

## **The first occurrence of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* (Severtzov, 1850) in Malta**

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Whilst monitoring the annual autumn raptor migration at Buskett at around 14.30 CET on 27 September 2016, the author spotted a sparrowhawk at moderate height coming over Buskett against the NE wind. The author immediately noted that the bird had features pointing towards Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* due to shape of the wings, which had pointed wing-tips rather than rounded as in Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*. The bird also had a boldly streaked breast and dark wing-tips (fingers), and at this point called the attention of local birdwatcher Raymond Galea to observe it. Unfortunately the bird immediately stooped and alighted in the Verdala Palace grounds and therefore at this stage, due to only watching it for a few seconds and in unfavourable conditions (as bird was flying away), the identification of the bird was not confirmed.

At 16.00 (joined by another local birdwatcher Charles Coleiro) the Levant Sparrowhawk was found again soaring low above Bosk Iz-Żgħir and then soared low over us. It was then that the author confirmed identification and some record photos of the bird were taken. The bird was identified as a juvenile and all features of Levant were seen including the features mentioned above, as well as the typical dark central throat stripe of this species. The dark eye could also be seen in the record photos.

The Levant Sparrowhawk roosted at Buskett that night. It is likely that the same bird was seen and photographed five days later by birdwatcher Raymond Testa at Buskett on the 1 October 2016.

The description was submitted to the Malta Rarities and Records Committee (MRRC) and it was accepted on 21 February 2017, based on the description and photographic evidence, a requisite considering that this is the first record for the Maltese Islands. Fenech (2010 & 2017) mentions a few records of this species but most seem to be based on preserved specimens in local taxidermy collections. These are therefore all hearsay records with no photographic evidence or description

and never officially submitted to the MRRC. Even if they are found in local collections as stated they could have easily been imported from elsewhere.

The suggested Maltese name is *Sparvier tal-Lvant*.

The breeding range of Levant Sparrowhawk is confined to the Western Palearctic. It breeds from the Balkans eastwards, with the majority in areas north of the Black Sea. Unlike the Eurasian Sparrowhawk, all migrate and is highly gregarious during migration, occurring in dense flocks of up to hundreds of birds in areas along the eastern flyway along the Bosphorus and in Israel. Autumn movement starts mid-August, with marked peak during latter half of September (which coincides perfectly with this bird) and ceasing during first half of October.

In nearby Tunisia there are at least six records of this species (Isenmann *et al.* 2005) and in Italy there are 13 accepted records, 11 of which since 2000 including six records in the Strait of Messina and one at Pantelleria (Brichetti & Fracasso 2018).

## References

**Brichetti, P., Fracasso, G.** 2018. *The Birds of Italy*. Volume I. Edizioni Belvedere.

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**Isenmann, P., Gaultier, T., El Hili, A., Azafzaf, H., Dlensi, H., Smart, M.** 2005. *Oiseaux de Tunisie*.

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Raymond Galea

**Figure 1.** Photo of Levant Sparrowhawk taken on 27 September 2016