

THE BLACKCAP..... WAS IT OVERLOOKED?

Has the Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* been overlooked or did its numbers increase in the last few years? Going through the ornithological literature one can assume that at least some authorities have indeed overlooked it.

It has been confirmed by the M.O.S. that the Blackcap is quite a common winter visitor. A few migrants start arriving by mid-September. The numbers increase slowly, becoming very common in December. Numbers greatly increase between mid-February and late March with maxima of c. 500 — 800 annually at Buskett. They then suddenly leave though odd birds are met with till late April or early May. (C. Gauci and J. Sultana: Systematic List for 1967-70: II-Merill No. 5, August 1971). The notable increase of Blackcaps in Buskett between mid-February and late March coincides with the ripening of the fruit of the ivy *Hedera helix* which is very common at Buskett. The Blackcap is also common at this time of the year at Girgenti where the ivy is common too. Otherwise in all other localities the Blackcaps are scattered and not concentrated. Since bird-ringing started in September 1965, no fewer than 581 were ringed till April 1971.

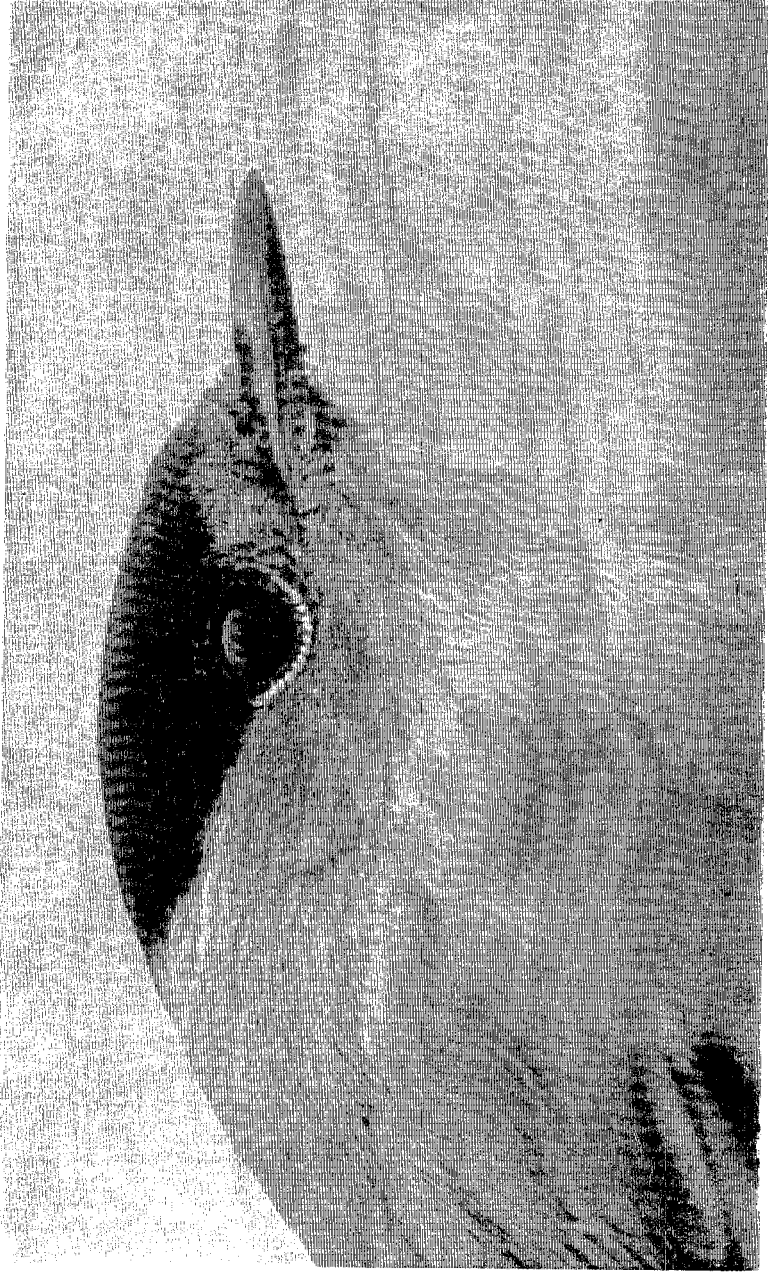
Hereunder are listed the various statements of previous authors.

- Schembri (1843)** : A few arrive in March and April.
Wright (1864) : Not common; has been observed in January, February and March as well as in September and October. (He gives about 15 records from 1859 to 1862).
Ardoino (1893) : Scarce in March and October.
Despott (1917) : Rare but occurs annually February to April, October to November.
Roberts (1954) : A rare spring and passage autumn migrant.
De Lucca (1969) : A scarce but regular spring and autumn passage migrant March to April and September to October. Regular but scarce winter visitor November to March. (In 1950, De Lucca included the Blackcap in a small contribution treating of rare and accidental species in Rivista Italiana (20) 2:33-44).

References:

- 1843 A. Schembri: Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta, Tip. Anglo-Maltese, Malta.
1864 C.A. Wright: List of the Birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo. Ibis 6:42-73, 137-157.
1893 N. Ardoino: Gli Uccelli di Malta. Elenco sinottico. This work was published by Despott in Malta in 1928.
1917 G. Despott: Notes on the Ornithology of Malta. Ibis (10) 5:281-349, 466-526.
1954 E.L. Roberts: The Birds of Malta. Progress Press, Malta.
1969 C. De Lucca: A Revised Check-List of the Birds of the Maltese Islands. E.W. Classey Ltd., England.

J. Sultana.



(Photo B.P. Grenfell)

The head of a Blackcap.