

~~ERIK HOSKING's gift to the M.O.S.~~

~~We are grateful to Mr. E. Hosking, Britain's international famous bird photographer, for the generous gift of 130 bird photos, to the Malta Ornithological Society, which he also kindly allowed us to publish. One of these photos, of a Turtle Dove, is reproduced on the cover of this first issue of 'Il-Merill'. We also hope to make good use of them at a Bird Week later in the year.~~

~~Yellow Wagtails~~

~~Yellow Wagtails are protected in Malta. ARE THEY? Those who visited~~

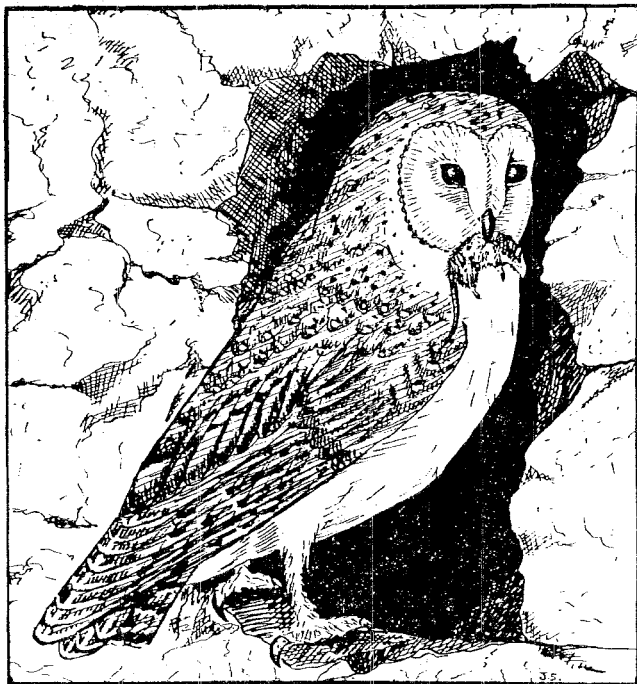
~~ta' Qali disused airfield during the latter half of April would have wondered. Heavy passages of these beautiful, slender and strikingly yellow birds took place. Unfortunately large numbers finished up in nets managed by a few irresponsible youths. Hundreds were trapped and most of these would, no doubt, have perished after a few days.~~

~~The same thing happened in Gozo, in the vicinity of Lunzjata Valley. It is quite discouraging to request the Government to put more species on the protected list when the law protecting the few is not respected or enforced.~~

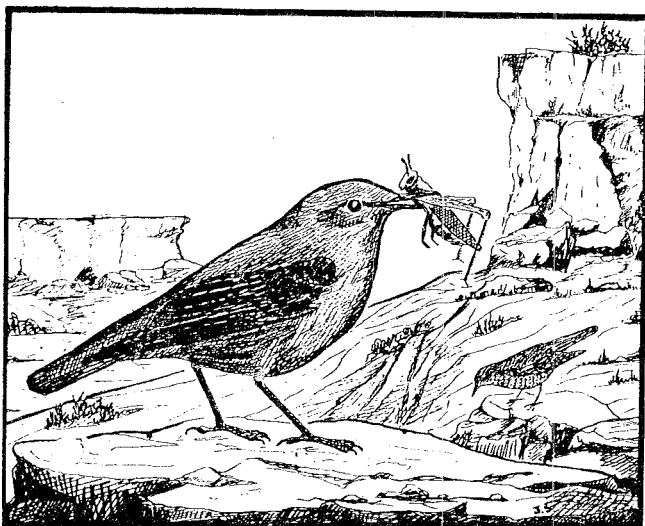
THE BREEDING BIRDS OF MALTA

By J. Sultana & C. Gauci

(THE MALTA YEAR BOOK 1970 carries a paper on the Breeding Birds of Malta by J. Sultana & C. Gauci. The following is the Introduction of their detailed study and shows the alarming state of Malta's breeding species. Ed.)



Barn Owl
Tyto alba



Blue Rock
Thrush
*Monticola
solitarius*

Cory's
Shearwater
*Procellaria
diomedea*
on nest
on Filfla

U. Sultana

"Besides the paucity of trees and the want of many other conveniences indispensable for breeding birds, another reason why the number of our breeding species is so very limited and nidification with the majority of these occurs rather sparingly, is assuredly want of protection".

This paragraph introduced Giuseppe Despott's paper "The Breeding Birds of Malta", in 1916, the first and only such study in Maltese ornithological literature. If this situation was quite alarming then, it is far worse now after fifty-four years. Large areas of countryside have been encroached on, by development, while the number of bird shooters and trappers has greatly increased. New roads lead to every corner of the Islands and there is not a spot of countryside which is not disturbed. The Maltese Islands are densely populated. The surface area is about 122 square miles and the population is over 320,000. Large uninhabited areas, permanent fresh water and habitats suitable for most birds are lacking, and these are all major factors resulting in a short list of breeding birds. It is well known that small islands tend to have fewer breeding species than large mainland areas



but certainly the general attitude of the Maltese worsens the situation.

Out of the 32 species that Despott listed, only 14 still breed regularly and 4 of these, namely the Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*), the Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) and the Woodchat Shrike (*Lanius senator*) are very scarce. The Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*) which used to breed commonly is now extinct. The last breeding pairs were exterminated in Malta in 1945 and in Gozo, where they had the last

hold on the N.E. cliffs of Xaghra, in 1956. It is a great offence indeed, still greater when one learns that this species had been on the bird protection list. Besides the Jackdaw eleven of the species listed by Despott have not been recorded as breeding since. The Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) should not figure as a breeding bird, as the few pairs that still breed on the south western cliffs of Malta and Gozo are not of a purely wild strain owing to successive interbreeding with domestic feral pigeons.

