

IL-MERILL

BULLETIN OF THE MALTA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

No. 7 April 1972

10c to non-Members



IL-MERILL

The title of the Society's Bulletin, **IL-MERILL**, is the Maltese name for the Blue Rock Thrush, *Monticola solitarius*, which is one of the few resident species of the Islands. It was chosen as the National Bird of Malta by the local National Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation and has been the emblem of the Malta Ornithological Society since the latter's inception.

Editor

Bro. Edmund

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MALTA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Cover picture: Blue Rock Thrush (photo: M.D. England).

EDITORIAL

It was with deep regret that we heard of the death of Mr. B. Masters which occurred on January 17th at the Blue Nuns Hospital. He had been a faithful member of the M.O.S. for some years and was at one time the devoted editor of the Quarterly Bulletin when it was published in duplicated form. We express our deepest sympathy and thanks to his dear wife. May he rest in peace.

This issue, number 7, of Il-Merill marks the third year of its publication. As we made issue number 6 a ringing number, giving details of four years records we are omitting the ringing records for 1971 which will appear in our next issue.

The Malta Ornithological Society has now reached the tenth year of its existence and much has been achieved in this decade and 1971, in particular, was most fruitful in bird studies and also bird conservation, as can easily be perceived by perusing our records in the last three numbers.

The International Council for Bird Preservation (I C B P) has very intimate connections with M O S and it tries to achieve its aims by working closely with it. The I C B P proudly celebrates its Golden Jubilee of foundation in 1972. It was the first international organization to be formed for the preservation of nature and as the years go by it can be quite proud of its many achievements in most countries of the world in saving millions of birds from slaughter and rescuing not a few species threatened with extinction. Malta is on the list of member countries and in its own small way shares in the achievements of this noble society. We hope in a later issue this year to publish an article on I C B P and to give an account of their 10th Conference held in Rumania.

Meanwhile we look ahead with confidence and appeal to all our readers and friends to do their utmost to help on the good work of bird protection and to try to enrol more members for the Society and increase our funds so that our aims can be more successfully achieved.

MISCELLANY

Bird Sites

In October, 1971, the Director of Agriculture and Fisheries requested a list of sites (in order of priority) which the M.O.S. wishes to see added to the schedule of Bird Sanctuaries. In the M.O.S. Secretary's communication the following list was recommended.

Malta: (1) The Pool at Ghadira with a protective belt of 500 yards around it; (2) Filfla with a one mile belt around it; (3) The Salt-pans and all the area known as is-Salina to be added to Kennedy Grove; (4) Ta' Qali; (5) Wied il-Luq to be added to Buskett; and (6) Chadwick Lakes.

Gozo: (1) Ta' Cené Area; and (2) Marsalforn Valley.

It was pointed out that 'protected' areas should include a non-shooting and a non-trapping belt around them of at least 100 yards. This should also be added to those sanctuaries which are already on the schedule, e.g. Buskett, Kennedy Grove, etc. (Comino Island has a non-shooting belt of one mile around it). It was also recommended that the Bird-shooting should be prohibited from all bays, inlets and from sea-craft.

Importation of Wild Birds

In 1970, £6,698 worth of wild birds were imported. The value of birds imported between January and May of 1971 was £1,174. A large number of imported birds comprise finches. These are used by locals to re-stock their decoy-birds. In October, last year, the Minister

of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture and Tourism banned the importation of the following species: Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Serin, Siskin, Hawfinch, Linnets, Brambling, Ortolan Bunting and Jackdaw. This was apparently done to safeguard the interests of the long-standing trappers so that the price of finches remains high. Nevertheless such banning helps to decrease the trapping of these birds from the countries from which they are imported, mainly Italy and Tunisia.

The Secretary congratulated the Minister for taking such action. It was pointed out to him that the M.O.S. pleasure was not derived from the point of view that the interests of the local trappers were safeguarded, but because wild bird importation entails inhuman activities. It was also recommended that the list should have included more imported species.

Ringed or Chained Pellets

In January, this year, the Prime Minister made the Ringed or Chained Pellets (Prohibition) Regulations which prohibit any person to import, manufacture, store, keep, distribute or use any explosives consisting of ringed or chained pellets. This praise-worthy action will save many a large bird migrating high over the islands. These chained pellets cartridges were being used by some of the shooters to shoot at out-of-range targets, usually Birds of Prey and Herons.

