

THE STORM PETREL

“Il-Kangu ta’ Filfla”

In the early 19th century ornithologists had failed to include the white base of the tail feathers when describing the Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, formerly known as *Thalassidroma pelagica*. Due to this discrepancy, Antonio Schembri, regarded as the father of Maltese Ornithology, described the Storm Petrel of Filfla as being a new species. He made a detailed description in his *Catalogo Ornitologico* in 1843 and named it *Thalassidroma melitensis*.

However, a year later, H.E. Strickland compared specimens, sent to him from Malta by Capt. Drummond, with specimens taken from the British seas and found that they were identical. The Storm Petrel is also monotypic as the differences in birds from the Mediterranean and elsewhere are too small to warrant subspecies recognition.

In the Maltse Islands, the Storm Petrel is confined to a large colony on Filfla Islet, hence the Maltese name *Kangu ta’ Filfla*. It is however interesting to note that the fishermen from Wied iż-Żurrieq call this bird also *Kangukangu*. The historian Canon Agius De Soldanis described a strange bird, which could have been this species, breeding in a cave between Xlendi and Ta’ Ċenċ Cliffs (National Library of Malta – MS 145a). No other writer has cited any site in the Maltese Islands, other than Filfla.

The Storm Petrel is only 15 cm in length and has a wing span of about 35 cm. Sexes are similar in plumage, which is sooty black all over except for a contrasting white rump. The decurved bill, which has nasal tubes, and the feet, which are webbed, are also black.

The Storm Petrel leads a strictly pelagic life and only comes to the colony at night during its long

breeding season. The single egg, which is white with a faint zone of minute reddish speckles around the broad end, is laid on bare ground, deep beneath boulders or in crevices. Most birds use the same site year after year. The first eggs in the colony are laid in May and the incubation period, which averages thirty-eight days, is shared by both sexes who relieve each other after spells of up to 4 or 5 days. The newly-hatched chick is covered in thick grey down but before leaving the colony, from mid-August, it already resembles the adult birds in all their characteristics.

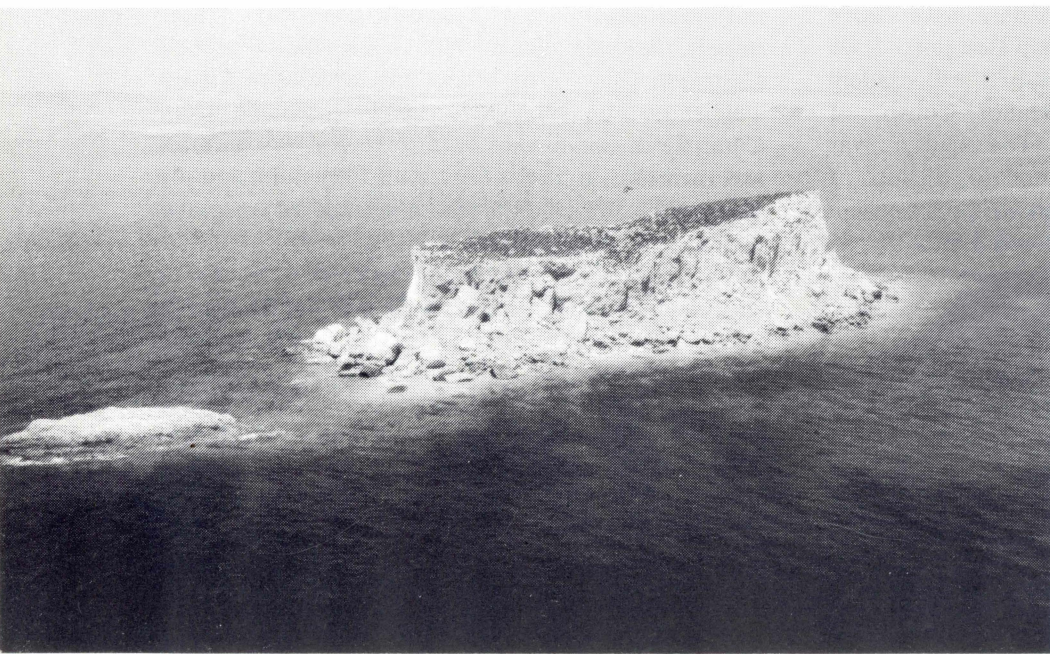
It is surprising how the Storm Petrel survived on Filfla when for so many years the islet was used for target practices by the Services. On the other hand it is easy to understand that bombing, although damaging the island as a whole to a great extent, created enormous rubble slopes beneath the cliffs which provide perfect habitat for this species breeding requirements.

Filfla can now boast of holding one of the finest colonies of Storm Petrel in the Mediterranean. It is necessary that it remains so for future generations.

Joe Sultana

FURTHER READING

- Attard, J.M. (1972) Chevalier Antonio Schembri (1813 – 1872) Father of Maltese Ornithology. *Il-Merill* 9:4 – 20.
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- Schembri, A. (1843) *Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta*. Anglo Maltese: Malta.
- Sultana, J. & C. Gauci (1970) *Bird Studies on Filfla*. Malta Ornithological Society: Malta.
- Sultana, J. & C. Gauci (1982) *A New Guide to the Birds of Malta*. The Ornithological Society: Malta.



Aerial shot of Filfla which holds one of the largest colonies of the Storm Petrel in the Mediterranean



The Storm Petrel is sooty black with a white rump

Storm Petrel incubating its egg in the burrow

