

NEWS AND VIEWS

1. Bro. Edmund



We regret that Bro. Edmund, who has given invaluable service to the MOS as Committee Member, Editor of 'IL-MERILL' and as an active member of the Ringing Group, is due to leave the islands in summer. We'll be missing a great friend and a staunch supporter of the Conservation movement in Malta. Bro. Edmund was also the chairman of the National Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation.

We wish him luck with the birds of Eritrea where he hopes he will be working in the future. Malta's loss is Eritrea's gain.

2. Mr. Dominic Cutajar

We are glad to announce that Mr Dominic Cutajar, a life member of the MOS, has accepted to be the new Editor of 'IL-MERILL' after Bro. Edmund's departure. Mr. D. Cutajar was one of the co-founders of MOS and has served on the Committee as Secretary/Treasurer for four years.

3 In the Press

The local papers have never carried so many articles and letters protesting against the indiscriminate shooting of birds. For the last few months few were the days when protest letters or articles did not appear in the papers. Leaders of the newspapers also pointed out the need to control the shooting and trapping. The P.R.O. of the MOS took the opportunity to hammer the society's ideals. It was encouraging to note that some correspondents were persons who are not in any way interested in birds. At last we seem to be arousing the public's interest.

4 Field course for young students at Ghadira

An experimental field course in nature study was held for about forty students from the Secondary School for Boys, Paola. The students carried out studies on various plant environment and its effect on plant structure in the Ghadira area. It is being realised that Ghadira is ideal for such courses. The latter are still a novelty in Malta and should be very frequently held. But leaders of such courses should make it a point to hammer in conservation ideals. Conservation of our countryside and all its wildlife should be included with the theme of each field course. The MOS has been stressing the need to educate the younger generation in the appreciation of wildlife in its natural state and it is for this reason that we have requested the Government to utilise the area at Ghadira which offers unique potentialities for a field study centre.

5. MOS Young Members Section

The Young Members Section should be congratulated for the number of activities which they have organised. They have had quite a number of successful bird-watching outings this spring. One hopes that the number of members of this Section will increase as the MOS depends on them in the future. The enthusiasm that prevails amongst this small band of youngsters should be partly attributed to the Section's dedicated Secretary, Mr. John Azzopardi.

6. The Blue Rock Thrush

Some people make it their business to steal the young of the Blue Rock Thrush to be reared by hand. The females are generally released whilst the males are caged for their song. This illegal practice still goes on and a male may fetch up to £M5.

Several hundred posters have been printed lately by MOS appealing for its protection by the general public and pointing out that it is prohibited to kill, trap, or keep by any means at any time of the year this bird. These posters were exhibited in all schools and in Notice Boards at Police Stations. (See back cover).

It is worth quoting here what Charles Wright had written on the Blue Rock Thrush, more than a hundred years ago, in his "List of birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo" published in the B.O.U. Journal "The Ibis" in 1864.

"A lover of rocky and solitary places, it not unfrequently approaches the dwellings of man; and it is no uncommon occurrence to see it perched on the corner of some house, giving vent to its me-

lodious but plaintive song, which it also often pours forth on the wing. It is most commonly met with in pairs on the south coast, where it breeds in the high cliffs. It also constructs a loosely formed nest in ruined buildings, in which case its progeny are sure to be taken by the country-lads, who find a ready sale for them in the town as cage-birds. The Blue Thrush becomes strongly attached to the locality in which it has been brought up, and seldom quits it. This affection is also known in a state of captivity, and it rarely long survives removal to a new and strange place. Many instances of this kind have come under my notice. One is worth mentioning. When the New Market in Valletta was opened, many of the market-people brought with them cages containing these birds from the old market, where they had been reared. One after another the birds pined away and died, and in a few weeks not one survived the change of locality, yet they were fed by the same hand, and with the same description of food. Almost fabulous prices are sometimes given for a good songster. An instance is fresh in my memory of a noble lady who considered herself fortunate in securing one for £7 10s, as the owner was very loath to part with it; and two or three pounds is not an unusual price. The male nestlings may easily be distinguished from the females at a very early age by their blue wing-coverts. In confinement they are much subject to a disease of the feet, which generally proves fatal. The Maltese suspend a piece of red cloth and a cowry-shell in its cage, which they consider a certain specific against the 'evil eye'".

7. M O S Logogram



This is the Society's logogram as designed by Mr. A. Baldacchino. The letters M O S have been arranged in a way that resembles a flying bird.

8. Dedication

This issue of 'IL-MERILL' is dedicated to Mrs. M. Fergusson of Pitlochrie, Perthshire, who donated £22 towards its cost.

9. Obituary: Dr. David Lack

Dr. David Lack, F.R.S., who died at the age of 63 in Oxford, after a long illness, on 12 March, 1973, was one of the most outstanding among world ornithologists. His interest in birds dated from his early days at school. When he was still an undergraduate he had already written a greater part of his book 'The Birds of Cambridgeshire'.

After carrying out studies on the biology and behaviour of the Robin he wrote a number of important papers and his very popular book 'The Life of the Robin' appeared in 1943. Just before the war, David Lack made an expedition to the Galapagos Islands and in 1947 he expounded his general ideas of species-formation, competition between species and the evolution of island faunas in his book 'Darwin's Finches' which has become a classic of evolutionary literature. At the end of the war he was appointed Director of Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford. In 'The Natural Regulation of

Animal Numbers' (1954) he dealt with the reproductive rates of birds and the natural selection of family size and provided information about the survival of birds both young and adult under various conditions by analysing bird-ringing results. At this time he also started to carry out migration studies through observation, later turning to radar to study the volume and direction of migrants reaching the British Isles from the European mainland.