Debate in Parliament

As we go to the Press, bird-shooting was the subject of a debate in Parliament. Whilst the Prime Minister denied the rumours that the new Government was going to ban shooting totally, he said that the Government wished to see all the shooters in an Association which would formulate bird regulations so as to safeguard their own game. The Prime Minister said that the shooters themselves are destroying their own sport because as it now stands there soon would be no birds to shoot at. He said that birds not only enhance the country-side but also help us to get rid of pests such as harmful insects. The Prime Minister continued that the Government wished that every sportsman should have certain regulations to abide by not only just a shooting licence. He also said that he knew how this sport is carried out in other countries where there are adequate bird protection regulations which are respected and that we should follow suit. The Prime Minister continued by saying that we are still doing what our forefathers used to do, cutting down trees and killing birds. Because of this we have a country without trees and without birds. The M.O.S. congratulated the Prime Minister on his speech and offered its help in advice on this matter.

On the Screen

On behalf of the M.O.S., J. Sultana prepared two programmes — 'Breeding Birds' and 'Bird Migration over Malta' — for the Malta Television's popular series 'Wirt Artna' (Our National Heritage).

These programmes which were screened in February were a success in propagating the Society's message to the general public. In the same TV series, in April, Dr. Anton Buttigieg, The Minister of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, being the national poet of nature, was the guest of the programme where he spoke of the need to conserve nature especially birds. In another TV programme 'Malta u lil hinn Minnha', Labour MP Dr. Philip Muscat in April pointed out at length the need to update the present legislation in order to bring it in line with that of other countries. He also mentioned the M.O.S. appeal not to molest the birds of prey.

In the Papers

Both 'L-Orizzont' and 'Malta News' had leaders condemning the way bird shooting is carried out in Malta. 'It-Torċa' had a whole page article on Birds and the Environment and praised the M.O.S. for the latter's initiative in distributing the birds of prey leaflet.

At the R.S.P.C.A. Meeting

One of the motions tabled for the Annual General Meeting of the R.S.P.C.A. (Malta Branch) urges the Government to set up a national commission composed of members from interested animal welfare organisations and others to examine the existing laws on the shooting and trapping of birds and to introduce revised legislation aiming at better protection of wild birds.

Blue Rock Thrush Photographs

M.D. England, O.B.E., who is one of Britain's finest bird photo-

graphers has kindly donated six photographs of the Blue Rock Thrush to the M.O.S. He also gave his kind consent to use them in M.O.S. publications.

Course at Ghadira

The Education Department held a three-day field course at Ghadira for Science Teachers in Secondary Schools with the help of the British Council. The course was run by Mrs. P. Wolseley and Dr. S.M. Haslam. During the course all those present realised the potentialities of this area as a field cen-

tre where school children can learn how to appreciate nature in its natural wild state.

Filfla

The bilateral agreement which was signed by the Governments of Malta and Great Britain does not give permission to the Services to use Filfla during the breeding season of the sea-birds. It is also hoped that Filfla will be declared a nature reserve. Its importance is documented in 'Bird Studies On Filfla' which was published by the M.O.S. in 1970.

BIRD PROTECTION

By Brother Edmund

There is a very laudable movement throughout Europe, and even the rest of the world, for countries to come closer together for various reasons such as trade, defence and culture. This is, in fact, an extension of Donne's saying that, "No man is an island". Just as individuals need each other in order to live sanely, so also do countries for self-defence against threats such as pollution and destruction of the environment. In other words, if we are to survive, then we must come closer together to save our common heritage and culture. The seas surrounding our countries do not belong to us only but to all mankind. If the Mediterranean becomes heavily polluted and fishless, this is the concern of all the countries in the area. So also we can argue that if one country is allowing its flora and fauna to be destroyed it is also destroying those of neighbouring countries, especially in the case of migrant birds which belong to all the countries over which they fly.

