

More White Wagtails roosting in Valletta



Photo: Denis Cachia

Valletta's designated important bird area is this year housing the largest number of White Wagtails to date.

Birdlife said that a survey it carried out recorded 7,761 White Wagtails this year compared to 5,433 the year before.

Great Siege Square and the area around St John's CoCathedral were designated an important bird area for its winter roost of White Wagtails.

White Wagtails are winter visitors to the Maltese islands and can be easily recognised by their white and black plumage and constantly wagging tail.

The wagtails roost at night in the trees in Great Siege Square in Valletta as the trees are large enough to provide the protection, shelter and warmth they need.

During the day, these birds fly to areas throughout Malta to feed in urban and rural habitats.

'It is great to see these birds doing so well, with a 42.8 percent increase on last year's total,' said Denis Cachia, BirdLife Malta council member, who coordinated the count. 'BirdLife Malta has been carrying out roost counts at this site since 1986 and the general trend of the wintering population appears to be a steady increase.'

Ringling recoveries from the BirdLife Malta ringling scheme have shown that these birds come from at least five European countries, namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Denmark and Sweden.

Birdlife said that the winter roost of White Wagtails was an annual spectacle, with the majority of birds arriving in November and leaving in March.

It was not clear why their numbers were increasing, but the main reason could be a change of habitat in other places in Malta or abroad, a spokesman said.

For the public to fully appreciate the wagtails coming in to roost, they have to be in Great Siege Square just before sunset and watch the birds as they flocked into the trees.

Comments

S Mizzi (5 days, 12 hours ago)

Mr Cachia Zammit,

I'm familiar with BASC and have been an active member for a number of years. The point is that contrary to what you tried implying it's really a simple matter of grabbing one's gun and going hunting at any time of the year in the UK.

I'm not trying to make an analogy in the sense that once they shoot Wood Pigeon in Spring in the UK then why can't I shoot Turtle Doves here in Malta. Rather it's a point of principle in that just as the UK managed a derogation and puts this into practise year in year out with the blessing of the EU then too should Malta, that also negotiated a derogation, albeit for different reasons, exercise its right to apply the same derogation as in the case of the UK. Now, that didn't happen for reasons known to the government, as a result of which Malta infringed the Bird Directive and has to appear before the ECJ. This doesn't mean though that Malta can't exercise its right to derogate any more. Therefore, in my view, all those that think that we have seen an end to Spring Hunting had better think again.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days ago)

@salvu abela

Yes we are now part of the EU and in all EU countries it is illegal to shoot Turtle Doves and Quails in spring, so that does not make us inferior but EQUAL.

@ S Mizzi & salvu abela

Claiming that you have the right to shoot Turtle Doves and Quails in spring just because some other TOTALLY DIFFERENT SPECIES is shot in another country is illogical and unscientific.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days ago)

@S Mizzi

Exactly Mr Mizzi, you wouldn't need a special license, it is the land-owner who would have such a permit. And instead of himself taking care of controlling those birds that would damage his land, he finds people like you to do the job and he even gets paid for it.

As for visiting UK hunting websites please note that I quoted from the official website of The British Association of Shooters and Conservationists and not from a Birdlife website. It would be best if you checked out this website and get the facts correct. This special licence or General licences allows authorised persons to kill or take the listed species, including wood pigeons, at any time during the year. An authorised person means the owner or occupier of the land where the shooting takes place, or anyone authorised by them. The General licence also states that " persons relying on this licence must be satisfied that non-lethal methods of resolving the problem are ineffective or impracticable" and that is exactly what I said that shooting the birds is the last resort.

S Mizzi (6 days, 3 hours ago)

A real phenomenon. BLM claim that White Wagtails increased by 42.8% from 5433 to 7761. Overnight they increased by another 3% to 8000 (see other report). Alarming to think what the figure will be next year at this exponential rate. So much for BLM's counting capabilities and credibility. No wonder they make cheap claims that millions of birds are shot over our islands and that massacres on protected birds are being carried out during migration season. Then when push comes to shove, all they report in their September report is 55 protected birds shot down.

