

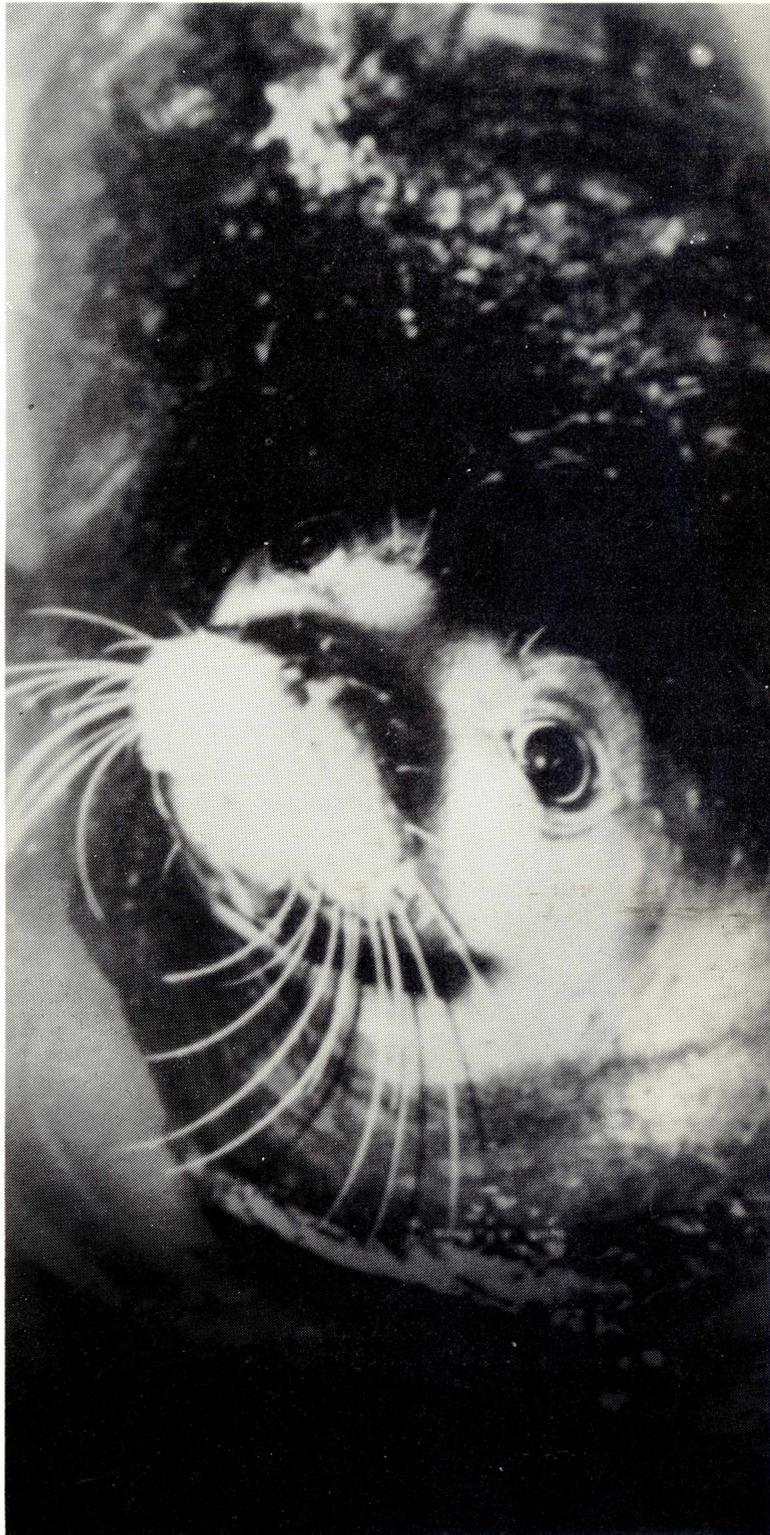
# CARNIVORES OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

The scarce vegetation of the present Maltese countryside makes it difficult to envisage the Maltese Islands as a portion of a continent with rivers flowing through a vast region of lush vegetation and virgin forests, where pigmy elephants kept company with hippopotami, deer and gigantic tortoises, while carnivorous animals prowled in search of food. If travel through time were possible, this would be the picture presented to a time-traveller who ventures to the Maltese Islands region of about one million years ago. This picture has been built on the basis of evidence found in various pliestocene deposits in Malta.

Mention of carnivorous animals was made by the palaeontologist Dr. A.L. Adams who reported that elephant, giant dormice and bird bones from various localities in Malta showed signs of being partially gnawed and devoured by large carnivora. G. Caton Thompson reviewed the records of carnivores from the Plietocene cave deposits in the Maltese Islands and listed several species of bear, fox and wolf. All these species are presently extinct on the Islands.

