

MALTA'S NEW BREEDING BIRDS

Cetti's Warbler and the Fan-tailed Warbler

Many bird species have become extinct, others have been exterminated from whole countries, while others have become endangered. This sad state of affairs has been brought about mainly by gross human interference rather than by natural causes. However certain species, sometimes inexplicably, increase their numbers and extend their breeding ranges. Two palearctic species which have done so in recent years and reached Malta's shores are the Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* and the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*. Both species have established themselves as Malta's breeding birds in the past decade during which period they have been colonizing successfully new areas.

The Cetti's Warbler, which is known locally as *Il-Bagħal tal-Għolliq*, is 15 cm in length. Sexes are similar in colour although the male is slightly larger in size. It has dark rufous brown upperparts, a greyish white throat and belly and a light brown breast and flanks. It has a short whitish supercilium

which is only conspicuous at close quarters. It has a much rounded tail which has ten tail feathers, most unusual for a passerine species, which usually has twelve rectrices. Its relatively short wings are also much rounded in shape when opened.

The Cetti's Warbler is mostly found in thick vegetation and reed beds in damp areas where it skulks in dense vegetation. Although it is very difficult to spot, its presence is always betrayed by the loud and abrupt burst of song (*chee wee, chee wee, cheeweyou*), which the male delivers while it patrols its territory.

The nest of the Cetti's Warbler is generally built among strands of bramble under a canopy of dense vegetation. It is constructed of dry reed blades and grasses with a neat, relatively deep and narrow cup, lined with fine grasses and dark feathers. Normally four eggs are laid. These are of a deep brick red colour. The incubation, which is carried out only by the female, lasts up to seventeen days. The young are



also fed by the female while the male sings and patrols the area. The young fledge after about fourteen days but accompany their mother for several days after fledging. Two broods are reared in a season which starts in April.

The Fan-tailed Warbler, which has been given the Maltese name – *il-Bagħal ta' l-Imrewħa*, is only 10 cm in length and is the smallest of Malta's breeding birds. It is a brownish bird with pale underparts. Its upperparts, except for a yellowish rufous rump, are heavily streaked. Its short rounded tail shows black and white tips to all but its two central rectrices. Sexes are similar in colour.

During the breeding season the male patrols its area by flying incessantly high above with an undulating flight while it utters its 'zip zip' calls continuously. Breeding in Malta was first confirmed in 1973, when two nests were located at Xemxija. Now it is found breeding in most parts of the Islands which provide suitable habitat for the species' requirements.

The nest of the Fan-tailed Warbler, which is like a wide-necked bottle, is usually built in grass within half a metre of the ground. The male builds the skeleton of the nest by incorporating the blades of grass. The female continues the building and lays three to six eggs which vary both in colour (white to pale blue) as well as in the amount of spots which sometimes are totally missing. The female incubates the eggs for about thirteen days and the young, which are also fed only by the female, fledge after about fourteen days. The male is polygamous and may have other females with the nest at the same time in its territory.

While it is so refreshing to think that these two species have been added to Malta's breeding birds, one feels indeed sad to note that, after loosing the Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula* – *Iċ-Ċawla*) this century, we are presently on the brink of loosing two other breeding species, the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba* – *Il-Barbaġann*) and the Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus* – *Il-Bies*), due to bird-shooting.

Joe Sultana

FURTHER READING

Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1982. *A New Guide to the Birds of Malta*. The Ornithological Society: Valletta.

Left: Cetti's Warbler feeding its young. *Top:* The eggs of the Cetti's Warbler are of a deep brick red colour. *Centre:* Fan-tailed Warbler at its nest which resembles a wide-necked bottle. The nest is made of cobweb, vegetable down and dry grasses. *Right:* Fan-tailed Warbler with a dragon-fly. The female feeds the young mainly with spiders, dragonflies and grasshoppers

(Photo credits: Raymond Galea)