This is just typical of how BLM bandy figures about.

salvu abela (6 days, 5 hours ago)

@Richard Cachia Zammit,

The worst thing that one can do, is to try to debate the subject of HUNTING with an ANTI-HUNTER, its the same thing as someone tries to debating the subjects of condoms, divorce and abortion with the POPE, one is sure that he is gonna get a very NEGATIVE ANSWER. THE same thing with you. You have to remember that we are Europeans now, in Europe HUNTING is practised in all countries, yes even in spring , in some countries the WOODCOCK is shot till the end of the month of MARCH. Are we SECOND CLASS EUROPEANS?

S Mizzi (6 days, 5 hours ago)

Mr Cachia Zammit,

One doesn't need a special license or to prove anything. All one needs is the land-

owner's permission to shoot off his land. In fact shooting organisers have numerous arrangements with farmers to be able to take clients shooting. Listen this is no covert secret ta. Just visit any UK hunting website and see for yrself the commercial scale of this activity which doesn't seem to raise any eyebrows.

If as you say, i'm in trouble, meaning that what I practise when in the UK is questionable then so too are the thousands of other hunters that hunt WPs. I think I know which the correct interpretation would be between yours and their's.

And no, I'm not trying to convince you that just because in the UK there is a concession to shoot certain species which are regarded as pests, Maltese hunters can shoot Turtle Doves and Quails in spring. The point we are trying to make is that just as the UK negotiated a year round derogation for whatever reasons it deemed fit and the EU accepts and respects it, so too should it respect the derogation which our government negotiated for Malta's particular circumstance.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days, 7 hours ago)

@S Mizzi

I copied the below from the web site

<http://www.basc.org.uk/content/pestandpredatorcontrol>

However, it is extremely important that the purpose for which you are shooting a bird, trapping a bird, taking, damaging or destroying nests, or taking or destroying eggs is covered by the relevant general licence for that purpose. For example, when you are shooting woodpigeons your purpose may be to prevent damage to crops and when you operate a Larsen trap for magpies your purpose may be to conserve other wild birds. Your activities are legitimate as long as you are clear about your purpose in relation to the bird species involved. Therefore, you should make yourself familiar with the contents of those general licences relevant to your activities.

So Mr Mizzi, that means that if you are shooting woodpigeons in spring and you are unable to prove that in that case those birds you are shooting are actually causing damage....well you are in trouble.

Anyway, are you trying to convince us that just because in the UK there is a concession to shoot certain species which are regarded as pests, Maltese hunters can shoot Turtle Doves and Quails in spring??? I'm sorry but that doesn't make sense.

S Mizzi (6 days, 10 hours ago)

Mr Cachia Zammit, i'm sorry but you really have no idea what is going on. Today, or next month or in the middle of Spring, I can pick up the phone, call 1 of hundreds of hunting organisers in the UK and book a 3 day shoot on Wood Pigeon for the next week. This is a reality and I have done it many times. Moreover, during my shoot, I could, if I wanted to, legally shoot at any 'pest' namely Collared Dove, Carrion Crow, Hooded Crow, Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies and Jays and even Canada Geese.

The issue here is that the UK managed a derogation under the excuse that these birds are pests. Although this was and remains a valid excuse, because the damage these birds cause is incredible, it is also a loophole that has given rise to many organised shoots. So yes, anyone in the UK can go out and shoot at any time of the year.

With regards to your comment about Turtle Doves and Quail you know full well that

these are protected only because their numbers in the UK are in decline because of loss of habitat and widespread use of pesticides.

S Mizzi (6 days, 11 hours ago)

Franco Farrugia.