The picture presented to our time-traveller should he venture further into time to about 25 million years ago would be very different. The Maltese Islands region then formed part of the continental shelf lying at variable sea-depths reaching to about 600 feet. The Miocene eco-system was an unsuitable habitat for the land dwelling carnivores. However, it was suitable for carnivora adapted to the aquatic environment; animals whose limbs had been transformed into flippers and whose teeth were especially adapted for catching fish. The miocene deposits of Malta have yielded remains of a seal attributed to the species *Monotherium rugosidans*.

The carnivores, literally "flesh-eating", are mammals whose diet consists primarily of meat. These mammals constitute an extremely important and highly diversified order of the animal kingdom. The natural carnivora found on the Maltese Islands are limited in number. The Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) known by the Maltese as *ballottra*, is the only natural inhabitant of the Islands. Growing to a length of about 20 cm, the weasel has a snake-like appearance with a long slender body, short limbs, a long neck and a small head. Despite its small size, it will attack creatures larger than itself. It has a varied diet including rats, mice, frogs, lizards, small birds, eggs and small rabbits. It has occasionally killed poultry. It inhabits open country and its favourite haunts are piles of stones and rubble. It is rarely encountered in



The Mediterranean Monk Seal, on the verge of extinction after being ruthlessly hunted for its fur, an example of indiscriminate killing.

(Photo credit: C. Savona Ventura)



The Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) known in Maltese as *ballotra*, is the only natural inhabitant of the Islands (Photo credit: C. Savona Ventura)

woods and avoids damp places. It usually gives human communities a wide berth. It is a very agile species, swimming or climbing trees in its prey's trail. Though chiefly nocturnal, the weasel may also be

active during the day. It normally hunts by stalking or trailing its prey, though "charming" is occasionally resorted to. This strategem is resorted to by a number of carnivora species. The animal starts by rolling about on the ground to attract its prey's attention. Then it begins chasing its tail while the intended prey remains stupefied at the weasel's antics. All the while, the crafty weasel contrives to get nearer and nearer until a sudden pounce enables it to grab its prey.

A closely related carnivore is the Ferret (*Putorius putorius furo*) known in Maltese as *nemes* or *farrett*. This animal is an introduced form of the European species and has been kept in semi-domestication since ancient times, being used for driving out rats and rabbits from their burrows. Specimens in the wild are usually escapees from domestication. The ferret grows to about twice the size of the weasel. It lives in fields and scrub, and often settles in the vicinity of human communities. It hunts its prey mainly at night. A popular belief is that the ferret kills its prey after stupefying it with a strong scent. This erroneous belief is based on the presence of scent glands under its tail which secrete an intolerably acrid and appalling smell. These secretions are used both for marking out its territory and as a defence weapon. When alarmed, the animal suddenly empties the gland of its contents thus contaminating the surrounding area. The would-be attacker generally decides that discretion is the better part of valour and beats a hasty retreat. A similar carnivore mentioned for the Maltese Islands is the Stoat (*Mustela erminia*). This record appears to be a mistaken one and probably refers to the weasel. A related species is the Mink (*Lutreola lutreola*). This carnivore is not found on the Islands and the environment is probably unsuitable. In 1972 the Department of Agriculture attempted unsuccessfully to start a mink fur industry in Malta. Another introduced carnivore species can be seen at San Anton Gardens. In 1975 the Libyan Minister of Agriculture donated a specimen of Fennec fox (*Fennecus zerda*) to the Maltese Islands.

An aquatic carnivore occasionally encountered around Maltese shores is the Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*) known locally as *monka* or *bumarin*. Sightings of this species have been sporadic, the earliest record being in 1642. The Monk Seal's scarcity in Maltese waters reflects its present localized and patchy distribution. The species appears to be mainly limited to the Mediterranean, and recent estimates number the Monk Seal population to about 500 individuals. Growing to a length of about four metres, these mammals are magnificent underwater swimmers and highly accomplished hunters. Their body has been streamlined and the limbs converted into flippers enabling



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(Photo credit: C. Savona Ventura)

rapid swimming. Being such good swimmers, they can catch the most lively fishes which form their stable diet. Coloured dark grey or chestnut on the back with a prominent white mark on the underparts, these sea-mammals are often mistaken for dolphins.

More familiar carnivores introduced by man include the large number of forms of dogs and cats which abound in their hundreds. One dog variety has been acclaimed universally as Maltese and is known as the Maltese Dog. This small white long-haired dog is classified by the Kennel Club as a toy non-sporting breed. The Maltese Dog is not Maltese at all. The title Maltese was given to the animal by the twisting of the Latin word for sweet "mellitus" to "melitensis". It is a breed of dog known for over 2,000 years and is mentioned in relation to its sweet disposition in the ancient writings of Aristotle.

The survival of the wild carnivores in the Maltese Islands is constantly being threatened by land development and indiscriminate killing. The Mediterranean Monk Seal is on the verge of

extinction after being ruthlessly hunted for its fur. The land carnivores form an integral part of Maltese ecology and are useless in keeping the rat population under control. Their reputation of being wanton killers of domestic poultry is very often over-amplified. It would be criminal to relegate the few remaining wild carnivore species in the Maltese Islands to the list of extinct species, and be known only from preserved remains.

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#### **FURTHER READING**

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