

A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW OF MONITORING FOR RAPTORS IN MALTA

Predhodni pregled monitoringa populacij ptic roparic na Malti

EDWARD BONAVIA

Malta Raptor Coordinator, 12 Dar Il-Poeta,
Triq Hal Xluq, Siggiewi, SGW 1440, Malta,
e-mail: edbon@maltanet.net

A total of 31 species of raptors have been recorded in Malta, nine of which are vagrants (MALTESE RARITIES COMMITTEE *unpubl.*). Most raptors are seen on spring (mainly from mid March to mid May) and on autumn (mainly in September and October) migration (SAMMUT & BONAVIA 2004). Only two species of raptors have ever bred in Malta – the Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and the Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus* (SULTANA *et al.* 2011). Both, however, are rare and irregular.

Main players

BirdLife Malta is the only organisation in Malta that monitors raptors. Founded in 1962 as Malta Ornithological Society (MOS), local birders have been monitoring raptors voluntarily since then. Since the mid-1990s, monitoring of migrating raptors was undertaken more systematically by a handful of birders both in the spring (mid-March to mid-May) and autumn (mid-August to end October). In the past few years, BirdLife Malta organised raptor camps both in the spring and autumn and a large number of international birders and activists take part to monitor raptor migration and illegal raptor hunting.

BirdLife Malta is a partner of BirdLife International. Throughout Raptor Camp we exchange data through e-mails with “Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli” (LIPU, the Italian BirdLife Partner), which monitors raptors across the Straits of Messina. Raptor camps are sponsored by the following BirdLife Partners: Swedish Ornithological Society (SOF), “Vogelbescherming Nederland”, and Nature And Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU, Germany) and therefore we collaborate closely with these organisations, too. Throughout the camps BirdLife Malta also collaborates closely with the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS), which also organises bird protection camps twice a year in Malta.

All raptor data are currently inputted by individual birders in the web-based “Worldbirds Malta” database run by BirdLife Malta and used to compile systematic

lists published in *Il-Merill* (e.g. BONAVIA *et al.* 2010), the only scientific ornithological journal in Malta, published by BirdLife Malta.

National coverage

The author has been appointed as the national raptor coordinator by BirdLife Malta. There is no formal national network for monitoring raptors currently in Malta, as there are only a few birders on the Islands.

Due to a lack of human and financial resources in Malta, monitoring is carried out only voluntarily by a few birders and thus only on individuals’ initiatives. The author has monitored daily the best site for raptor migration in the autumn (Buskett) since the mid-1990s. Contrary to the autumn, raptors migrate on a broad front in spring, and therefore a large number of raptors are not recorded. Due to the small number of birders present in Malta there is a tendency that all birders end up at the same location and usually monitor raptors only in the afternoon. Thus, a large number of raptors migrating over Malta both in the spring and autumn are not being recorded.

Key species

Key migrant raptor species include Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (mid Apr–May and Sep–Oct), Black Kite *Milvus migrans* (Mar–Apr and Aug–Sep), Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (Mar–May and end Aug–Oct), Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* (Mar–Apr and Sep–Oct), Montagu’s Harrier *C. pygargus* (Apr and end Aug–Sep), Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (Mar–May and end Aug–Oct), Lesser Kestrel *F. naumanni* (Mar–Apr and Sep–Oct), Kestrel (Mar–Apr and mid Sep–early Nov), Red-Footed Falcon *F. vespertinus* (mid Apr–May), Hobby *F. subbuteo* (Apr–May and Sep–Oct), and Eleonora’s Falcon *F. eleonorae* (Apr–Oct).

The major site monitored in Malta is Buskett (Figure 1), where a large number of raptors congregate in autumn. Buskett comprises a small wooded area and a valley, surrounded by hills, in the western part of Malta. At 220 m a.s.l. it provides a fine view over the northern and eastern half of the island. It is one of the few wooded areas in the islands and thus attractive to raptors, combining an area of relatively high land (ideal for the formation of thermals) with a sheltered and reasonably safe roosting place. Between 2,000 and 4,000 raptors are seen annually from Buskett in the autumn, the majority being Honey Buzzards, Marsh Harriers, Kestrels and Hobbies (SAMMUT & BONAVIA 2004).

From 2008 onwards, 1–2 pairs of Kestrels started breeding in Gozo (SULTANA *et al.* 2011) and possibly a pair of Peregrine Falcons along the Southwestern cliffs



Figure 1: Raptor camp participants together with local birdwatchers counting birds of prey migrating over Buskett, Malta

Slika 1: Ornitologi in udeleženci tabora za monitoring ptic roparic med štejetjem ujed, selečih se prek Busketta na Malti

of Malta in the last two years. A few Kestrels winter in the Maltese Islands, mainly in Gozo (SULTANA & GAUCI 1982).

Key issues and threats

The most critical issue facing raptor conservation in Malta is illegal hunting. The problem is not only a local issue, but has international ramifications as well, as it has a serious impact on the migratory raptors of Europe. Species listed on the global IUCN Red List such as Pallid Harrier are killed regularly and Ospreys carrying rings from Scandinavian countries are frequently shot down. Even in the case of species, which are not threatened at a global or European level, such as the Honey Buzzard or Marsh Harrier, if birds migrating over Malta are coming from specific countries where the species is at a critically low level, then the death of even a few of these birds could cause their extirpation from that country (RAINE 2011).

In Malta, there are currently around 10,000 hunters. With such a small landmass, Malta has one of the highest numbers of hunters in Europe with a density of 50 hunters per km square (RAINE 2011). Illegal poachers shoot at raptors as these are relatively easy targets especially when trying to roost.