It was thus interesting to hear Dr. Mansholt, president of the Common Market Commission, at a recent conference in Venice, speak, "with horror of the destruction in Italy of millions of migratory birds." This, he declared, "is destroying the natural balances in this part of Europe. We respect Italy as the cradle of civilization. It is essential that this horrifying practice stop immediately." Not a very tactful thing to say as a guest in Italy, but how courageous and true! He emphasised that the killing of migratory birds is banned in all other countries of the Common Market and this was another reason why the ban should be fully imposed in Italy. There have indeed been noteworthy and constant attempts in Italy to introduce some control and when we were just about to experience the

happy end to the annual massacre, largely due to the life-time efforts of that gallant gentleman Dr. Ghigi, the power of the 'hunters' lobby' prevailed in these months of political instability. But nevertheless, we entertain firm hopes that the politicians will soon listen to the voice of millions of conservationists, Italian and European, who are determined not to let the 1,600,000 licensed shooters have their own way. The absence of small birds means on the part of farmers a greater reliance on chemical insecticides which is one reason why in Italy the presence of D D T in humans is 1.8 parts per million compared with 0.4 in Britain.

One inevitable result of the greater use of chemical insecticides, as has been tragically shown in recent studies in Israel, is that the already diminishing number of birds is further being destroyed through the accumulation of chemicals in their bodies, so that their eggs become infertile. In addition to this, the birds of prey which feed on the smaller birds and rodents are rapidly and tragically decreasing in numbers. One bird of prey in particular is in especial danger in Europe, the Peregrine Falcon (il Bies). It has already disappeared from several countries and its numbers have gone down by 90%. And yet this bird is not on the protected list in Malta and any hunter can shoot down one of the few remaining ones with impunity. For this crime in Sweden a hunter would be sent to prison and his gun would be confiscated.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature issues a Red Data Book which lists animals and birds which are in imminent danger of disappearing from the world. Last year eight more species of birds were added to the danger list which is no small one. Yet it could happen that a trigger-happy hunter in Malta could shoot down a highly protected bird such as the Osprey (Arpa).

Much can be achieved in the field of bird-protection by two means. The first is through education in the schools, as was achieved last autumn in Malta through the Save the Robin campaign, and in the mass media of newspapers and T.V.; and this is being fairly well done in Malta through the efforts of the Malta Ornithological Society and other dedicated persons. The second is in the vital field of legislation in drawing up and enforcing adequate protection laws. We are quite hopeful that in the next few months much will be achieved in this area in order to bring Malta in line with present standards of bird-protection in the rest of Europe and thus help maintain and increase the declining numbers of our feathered friends.

THE 10TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 10th Annual General Meeting was held on Tuesday, 29th February, 1972, at the British Council in Valletta. Following is the Presidential Address and the highlights from the Secretary's Report.

Presidential Address

I have great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Malta Ornithological Society on this tenth anniversary of our Society. Though no trumpets were blown and no ceremonies were held to commemorate this occasion, we thought it more practical and useful to pool our energy and resources towards contributions that would strengthen and spread our scope. The latest issue of "Il-Merill" covering the Ringing Report for 1967 to 1970 and Recoveries in Malta of Birds Ringed Abroad is in itself a contribution to European ornithology. 'L-Ghasfur', the leaflet issued by the Young Members' Section of the M.O.S. has met with substantial support especially in the schools. The Society has also published an appeal to Maltese shooters for the preservation of Birds of Prey. This was done jointly with the Birds of Prey Working Group of the I.C.B.P.

In this tenth year of struggle and survival, we felt ourselves striving with greater hope to see some of our dreams turned into reality. It is, therefore, my great pleasure to announce today, that through the personal efforts of the Hon. Minister of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Dr. Anton Buttigieg, who is Malta's national poet of nature, a new law is being drafted on bird sanctuaries. Let the poet live by his word and let his word live for ever by nature.

I must also express our great appreciation to Sir Anthony Mamo, our Governor-General for accepting to be the Patron of the Malta Ornithological Society and for this we feel greatly honoured. We know how much Sir Anthony appreciates the work that the Society is doing and we are sure of his full support and sympathy.

I must also take the opportunity to thank the Government for prohibiting the importation of finches from abroad and the manufacturing, importation and use of any cartridges consisting of ringed or chained pellets. As you know well the trafficking of wild birds is being condemned the world over and in 1970 a resolution was passed at the XV World Conference of the I.C.B.P. urging Governments to stop this trade which has always been the cause of high mortality of wild birds. The ringed or chained pellets were being imported from Italy and Belgium and used in Malta on birds of prey and flocks of migratory birds normally out of range of the ordinary cartridge shot.

'Il-Merill' continued to be published and reached our members regularly with a progressive standard in presentation and material. In Number 5 issue we have brought up to date the Maltese nomenclature of bird names together with the present status of our birds. This is now the accepted standard Maltese nomenclature and we are glad to say that it has

already been accepted by Prof. Aquilina, Head of the Maltese Dept. at the Royal University of Malta.