You are right, it should be and will be, the day it becomes less extremist, more tolerant and balanced towards the genuine and legal shooter and above all more credible in the way it manipulates the media in a sick attempt to sway public opinion by feeding on its ignorance of all birding matters. The fact that it is using the shooting of protected species (which happens everywhere) as a means to achieve a hunt free Malta at the expense of the hunter that practices his pastime within a legal framework and as practised by all EU nations and indeed the world over is cowardly, unethical and despicable and therefore, in the eyes of the hunting fraternity, this body merits nothing more than contempt.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days, 22 hours ago)

@Andrew Gatt

I don't know what spring hunting has to do with white wagtails but just the same, you make it sound as if in the UK you can just grab your shotgun and go hunting whenever you want, any time of the year. Come on Andrew, be real. You know very well that isn't exactly how things go. You keep mentioning spring hunting for 2 species. Do you really want the readers to believe that in the UK they actually shoot these 2 species, namely the turtle dove and the quail? No they don't because they are PROTECTED SPECIES. In the UK, shooting in spring is only allowed when farmers complain of certain species of birds, such as crows, damaging their crop. Just the same, it is not as if Tom, Dick and Harry goes there and start shooting. First of all, who ever is claiming damage by the birds has to prove that he has tried all other options to deter the birds and shooting is only the last resort, and limited permits are granted but you make it sound as if all the UK hunters go out shooting at that time of the year.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days, 22 hours ago)

@MARK MIFSUD BONNICI

17,000 hunters / trappers, need only to take 59 birds each in a year to total 1,000,000. On the 05/12/08 you yourself stated that your catch in 3 months was of 10 quail, 3 turtle doves, 14 thrushes and 9 starlings. That is a total of 36 birds and you still had almost TWO more months to go. But let's just say that after that day you didn't bag anything and that leaves a difference of only 23 birds to make up the total of 59. One has to keep in mind that just up to 2007, there was also spring hunting and you always claim of catching more turtle doves and quails in that season. In autumn you caught 13 quails / doves, so it is not a big deal if in spring you would bag 23, just 10 more than in autumn. And there you have your contribution of 59 birds taken to make up the 1,000,000 total.

Franco Farrugia (6 days, 23 hours ago)

I cannot understand why some people, who think themselves to be intelligent, are so much against such an important NGO as BIRDLIFE. It is quintessential that this NGO is

given all the support that it needs in order for it to be one of the most important voices in favour of birds and fowl of flight on the Maltese Islands. It should be given a privileged status in our country.

Richard Cachia Zammit (6 days, 23 hours ago)

@Anthony Formosa

Accountancy has nothing to do with counting the birds as they come in to roost. Anyone who has any experience with these birds knows that the 7,000 plus that roost there don't come in as one huge flock but in small flocks which can easily be counted.

Also anyone with a little knowledge of birds or at least with a bird guide can easily see that we are in the wintering range of this species and that is why these birds leave in March. They do the same thing in other countries where they winter such as many countries in Northern Africa.

Andrew Gatt (1 week ago)

@Richard.....good to hear and serves them right. It's the first incident I've heard of in quite a while now. The scale of illegalities is NOWHERE NEAR what is splashed around. The scale of misinformation and wrong information is, however, WAY BEYOND the reality of the situation. But then, one does what one must to garner sympathy, support and funding!!!

And, for the nth time.....the issue is about permitting SPRING HUNTING for 2 SPECIES fact as agreed with the EU. I notice you haven't commented on the FACT that the UK permits large scale shooting ALL YEAR ROUND and DEROGATES from the Birds Directive to do so.

chris mizzi (1 week ago)

I bet , the number will start decreasing if the heritage Ngos manage to remove all the trees of valletta since this is their latest campaign, remove the trees from Valletta. I am astonished by the silence of birdlife on this issue. heqq some trees are more equal then others, rightly so there was a lot of condemnation for the destruction of trees in the natura 2000 areas but not for the trees in Valletta and in all our village centers.

