

Breeding Population of Barn Swallows in Gozo

Adin Vella

The Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (Linnaeus, 1758) is a very common passage migrant in the Maltese Islands, both in spring and in autumn. They start arriving from late February to mid-May, and also from late August until early November (Raine 2011; Sultana 2015).

Occasional pairs have bred in the past, with the first documented breeding record for mainland Malta occurring in 1974 when a pair of Barn Swallows bred in a house in the middle of Mqabba. Moreover, the second record of such a breeding pair took place in a derelict farmhouse in the limits of Bidnija in the summer of 1995, where a nest containing four fully-grown young was found on 28 July, a day before they fledged. Additionally, the preceding record, reported also on mainland Malta, occurred in 2004 (Sultana *et al.* 2011).

The first breeding record for Gozo was confirmed in 2006. A family party of five birds was observed at Ta' Gajdoru in Xagħra, Gozo (J. Sultana, G. Haber). Furthermore, the following year, a pair was found breeding in a shed surrounded by horse stables in Sannat. In fact, a female was observed brooding three newly hatchlings. After having consecutive years of successful breeding attempts, the population had increased to four pairs in Sannat by 2011.

Also in 2011, there were breeding Barn Swallows confirmed in Sannat, Xewkija, Kerċem and Għajnsielem, along with a small population of three pairs in Victoria. Between 2016 and 2019, the population of Barn Swallows in Gozo expanded; by 2018, new pairs and locations were found with a total of 24 pairs confirmed breeding in six Gozitan villages, namely: Kerċem (eight pairs), Xewkija (five pairs), Victoria (four pairs), Sannat (three pairs), Għarb (three pairs) and Għasri (one pair), including a potential breeding pair in Fontana.

In 2019, 32 pairs were confirmed. Breeding birds were found for the first time in Nadur as well, with two nests. Between 20 May and 31 August 2019, a total of 77 Barn Swallows were ringed; 19 were ringed as pulli in their nests, whilst the other 58 were caught at a registered bird ringing site in Mġarr ix-Xini. Four of the 77 birds ringed were adults, which were local breeding birds. Two of the pulli that were ringed in Victoria were later controlled at Mġarr ix-Xini.

In the past 12 years, 207 pulli were ringed; this excludes chicks that were present in unreachable nests and/or present in dangerous structures.

One theory to suggest why the numbers of breeding Barn Swallow pairs is increasing on Gozo could be because the existing established pairs were once juvenile birds that were raised in these areas, particularly in Sannat where there have been breeding pairs since 2007. These birds may be returning to the same areas to breed, thus resulting in an expansion of territories across Gozo. The chicks and adults that have been ringed previously will hopefully be able to prove, or disprove, this theory in the future.

Another theory to suggest why Barn Swallows are doing so well as a breeding species on Gozo, compared to Malta, could be because Gozo is still relatively rural with many farms, small hamlets and derelict buildings. Farms provide the birds with areas to find nesting materials and mud for constructing the nests, and the derelict buildings provide them with areas in which to build their nests. In Malta, overdevelopment and the construction of high-rise apartments is becoming more commonplace, which in turn reduces nesting opportunities for Barn Swallows.

However, the current situation for Gozo augurs a bright future for this species, and the Barn Swallow will hopefully retain its status as a regular breeder in the Maltese Islands.

References

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Adin Vella - 92, Ta' Gajdax, Main Street, Sannat, Gozo, Malta. adinrewz@hotmail.com

First record of Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea* (Ménétries, 1832) in Malta

Mario V. Gauci & Mark Gauci

The Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea* is a *Sylvia* warbler similar to the Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* but it is slightly smaller and shorter-tailed. Its breeding range is southwest Asia and winters southwards as far as northeast Africa. The winter range covers southern Iraq, Arabia and northeast Africa from Sudan to Somalia. A few birds pass through Israel and Jordan on migration. In Europe it has been recorded as a vagrant in Portugal and Spain (BirdLife International European Red List of Birds 2015).

During a bird ringing session at Saqqajja, Rabat, on 21 August 2011, a bird was netted close to a playback lure for Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans*. The ringing site consists mainly of uncultivated fields overgrown with almond *Prunus* sp. and pomegranate trees *Punica granatum*. On examination the bird looked like a cross between a male Subalpine Warbler and a female Sardinian Warbler, especially due to the pinkish tinge on the breast and the dirty greyish head, reminiscent of an adult female Sardinian Warbler. The bill was evidently too strong for a Subalpine Warbler.

After the bird was ringed, its wing length, weight, and other notes were recorded, as follows: wing length: 59mm; weight: 10.7g; fat score: 4; muscle score: 2; 6th primary emarginated; wing tip fell between the 4th and 5th primaries; and six primary tips projected beyond the tertials.

The bird had a greyish head, bordering on the blackish/grey with particularly blackish lores. A white moustachial stripe was very evident and the throat was white with a pinkish/buff colour on the breast extending to the flanks and side of the breast. A reddish eye ring was also evident. The upper mandible was dark whilst the lower mandible had a pinkish/pale patch at the thick end. The back was brownish/grey in colour while the wings showed a mixture of old unmoulted feathers (brownish) and fresh feathers (dark grey as in male Sardinian Warbler). Two tertials and the

secondary coverts were all moulted and coloured dark grey with a lighter diffused fringe, denoting that the bird was a first year bird. The alula was long and dark, with a whitish fringe. The tail was squarish, darkish black on top with one moulted feather having a white tip, the rest of the rectrices were unmoulted.

At this stage Sardinian Warbler was obviously discounted. Later in the morning upon consulting the *Collins Bird Guide* (1999) it became evident that the bird could potentially be a Ménétries's Warbler; a species previously unrecorded in the Maltese Islands. This was indeed confirmed when photos were circulated to Lars Svensson and to Itai Shanni (Israel Ornithological Centre), to whom we are very grateful.

This record was submitted to the Malta Rarities and Records Committee and was accepted on 7 November 2012 (Bonavia 2017).

References

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Mario V. Gauci - mvgauci58@gmail.com

Mark Gauci - mark.gauci@birdlifemalta.org