During the last year the Young Members' Section was re-organised and through their hard working committee they are taking initiative to organise their own outings, lectures and publications. It is the aim of this section of the Society to propagate our message in the schools and the younger generation of Malta and Gozo by distributing 'L-Ghasfur' and seeing that this pamphlet is regularly published in the most interesting way.

The campaign launched by the M.O.S. last year on the protection of the Robin was a great success and here I would like to thank the Department of Information and the Director of Education for their co-operation. Our long cherished wish to see a set of Maltese stamps bearing items of natural history has at last arrived. Our national bird and the Emblem of the Society — The Blue Rock Thrush — was depicted on two stamps of different values in a set of four.

Last year we also took part in an exhibition organised at Zurrieq by the Zurrieq Civic Committee on the history and fauna and flora of this village to commemorate the birth of Prof. Stefano Zerafa, father of Maltese Natural History. On our initiative a seminar was held on "the future of our Environment", and with the co-operation of other local societies interested in this very important matter, it was a real success.

Lectures and outings were organised by the M.O.S. and assistance and advice to local members and foreign ornithological bodies was always willingly forthcoming from the Society. Continuous contacts with foreign ornithological and bird protection societies were made and my recent holiday in Italy brought me into contact with Prof. Edwardo Moltoni of the Milan Natural History Museum, Dr. Robin Chanter, Secretary of L.E.N.A.C.D.U. and members of the Swedish Bird Observatory on Capri.

In 1972 falls the first centenary of the death of Antonio Schembri, father of Maltese Ornithology and I hope that the incoming Committee will commemorate this event in a proper and desired way. Before I end this address I would like to thank all the members of the outgoing Committee for the confidence and support that I have found from each and everyone of them and for all those members, persons and societies who have supported our cause and co-operated in our activities.

J.M. Attard, M.O.S. President...

From The Secretary's Report For Feb. 1971 — Jan. 1972.

1971 has been the busiest year since I was elected Secretary of the M.O.S. in 1966. On our Society's initiative, a seminar on 'The Future of Maltese Environment' was held on 4th July, 1971. This was held jointly with 'Din l-Art Helwa' Association, the Malta Geographical Society and the Natural History Society of Malta. The Seminar was opened by the M.O.S. with an illustrated talk — The Future of Bird Habitat — by J. Sul-

tana. One of the main resolutions passed at the end of the Seminar urged the Malta Government to create an official body to be responsible for the protection of nature and the environment of our islands, to create a field centre at Ghadira and to enact new legislation for adequate bird protection.

In October, an active campaign was carried out to stop the annual craze among young people to trap Robins. Though the Robin is protected, thousands are trapped annually during the influxes in October and November of this wintering species. Most of these die in captivity in less than a month. Posters with an appealing picture of a Robin overprinted with Maltese captions reminding people that the trapping of Robins is illegal and ends in the death of the birds were displayed in all the boys' Primary, Secondary and Private Schools, with the kind permission of the Director of Education. The posters were also displayed outside all the Police Stations in Malta and Gozo through the co-operation of the Department of Information. All the expenses involved were covered by the Malta Bird Reserves Overseas Committee. The Malta Television, the Rediffusion and all the local papers supported our campaign by publishing our press releases. Support was also forthcoming from the school broadcasting magazine — 'The Young Listener' — a publication of the broadcasting authority. The latter, jointly with the M.O.S. Secretary, prepared a programme on Rediffusion for school children on the Robin. The Secretary was also interviewed re the Robin Campaign on Rediffusion in October.

At the end of the year the M.O.S. printed 10,000 leaflets appealing for the preservation of birds of prey. With the kind permission of the Commissioner of Police these were distributed by the Police to all the local shooters when they called to renew their shooting licence for 1972. The leaflet, illustrated by two photographs by Eric Hosking, with the latter's kind consent, gives an account of the characteristics of these species; the important part they play in the balance of nature; and the reasons for their alarming decline, one of which being the shooting of these birds on migration. It gives also information as to what is being done in European countries to safeguard these birds, and stresses that Malta is in duty bound to co-operate, pointing out the damage that is being done not only to Malta's but also to Europe's wild birds by local shooters. The cost of the leaflets was met by the M.O.S. and a donation of £15 from the Emergency Fund for the Protection of Birds of Prey, set up on the initiative of Monsieur J.P. Terasse (France) and Dr P. Geroudet (Switzerland). To advertise this campaign, the M.O.S. Secretary spoke on this matter on the Rediffusion.