MARK MIFSUD BONNICI (1 week ago)

RichardCachiaZammit

"Birdlife never said that you never see any birds in Malta" on the contrary they claim to see millions all killed by hunters. Also all they said is that "80% of the Maltese countryside is occupied by hunters and trappers".

Where is the distinction between the legal hunter and the "irresponsible shooters who do actually shoot anything that flies." Is the 80% you claim to be occupied, all occupied by illegal hunters

Birdlife's inciting the public to reclaim the countryside, which after all belongs to all (hunters included) clearly shows that anything Birdlfie does is directed against all hunters.

LEGAL OR ILLEGAL HUNTING MAKE NO DIFFERENCE.

F Xerri (1 week ago)

Are you sure there were 7761 ???

My unemployed uncle counted 7765 ...

S Mizzi (1 week ago)

Another roosting spectacle takes place in Rabat near San Duminku church. Thousands and thousands of sparrows, starlings etc can be seen coming and going at dawn and dusk. A phenomenal sight. Considering that these birds head into the neighbouring Rabat and Dingli fields to feed, renowned hunting hotspots, its a wonder why their numbers keep increasing. Perhaps because the myth that hunters shoot at anything that flies is purely just that, a myth and a huge lie to impress those that can't tell a bird from a flying pig..

Philip Galea (1 week ago)

The White Wagtail migrates over Malta during the peak of the Autumn hunting season. It can be seen everywhere in open countryside, especially in freshly ploughed fields. Birdlife is once again confirming that Maltese hunters do not blast away anything that flies.

When someone like Alex Ellul writes those sort of comments, it shows how much ordinary people know about birds. I don't think that he is a member of Birdlife, because if he is, it's a disgrace.

Richard Cachia Zammit (1 week ago)

@Andrew Gatt

Just last week, thanks to the intervention of Birdlife, a person was apprehended by the police for shooting at Meadow Pipits (Psiepes) as target practice. So unfortunately yes, there are still irresponsible shooters who do actually shoot anything that flies. Apart from that Birdlife never said that you never see any birds in Malta. On the contrary, it always claims that if illegal hunting was not as rampant as it is, Malta would be a better place for birds.

Anthony Formosa (1 week ago)

First off all congratulations to Mr Cachia for his accuracy in accounts, and secondly I would like to ask BLM why the birds leave in March? Shall we make Valletta a Special Conservation Area?

It was not clear why their numbers were increasing, but the main reason could be a change of habitat in other places in Malta or abroad, a spokesman said.

So since 1986 BLM have no clue of why the number is increasing, very professional indeed.

Adrian Borg (1 week ago)

Yeah of course! Pro-hunting lobbyists start using this article in your defense!

Maybe the hunters do not have the needed skills to shoot down such a fast and small bird.

Bertu Agius (1 week ago)

Do Birdlife ever count the ones that every evening come to Victoria Gozo and many of them roost on the roof of the Aurora theatre?

I would also like to ask Birdlife Malta ,why is it that the White Wagtails stay for six months in Malta yet when breeding times come they all go?Because when March-April comes you won't be able to see one flying around. Please don't say that the Hunters shoot them or trap them because that for sure not true.And for those who don't know,White Wagtails love to come near you when you are digging or ploughing the fields. The Yellow Wagtails mostly come in September and March to May,but now-a-days they keep going, too much pesticides on the field crops, so no insects to eat ,most of the time you can see them flying high in flocks of between 30 and even more and they keep going.

Alex Ellul (1 week ago)

@Chris Galea: Trees are everywhere all over Malta and Gozo not only in Valletta. So wagtails should be seen everywhere in the same numbers as seen in Valletta but.....who knows, maybe they like the smell of coffee.

In fact you said it so correctly, even if it is a misprint from your end: "...they spend the day 'hoping' from one place to another... " hoping they will survive the day methinks.

vince peresso (1 week ago)

I must say this is a very pleasing article to read. If my memory serves me right in my younger days we used to experience the "sturnell" that inhabited Valletta espeially the yards in Palce square and Pjazza Regina. Are they still using Valletta as their sleeping quarters?

