

BirdLife office inundated with shot protected birds and illegal hunting reports

Title

Over the last three weeks since the end of BirdLife Malta's Raptor Camp, the BirdLife office continued to receive shot protected birds and reports of widespread shooting and killing of birds of prey and herons, particularly following unstable weather over the Mediterranean during this last week.

Stormy weather at the beginning of the week brought in a considerable migration of falcons and kestrels. Last Tuesday and Wednesday alone BirdLife received five Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* with verified gunshot injuries. Three of these kestrels had to be euthanized by a veterinarian owing to the multiple fractures and open wounds caused by gunshot, whereas another two were passed over to the ALE for rehabilitation. Kestrels coming in over Buskett to roost were also shot at yesterday afternoon.

Over the weekend, birdwatchers have also witnessed large flocks of Black-crowned Night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*, Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea* and Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* from different locations. After the mid-day storm of last Saturday, a flock of nine Night Herons which made its way inland, was met with a barrage of gunshots in Fgura, resulting in at least three shot down along the Cottonera fortifications. Two Little Egrets were later in the afternoon shot at in the Buskett area, while a Grey Heron was shot at in Mellieha on Sunday and another killed in Girgenti on Monday.

Other reports of illegal hunting on birds of prey include shooting at and killing of Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Short-toed Snake-eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus*, Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Western Marsh-harrier *Circus aeruginosus*. The BirdLife office has also received four shot honey buzzards, one of which was retrieved metres away from the Prime Minister's residence in Marsascala last Saturday.

Rare migrants observed in the last few days have also been targeted such as a Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* gunned down in Hal Far and a Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* chased by sea hunters. Earlier this morning a Black Stork which had just escaped shots fired from Qala in Gozo, was gunned down by sea hunters over the Gozo channel. The sea hunters handed the stork over to two individuals on motorbikes in Qala before heading back out to sea. Since the end of Raptor Camp in September further shot and injured birds were

recovered by BirdLife Malta staff including; a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, and two Night Herons.

BirdLife Malta stated that the shot birds it receives is the tip of the iceberg. The chances of the BirdLife office receiving a shot protected bird is very remote as the bird has to first escape the illegal hunter, then be found by some one who is willing to handle it and then be taken to BirdLife.

The number of shot protected birds that are being given to government authorities is not known to BirdLife Malta. ?Since the end of Raptor Camp, BirdLife office received 14 shot protected birds and only two legally huntable birds, a Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* and a Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. Since there are around 12,000 licensed shooters in Malta who can legally shoot over 30 bird species, this disproportion between the huntable species and protected species BirdLife office receive suggests that protected birds continue to be prized targets in Malta.? said Tolga Temuge, BirdLife Malta Executive Director.

?Malta, as an EU member state, has an obligation to enforce the EU Birds Directive. Lack of strong law enforcement in the countryside, coupled with low fines at the courts, encourages the poachers who flout national and EU laws. We once again call on the government to immediately establish a wildlife crime unit and increase the minimum penalties to a level that would act as serious deterrent.? Temuge concluded.