The M.O.S. also prepared one of the stands at an exhibition which was organised by the Civic Committee of the Zurrieq village. The motto of the M.O.S. stand was 'protect the birds which enhance your village'. Part of the stand was also dedicated to show the ornithological importance of the Islet of Filfla. The Zurrieq Civic Committee has always supported the M.O.S. to stop Filfla being used as a bombing target by the Services.

Activities for members were held regularly. Four coloured films — Severn Wildfowl Trust, Winged Aristocrats, Birds of a Hampshire Garden and Jungle Feathers — were shown to members at the British Council. A successful day outing was held on Comino while two afternoon walks were held to Buskett and Girgenti. Eight talks were also given at the British Council and at the 4Ts Headquarters. All the members were regularly informed about the activities by circulars. Outings for young members were organised separately by the Young Members' Section.

The Malta Television, the Rediffusion and the local papers were frequently used to air the M.O.S. aims and to educate the public in conservation ideals. Three more numbers of *Il-Merill* were printed, with numbers 5 and 6 as special issues. Number 5 carried a Systematic List of Birds noted in the Maltese Islands during 1967-70 while number 6 reported on Bird-ringing for 1967-70. The first number of 'L-Ghasfur' appeared in January. 1,500 copies of this leaflet for young members were sold to young people in Secondary Schools. Contacts were regularly held with local societies and with most of the European bird societies to which the M.O.S.' publications were sent regularly. Communications were also frequently held with various Government departments re Society matters and scope. A sub-committee was formed to prepare a draft for better bird protection laws to be presented to the Minister concerned. (As we go to the press, the Agricultural Department has asked for a copy of this draft).

The M.O.S. Bird-ringing Group was again very active during 1971. Over 7,500 birds of 91 species were ringed. A daily log of all birds noted was also kept by this group.

...
J. Sultana, M.O.S. Secretary.

RAPTORS IN MALTESE SKIES

By C. Galea

(This is the third of a series of articles on diurnal birds of prey. The first article appeared in 'Il-Merill' No. 3, Dec. 1970).

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Kuccarda prima

Buzzards, though they come annually, are scarce but irregular in the time of year they appear. They do not occur from June to late September.

Their plumage varies but it is generally dark brown on the back, while the under-parts are a variable brown. Their tail is buffish, with narrow, regularly spaced bars and a dark subterminal band.

Like so many other birds of prey, it is seen mostly on the hill-ridges. Its food consists of small mammals, insects, reptiles, carrion and occasionally small birds.

This bird of prey, though of a sluggish flight, makes optimal use of thermals, soaring and wheeling on motionless wings for long periods. On migration they do not appear to mix with other birds of prey and seem to appear singly or in pairs.

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Ajkla bajda

This predator is a regular autumn passage migrant, a very few passing over between mid-September and mid-October. One was also recorded at the end of August in Gozo by Wright (List of Birds observed in Malta and Gozo — Ibis 6.42-73, 137-157). A most curious record is of one at Mistra in mid-December, 1970.

The upper-parts of this species are grey brown, sometimes with a pale crown. Its under-parts, including the under surface of the wings are white except for a dark throat and upper breast. Some individuals may have lighter markings while in others the dark colour is more extensive, reaching the flanks. Juveniles are paler than adults, tawny below with brown markings. Its tail has three or four dark bars. It has an owl-like head with a relatively small beak; its greyish brown feet have stubby toes.

The preferred habitat of this bird is heath and bogs near woods and forests where its reptile prey abounds. It is thus not surprising that it finds the Buskett-Salib tal-Gholja area attractive.

Its elegant flight, though powerful and easy, is not fast; and like most other large broad-winged birds of prey it soars expertly on level wings. When hunting it hovers heavily keeping its body horizontal with feet dangling, looking just like a gigantic hovering Kestrel.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Bughadam abjad prim

This harrier is a passage migrant, scarce in spring and rare in autumn. In spring it occurs in March and April, while in autumn it comes over from about late August to late September. Males are very rarely seen.

The adult male is pale grey on back, throat, and upper breast, with the remaining underparts white. Females have dark brown upper-parts, with the heavily streaked under-parts being a lighter colour. Its head is brownish with a white facial ruff. Young birds resemble the female but their underparts are a streaked rufous. Both adults and juveniles have a conspicuous white rump, which in females can be streaky.