May we see more and more birds visiting our islands and invading our towns as well.

MARK MIFSUD BONNICI (1 week ago)

Alex Ellul

I never realized you were so "intellegent".

When these Wagtails roost for the night they would be returning from a day of undisturbed roaming in the countryside. So they are not shot in Valletta nor anywhere else in Malta. In fact as Birdlife state they have increased considerably.

So what does you senseless comment prove apart from your sarcasm.

Similar comments only strengthen the common belief that ignorance is the main hunters enemy. Thank you for proving it.

Andrew Gatt (1 week ago)

So Birdlife, CABS and every other anti-hunting organisation still claim that "you never see any birds in Malta", hunters kill everything that flies" "indiscriminate slaughter" etc. Then we get an article like this! Same as with the Yelkouan Shearwater. If there was even a fraction of truth in these wild claims, both these species' populations should be showing drastic declines - not increases!

MJ Naudi (1 week ago)

I have noticed many of these birds, beginning last year, during my regular long-distance runs in preparation for the Malta Half Marathon.

They are hyperactive and have a gliding way of flying which is quite unusual.

They are certainly a welcome addition to the island and hopefully do not do the sort of damage that pigeons do with their droppings.

Rita Spiteri (1 week ago)

WOW

Matthew Bonnici (1 week ago)

what impresses me is the way BirdLife count birds so efficiently.... to the nearest bird????

how they are able to count 7,761 and 5,433 surprises me...

it also amazes me when they say millions of birds.... i'm in the countryside quite often and to be honest i've never seen more than 20 to 30 of the millions of birds they claim hunters shoot down.

Illegal hunting is ignorant however we must also recognize that legal hunting within limits is part of our culture. So if you want to stop illegal hunting promote legal sustainable practice.... dont threaten the hunters to ban it completely.... easier said than done however....

Tony Caruana (1 week ago)

@ Alex Ellul

I still can't stop laughing at your Comments.

Anthony Formosa (1 week ago)

@Alex Ellul I see your point, they follow the signs to Valletta on their way in and to avoid hunting spots, they're also enjoying the lakes around Valletta and the river. Grow up Please.

Chris Galea (1 week ago)

@Alex Ellul

The wagtails ROOST at Valletta,they spend the day hopping from one place to another in the countryside in search of water puddles and food.

John Borg (1 week ago)

'During the day, these birds fly to areas throughout Malta to feed in urban and rural habitats.'

The hunting season is still open and yet, these wagtails manage to return to Valletta; but don't hunters; according to the same Birdlife and CABS; blast out of the sky anything that flies?!!!

While wagtails may be increasing in Valletta, I'm sure they are year after year in the decrease throughout the countryside. Maybe Birdlife can confirm this from their birdwatching statistics.

I don't know the reason why; but I hope there won't be someone pointing to hunters and trappers.

J. Borg (1 week ago)

I wonder where the birds that roosted at Castille have relocated....

Alex Ellul (1 week ago)

@MMB: One cannot shoot birds in Valletta, not even during the open season. That's why wagtails congregate there. They're safe.

Antoine Grima (1 week ago)

This is great news . What's happened to the yellow wagtail ? As a kid i remember the yellow wagtail very well , but now you never see one

MARK MIFSUD BONNICI (1 week ago)

These birds have never trapped or shot in Malta. It is good to learn that the White Wagtail is increasing. Considering that this noted increase coincides with the hunting season, one can easily deduce that the perceived idea that hunters "shoot anything that flies" is nothing but a fallacy.

Finally we are beginning to experience truthful ornithological reporting. Keep it up Birdlife.

Joe Cassar (1 week ago)

And yet there have been people lately who called for the removal of all trees in St John Square so that we can all see more of the stonework!
Incredible.