David Lack also produced many studies on individual species. With the help of students under his direction he produced a remarkable long-term study on the population of the Great Tit. His 'Swifts in a Tower' (1956) presents scientific work, as with 'The Life of the Robin', to the enjoyment of the intelligent laymen.

David Lack was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1951 and president of the Ornithological Congress in 1966. At the end of last year he was awarded the Darwin Medal of the Royal Society.

10. Good Friday Eve

It has been some years since we had such a poor migration in spring. A belt of low pressures and adverse weather conditions along the north coast of Africa south of Malta for the best part of spring must have been one of the main causes. However we did have a few influxes. The most spectacular occurred on Good Friday eve, April 19th. The wind was blowing moderately, at times strongly, from the NE with frequent light showers. Members of the Bird Ringing Group were operating at Hal Far and were lucky to witness a number of birds coming. Their numbers increased as the day grew

older and the wind dropped. 57 species were recorded there, including Black Kite, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Purple and Night Heron, Glossy Ibis, Stone Curlew and an assortment of chats and warblers. Turtle Doves, too, arrived in large numbers; so did Golden Orioles. Small flocks of this brilliant species were seen coming in at regular intervals. Although protected by Maltese law, they received the same treatment as any other bird, the size of a thrush or larger, did. Ironically one male golden oriole fell dead just in front of the statue of St. Francis surrounded by birds near the Pope John Peace Laboratory at Haj Far.

11. Two additions to the List of the Birds of Malta

Penduline Tit (*Remiz pendulinus*) & Needle-tailed Swift (*Hirundapus caudacutus*).

(i) While three members of the Ringing Group, J. Grech, V. Vella Muskat and J. Sultana were operating at Lunzjata Valley on 4th November, 1972, a curiously looking small bird was found in the net. As it was getting dark it was taken home in a ringer's bag and on examination it turned out to be a first year Penduline Tit, which had never been recorded in the Maltese Islands. It was ringed, measured, weighed and photographed. On its release early next morning at Lunzjata it started to call and immediately another was heard answering. Afterwards both birds were seen together in the reeds. The last recorded sight of this species was on 9th December when one was still present in the same area.

(ii) We were informed by Mr. P. Micallef that Mr. George Mangion of Qormi, had in his possession a

mounted bird whose description matched that of the Needle-tailed Swift, an east Asian bird which winters in New Guinea and Australia. Members of the Ringing Group examined the skin which was found to be the Needle-tailed Swift. The tail feathers of this species end in needle-like spikes. It is a large swift with a short unforked tail, white forehead and throat and a conspicuous white horseshoe-shaped area under the tail. It is one of the fastest birds and reaches speeds of over 100 mph. It is a rare straggler to Europe and has been recorded in Great Britain, Finland and Italy. The locally stuffed bird was taken in mid-November, 1971, at Faqqanija.

12. Another addition to the Breeding Species of Malta

The Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) can be added to our list of rare breeding species. It has always been recorded by previous authorities as a common spring and autumn passage migrant. However during the last few years it was noted that one or two pairs have started to breed with us. The following records are proof enough.

In 1971, a pair with three fledged young was present from the 6th to the 10th June at Buskett. After this up to 5 birds were noted on various dates in the same locality till 18th August. In the same year another family party was noted at Wied il-Kbir on 30th June and 11th July.

Last year (1973) 2 juveniles were present at Buskett on 9th July. We were also informed that a few years ago a nest with eggs of this species was most unfortunately collected from the same locality.

13. Unusual Winter Visitors

Every winter one or two spring and/or autumn migrants make an unusual appearance. This year we had 3 House Martins at Lunzjata during the first week of January while a Wheatear appeared at Hal Far on 4th January. But the most unusual winter visitor was a Great Reed Warbler which was trapped and ringed at Xemxija on 12th January. It was undergoing heavy body moult while its old wing and tail feathers were much worn out. Another surprise visit was made by a Red-backed Shrike which seemed to have wintered at Lunzjata. It was last seen in mid-March. Both the Great Reed Warbler and the Red-backed Shrike winter south of the Sahara.

14. Two overloaded birds.

While bird-ringing at Xemxija an exhausted Wood Warbler was found in the nets with its feet each covered with relatively large clods of hard clay. One would not have been surprised had these been found on a ground dwelling species. It was patiently relieved of its load. Another warbler, this time a White-throat, was relieved of four large ticks which seemed to have been working quite a lot on its blood for the last few days. Their size altogether was almost as large as its head.

15 A silly pair of Sardinian Warblers

Two members were surprised to

notice that a pair of Sardinian Warblers had built a nest which was still empty, in a small dead branch lying alongside a public path. The nest couldn't have been more exposed. They concealed it as best they could with some vegetation and on subsequent visits was found that the pair managed to raise a brood of four.

16. Ringing Recoveries

The Bird Ringing Group has already had seven birds recovered abroad this year. Five of these (a Starling ringed at Hal Far in October, 1972; a Chaffinch ringed at Buskett in January, 1970; two Robins, one ringed at Lunzjata in November and the other at Hal Far in October, both last year; and a Blackcap ringed at Buskett in February, 1970;) have been recovered in Tunisia. A Grey Wagtail ringed in November, 1971, at Lunzjata was recovered in nearby Sicily while a Song Thrush ringed in November, 1970, also at Lunzjata was recovered in Reggio Calabria, Italy.

Foreign ringed birds recovered in Malta this year include a Gannet from Scotland, a Purple Heron from Holland, and a Kestrel from Tunisia. A Golden Oriole and a Serin with Czechoslovak rings, a Linnet with Lithuanian ring, a Kestrel and Purple Heron with French rings have also come to our notice.

Details of all recoveries will be published in the Ringing Group Reports.

J. Sultana & C. Gauci