Flying Hen Harriers are quite buoyant, gliding effortlessly and unhurriedly for good distances. They have not been noted to soar much. They migrate singly.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Bughadam abjad

A frequent spring passage migrant, being met with from mid-March to mid-April; it is rare in autumn, when it appears in October. An early bird was noted on 21st February 1971.

The underparts of the adult male are a shining white, with the primaries forming a contrasting black wedge. Above, it is a soft pale greyish-blue, with its rump being barred with black and white. Females and juveniles look like the Montagu's, but they are somewhat paler and duller.

In flight this harrier is much like the Montagu's, but it is slightly heavier and slower. The adult male, ghosting its way over the silla-fields, its delicate colouring contrasting with the crimson of the clover, must be one of the finer sights of a Maltese spring.

When migrating, this harrier flies low and singly, though now and then two or three birds may be noted together.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Bughadam griz

In spring, this harrier is not infrequent, appearing in early April and continuing to be met with for about a month. In autumn a few are seen from late August to late September.

Male Montagu's Harriers are a grey-blue on their upperparts, throat and breast. The rest of the underparts are white flecked with red. They have two black lines on their secondaries. Females are rich brown above, streaked buffish brown below; juveniles have brownish upperparts and brick red underparts. Their facial pattern is quite well marked.

On the wing Montagu's Harriers are very buoyant and quite fast. Flapping, with a few deliberate wing-beats, alternates with longish glides. When migrating, they fly at low to medium heights, but rarely can be noted very high up.

Small parties, up to five birds, can be seen though they are few and far between.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* Bughadam ahmar

The Marsh Harrier is very frequent in spring, from early March to early May; sometimes it continues to be met with till the end of May. In autumn, it is very irregular: very scarce in some years and very frequent in others. At this time it occurs during September and October, but can occur also in August and early November.

Adult males are dark brown on the back with a grey tail and a greyish patch on the upper surface of the wing. They are a variable shade of brown on their underparts, which are streaked. Females are a dark brown all over, with a creamy crown and throat. Young birds resemble the female, but lack the cream on the head.

These hawks have a leisurely flight, with some wing-beats followed by long easy glides. It often indulges in a lazy soaring flight, frequently at great heights. On migration it usually flies at medium height and travels chiefly singly, but small parties (largest one recorded of seven birds) may also be seen. In autumn, they can sometimes be seen accompanying the flocks of Honey Buzzards.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* Bies

Up till a few years ago, a few peregrines on passage could be met with quite regularly at each migratory season, especially in the autumn. Nowadays, the only Peregrines about belong to the resident pair or two and their progeny. An odd migrant or two may still come over, but it is impossible to tell whether a bird is a migrant or a resident.

Adult peregrines are a slate-blue above, with a heavy moustachial stripe; their underparts are whitish closely barred with blue. Juveniles are brownish above and streaked below; they also have a moustachial stripe.

These falcons have a powerful flight, a few strong wing-beats being followed by a long glide that frequently leads to a display of masterful

soaring. They feed almost exclusively on birds, which are captured mostly by their famous stoop during which it is said speeds of nearly 200 m.p.h. can be reached.

It is worth digressing a little here to mention the connection this falcon has with Maltese History.

In 1530, these Islands were ceded by the Emperor of Spain, Charles V. to the Knights of St. John, with the nominate yearly rent of two falcons, one to be sent to the ruler of Spain and the other to his Viceroy in Sicily. In Grand Master Pinto's time, the custom was introduced of sending a falcon to the King of Portugal also. These falcons were caught by nets, to which they were lured by tame falcons.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Seqer tal-Hannieqa

Hobbies are frequent in spring (from mid-April to early June, occasionally appearing as early as late March) and common in autumn (early August to mid-October). It occurs sporadically in July.

Both sexes have the same plumage: adults are slate-blue on the head, back, wings and tail, with white underparts striated with thin black markings; thighs and under-tail coverts are a bright chestnut. Juveniles are a dull brownish-black with buff-tipped feathers above and buffish with coarse black streaks below. Adults and juveniles have a heavy dark moustachial stripe.

In the air this falcon has a very distinctive silhouette -- it looks just like a crescent moon with a tail. Its flight, so effortless and agile, is a wonderful sight, as the bird soars and glides with such consummate ease. Its food consists of large insects and small birds.