Although both the local law and the EU Birds Directive prohibit the shooting of raptors in Malta, law enforcement is poor. The Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE), the police unit responsible for dealing with wildlife crime, is under-staffed and under-resourced. This is caused primarily by a lack of priority given to the issue by the Maltese Government. All this means that illegal hunters are unlikely to be caught committing their crimes. Even when

apprehended, hunters often get laid off with light sentences or even simply warnings or probationary sentences (RAINE 2011). The low number of raptors that breed and winter here are a direct result of illegal hunting together with minimal protection of habitats in Malta. There are very few reserves and there is a lot of disturbance in most areas thus making it difficult for raptors to breed or winter here. While the level of illegal hunting has been reduced in the past few years, thanks to BirdLife Malta and raptor camp volunteers, illegal hunting on the island is still at a level which shocks and horrifies visitors from overseas (RAINE 2011). Out of the 337 shooting incidents in 2010, 47.7% were targeted at raptors involving 12 species. BirdLife Malta receives an average of 40 injured raptors annually in recent years.

International networking is necessary especially to curb the illegal hunting. Pressure is needed from other European countries to end this illegal raptor hunting once and for all. As seen, illegal hunting in Malta can have a significant impact on international conservation projects. Even after joining the European Union in 2004, Malta has continued to allow hunting in spring, despite the fact that it is not permitted under the Birds directive. Human and financial resources are needed to monitor the migration of raptors both in the spring and autumn and also to monitor illegal hunting. Raptor camps are the ideal platform for this and if these were to be extended to a longer period and a larger number of participants were to attend we will safeguard a larger number of raptors. A proper Wildlife Crime unit in Malta and a rehabilitation centre to treat injured raptors are also urgently required.

Strengths and weaknesses

The main strength of monitoring for raptors in Malta lies in the fact that although there are only a handful of birders in Malta they are well qualified in identifying and spotting raptors. There are also several dedicated and motivated people (both local and foreign) to safeguard European raptors and volunteer to support raptor camps. Furthermore, all raptor data are easily accessible.

On the other hand, the main weaknesses include lack of financial resources for monitoring raptors, which means that everything is done on a voluntary basis. Additionally, there are limited human resources (no more than 15 active birders) and, finally, rampant illegal hunting of raptors is practised, causing a lot of disturbance when raptors are monitored.

There are a number of gaps in monitoring for raptors in Malta. These include the difficulty in

estimating the actual raptor numbers that migrate over Malta. Monitoring is carried out only in a few areas and mainly in afternoons due to work commitments by local birders. In spring, sites are monitored depending on weather conditions, thus no systematic monitoring is done at any particular site for the entire spring season. In autumn, only one site (Buskett) is well covered. Other sites need to be monitored for the whole period. No regular observations are made in the sister island of Gozo. There is, therefore, a gap in the actual numbers of raptors that migrate over the Maltese Islands. An additional gap is that illegal hunting is monitored well only during raptor camps thanks to the international participants. They are present for only a short period (two weeks in spring and two weeks in autumn) and can cover just a few places. Thus there is a gap in the actual number of raptors being shot down.

The main challenges include human and financial resources. There are only a few birders in Malta, who can monitor only a small fraction of the islands, and everything is voluntary as there is no financial help. Monitoring is done by individuals' own free will and therefore time allotted for raptor monitoring is quite restricted. Law enforcement is not helping in reducing illegal raptor hunting.

Priorities, capacity-building

There are several priorities to strengthen monitoring for raptors in Malta. These include having a better picture of the actual amounts of raptors that migrate over the Maltese Islands during both spring and autumn migration. More foreign birders are needed to help few local birders to monitor key sites. Additional documentation of illegal hunting is required to improve illegal raptor hunting in the near future. Participation at Raptor camps has to be increased and more help is needed to organize longer-lasting camps (both financially and in terms of human resources). Finally, ecotourism should be promoted so that tourists start visiting Malta as a raptor watching destination. The following are the main capacity-building needs:

- implementation of an interpretation centre at Buskett,
- establishment of new nature reserves offering protection for raptor species,
- start-up of a raptor rehabilitation centre to treat injured raptors,
- more human resources required,
- more financial resources required,
- more pressure from EU governments to the EU to curb illegal hunting and spring hunting in Malta,

- more raptor enthusiasts participating at raptor camps.

Povzetek

Malteško otočje leži na pomembni selitveni poti mnogih ptic roparic. Selitev teh ptic na otočju redno spremljajo že od leta 1962, ko je bila ustanovljena organizacija BirdLife Malta. Žal pa zaradi pomanjkanja človeških in finančnih virov, a tudi redkih zavarovanih območij na otočju sistematični monitoring poteka le na eni lokaciji (Buskett), in še to zgolj v jesenskem času. Avtor članka tu opravlja dnevni monitoring že od sredine 90-ih. V zadnjih nekaj letih BirdLife Malta redno organizira tako spomladanske kot jesenske tabore za monitoring selitve ptic roparic pa tudi nezakonitih lovskih dejavnosti, pri čemer ji pomagajo tuji prostovoljni aktivisti in ornitologi. Ptice roparice seveda ne privlačijo le opazovalcev ptic, marveč tudi divje lovce, kar pomeni, da je na različnih malteških lokacijah žal še vedno ustreljenih veliko teh ptic. Vsi podatki o pticah roparicah se vnašajo v bazo podatkov, ki je osnova za pripravo letnih sistematičnih seznamov, ki so nato objavljeni v znanstveni ornitološki reviji organizacije BirdLife Malta. V tem kratkem prispevku njen avtor poleg monitoringa ptic roparic našteva vrsto prednosti in slabosti pa tudi potreb po krepitevi zmogljivosti, nujnih za izboljšanje monitoringa na Malti.

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