During these last few years the Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) has been added to the list. This species, which must have been overlooked, was listed only as a rare passage migrant. It is now well spread and breeding regularly. The first nests found in Gozo in 1967, were reported in the Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club. This does not mean that it was not breeding before then. Nests had been found previously, in 1959 (though not officially reported), by A. Valletta (Valletta in litt).

Other species which breed sporadically are the Quail (*C. coturnix*), the Serin (*Serinus serinus*), the Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) and the Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*). The Quail is one of the most sought after gamebirds by the local shooters. It migrates over our islands both in spring and autumn and winters in small numbers when left undisturbed. Following the spring migration a few linger behind annually but they rarely succeed in breeding. Being a ground-dwelling bird, a pair that might nest is easily detected by dogs that follow the farmers and the shooters. The Maltese bird-trappers concentrate mainly on finches and so the occasional pair of Serins, Greenfinches or Goldfinches that tries to nest is not given much chance. The chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), though never reported previously, has also bred occasionally, twice to our knowledge during the last two years. If these finches were not constantly molested especially in winter and spring, they would almost cer-

tainly figure in Malta's list of scarce but regular breeding birds. After the spring migration, a pair of Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia turtur*) also occasionally attempts to breed in overgrown valleys like Girgenti and Buskett in Malta, and Lunzjata in Gozo, where freshwater springs can be found all the year round after a good rainy season. It is in such favourable places that the occasional breeders build their nests.

Though densely populated the Maltese Islands still offer proper habitat to the present regular breeding birds. The southern and western cliffs provide facilities and protection to the Shearwaters (*Procellaria diomedea* and *Puffinus puffinus*), the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), the Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) and the odd pair of Kestrels and Peregrines. While the inland cliffs and deep valley sides, especially of hilly Gozo, also favoured by the Blue Rock Thrush, hold a few pairs of Barn Owls. It is not difficult to meet with nests of the Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella cinerea*) and the Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) in the open spaces where the Spectacled Warbler, (*Sylvia conspicillata*) also breeds commonly. The other Warbler, the Sardinian (*Sylvia melanocephala*), which became established as a common breeding species on Malta between the years 1874 and 1885, has been common ever since, inhabiting every niche in rural and suburban areas. Another common species which needs no introduction is the Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*). It breeds abundantly all over the islands. The Linnet (*Acanthis cannabina*), though far from being a common breeding bird, still nests around the villages of Xaghra and Nadur in Gozo, while scattered pairs, not previously reported, do so also in Malta. Contrary to what has been written since Despott's time, Filfla, the destination of recent expeditions which we organised is still a stronghold of the Storm Petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*). It is a pity that this islet is still being used as a bombing target. This has reduced

alarminglly the number of breeding Shearwaters and accounts for a large number of dead Storm Petrels and a larger number of addled eggs.

Though breeding profusely on Filfla, it has not been confirmed that the Storm Petrel breeds also on Malta and Gozo as Despott had stated, though it gets near the shores at night. And it is not surprising, considering the abundance of rats all along the coastline of both Malta and Gozo. The ground nesters, namely the Short-toed Lark and the Corn Bunting, and the two Warblers which prefer to nest just above the ground suffer immensely. Rats, snakes, herds of grazing goats, dogs and children destroy a large number of their nests. On the other hand the larger breeding birds often fall victims of the shot-gun. The Shearwaters are continuously pushed to the farthest corners through disturbances, while

large numbers are slaughtered in summer off Marsaxlokk and Wied iż-Żurrieq in Malta, and off Marsalforn in Gozo, during 'pleasure' shooting boat trips. Erroneously, the Peregrine, the Kestrel, and the Barn Owl, like all other birds of prey, are looked on as man's enemies and end up in a show-case.

It is a sad fact that very few of our breeding birds are protected. Ironically, the laws that protect these few are not entirely respected. A clear example is that of the Jackdaw. It is of urgent importance to protect, not simply on paper, all our breeding birds. 1970 is European Conservation Year and it would be befitting if Malta, being a member of the Council of Europe, would conserve this neglected part of our National Heritage for future generations who would then one day call us enlightened.



~~Malta . . . Birds . . . & European Conservation Year~~

by ~~J.M. Attard~~

~~1970 is European Conservation Year. All the member countries of the Council of Europe are taking part, as well as Spain and Portugal which have expressed a wish to be associated with the year.~~

~~The theme of 1970 is Conservation with a stress on different influential aspects arising from urban conglomeration, industry, agriculture and forestry and leisure in the countryside.~~

~~Last February 800 participants from 27 countries met in Strasbourg for a conference to discuss on the Management of the Environment in Tomorrow's Europe. This was an inter-governmental conference and its object was action. Its process, however, was educational. The Strasbourg Conference had been well prepared and after studying and debating four thick reports — on urbanisation, industry, leisure, farming and~~

~~forestry — came out with a powerful document of 30 guidelines for Europe's decision makers. It was acclaimed unanimously.~~

~~The Council of Europe is now demanding a conference of senior government ministers as a matter of urgency which means that it should meet this year. The point will be to put European Governments on the spot as to what they are actually proposing to do about the policies and measures agreed last month.~~

~~The Strasbourg Conference meant action. The experts have even recommended that the Council of Europe should guarantee the right of every individual primarily as a voice and a voter.~~

~~If parliaments ratify this, Governments would be liable to legal action from citizens in the European Court~~