On migration, this falcon flies rather fast and high. Birds usually journey singly, but on several occasions, very small parties (of two or three) have been seen. It has been seen with Sparrow Hawks and Honey Buzzards.

Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonorae*

Bies tar-regina

One of the many birds overlooked by previous Maltese ornithologists was this species. It occurs as a scarce passage-migrant from mid-April to early June and from mid-August to late September. There is some evidence that it is also a summer visitor.

This bird is dimorphic. Light phase birds are slate-brown on the upperparts with a buffish-white breast becoming increasingly rufous towards the tail and heavily spotted with black. Dark-phase falcons are a uniform dark brown, scalloped and blotched with buffish and white; some individuals are all black. All these different plumages have been recorded.

While other European falcons nest in spring, this bird nests in the late summer, to coincide with the return migration to Africa. Its favourite habitat is small Islands and sea-cliffs, so it would be quite conceivable that it would nest here, if left undisturbed.

Its silhouette is like that of a Hobby, except for the longer tail. It has also much the same kind of flight, but is more powerful and less agile. Its food consists of small birds and insects.

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.

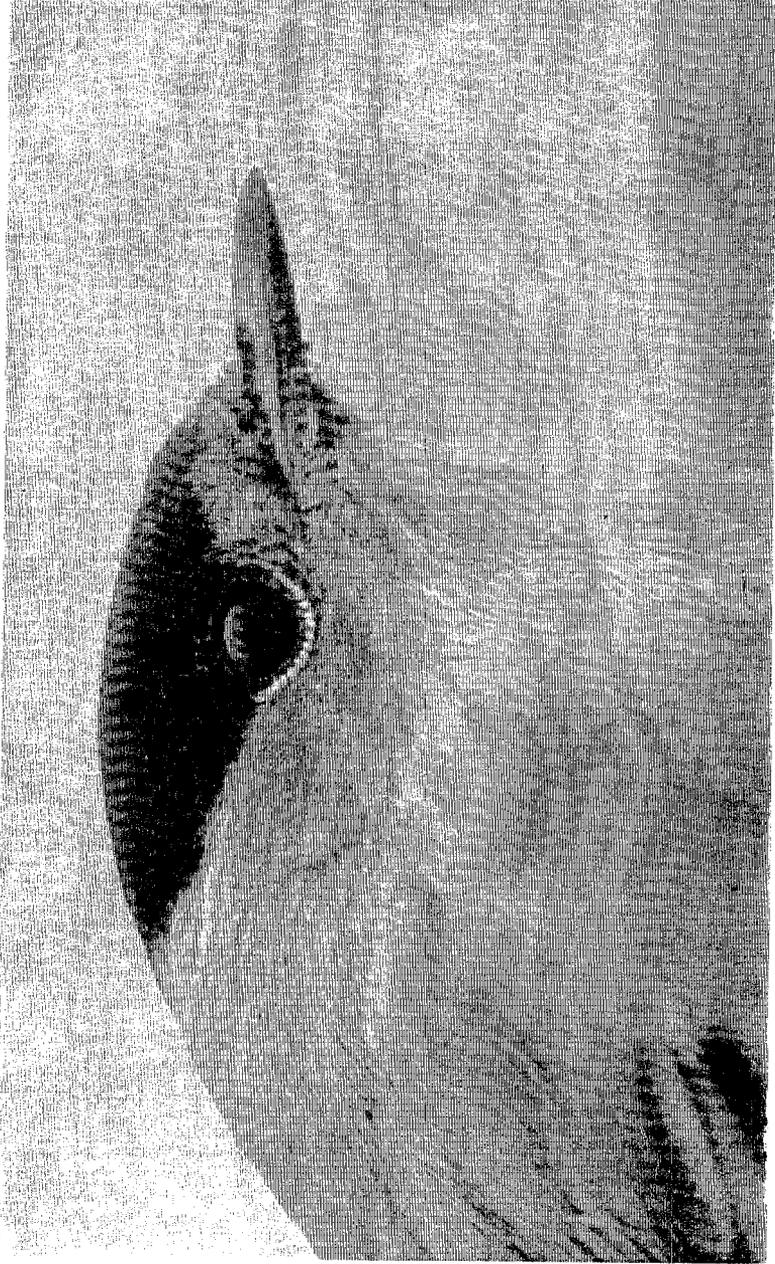
Hereunder are listed the various statements of previous authors.

- 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.