The Short-toed Lark (Il-Bilbla) MALTA'S SUMMER VISITOR

A nest with four young. Their open mouths, begging for food at the approach of their parents, betray the presence of the otherwise well camouflaged nest. (Credit: J. Sultana)

The Short-toed Lark, with its sandy coloration, blends well with its surrounding rocky habitat (Credit: J. Sultana)

A nest with a normal clutch of four eggs. The nest is merely a depression in the ground scantily lined with fine roots and grasses (Credit: J. Sultana)

A depression in the ground and a few tiny droppings indicate a roosting place of a Short-toed Lark (Credit: J. Sultana)

When the last of the wintering birds leave Malta's shores and the spring migration, which involves thousands and thousands of birds moving from Africa to Europe, is in full swing, the Short-toed Lark, known scientifically as *Calandrella brachydactyla*, arrives to take up summer residence with us.

Il-Bilbla, as it is known in Maltese, prefers the open countryside and feels at home in the large rocky areas such as at L-Aħrax and Ta' Ċenċ, in the treeless terraced fields areas such as those surrounding Għarb and San Lawrenz, as well as in the airfields. It takes over those areas which in winter are favoured by another closely related lark – the Skylark (*Alwetta*).

The Short-toed Lark is sandy coloured with softly streaked upperparts and pale buffish white underparts. In flight its tail appears conspicuously darker and looks blackish with a whitish border. The shade of sandy brown coloration and the amount of streaking vary amongst individual birds and some have a rufous crown which is totally absent in others.

The Short-toed Lark, which is a ground dwelling bird and never perches on trees, is a very common migrant and breeding summer resident, arriving in early March with a continuous passage until April. The nest is merely a depression in the ground scantily lined with fine roots and grasses. It is usually built in the shelter of a small plant or even a stone. The eggs, which may number from three to five (usually four) are laid from mid-April, and are of a creamy-white colour speckled and clouded with various shades of brown, olive and grey. Incubation averages thirteen days and the young remain in the nest for about ten days. They are fed by both parents and are unable to fly properly when they leave the nest.

The nest, whether with eggs or young, is usually very well camouflaged. However several nests are destroyed through human interference, mainly cultivation and grazing. Although protected by law some nests are also robbed by some people to raise the young in captivity. The main predator is however the common Western Whip Snake *Coluber viridiflavus* which, it is estimated, takes fifty per cent of the nests.

When the Short-toed Lark takes up territory in April and during the breeding season it may be observed and heard singing for most of the day, as it flies up and down like a yo-yo ball, high up in the air.

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