

THE JACKDAW – ONE BIRD MALTA LOST

“It is said that in other countries few are the places where the Jackdaw cannot find a home. Well, it must be said that in Malta few are the places where it can find one, such is the persecution the poor bird suffers all the year round, and during the breeding season especially”.

This was stated by G. Despott, Curator of the Natural History Museum, in 1916 when he published his study “The Breeding Birds of Malta” in *The Zoologist*. Despott had also rightly forecast the extinction of this species as a breeding bird.

The last colony bred at “Il-Qortin tax-Xagħra”, Gozo where 31 birds were still present in 1950. By March 1956 only one Jackdaw remained. It was seen flying about, stretching its wings in the vicinity of the Gran Castello, crying for a mate but getting no reply. Soon its melancholic cry was heard no more. It was shot in the following month on the hill known as “Id-Dabrani”, the only place where it used to find sanctuary to roost. The Jackdaw was exterminated earlier from the main Island (Malta) where the last colony was still recorded in the forties in the north-west part near Melliġha.

The Jackdaw, locally called “iċ-Ċawla”, is scientifically known as *Corvus monedula* and Malta's birds belonged to the race *spermologus*. During the reign of the Grand Masters Gregorio Caraffa and Adrian de Wignacourt, about 300 years ago, a reward was offered by the Government of the Order for every bird taken, presumably to control the large numbers present at that time.

In mid-19th century it was again very abundant and increasing, so much so that about 120 years ago it was reported to be quite plentiful in the south and southwestern parts of Malta and even bred freely in the Valletta fortifications. It was seen sometimes perching on roof tops in the centre of the town.

The Jackdaw is about thirteen inches in length and is far from being a colourful bird. Its black plumage breaks into a greyish nape and ear coverts and into dark grey underparts. Its eye is distinctively pale grey. The last remaining birds in Malta used to nest in the inaccessible cliffs overhanging the sea. The birds constructed a rough platform-type nest of straw and hay, sometimes including feathers, wool and hair. The eggs varied in number from four to six. These were pale greenish-blue mottled all over with a varying amount of light and dark brown spots.

It is indeed sad that Malta lost the Jackdaw. It did so even though it had been legally protected since

1911. The Jackdaw's extermination from Malta is a local example of man's negative interference with the natural environment.

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FURTHER READING

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