— R.E. Moreau— Problem of Mediterranean — Saharan Migration. *Ibis* 1961

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