

Large-Scale Shooting of Raptors in the Maltese Islands

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INTRODUCTION

The Maltese Archipelago lies 89km south of Sicily and 3340km north of the Libyan coast. The islands have a total area of 342km² and a population of 345,000, of whom 16,000 have a license to hunt birds. 112 out of 367 species of birds recorded in the Maltese Islands are regular migrants, whilst 183 are rare or vagrant visitors. Of these 34 are raptors.

The Maltese Islands have a notable spring and autumn migration of raptors, the most commonly observed species being Marsh Harrier, Honey Buzzard and Kestrel. There is also a significant migration of Hobby, Osprey and Eleonora's Falcon. In some years large numbers of Red-footed Falcons are recorded. Ringing recoveries show that most raptors arrive in the Islands mainly from northern breeding grounds, mainly from north Germany and Scandinavia.

SHOOTING

The popularity of bird hunting results in a density of over 60 hunters per square kilometre of countryside. Hunting is regulated by the 1980 Laws for the Protection of Birds. Amongst other things the law states that it is illegal to shoot birds between 22nd May and 31st August. The law also lists those birds which may be shot or trapped, thereby giving legal protection to most birds including all raptors. In practice the laws are completely ignored by hunters. Enforcement is insignificant as the police do not consider the bird protection laws as a priority.

Raptors are shot mainly for taxidermy. Every hunter tries to get at least one specimen for his private collection. Many specimens are given away as gifts to relatives and friends.

It is estimated that three million birds are shot or trapped every year in Malta. In 1986 Magnin estimated the number of birds shot, concluding that between 3,000 and 5,000 raptors are shot annually. More recent estimates show that nowadays about 8,500 are shot annually.

The estimates given by Magnin and the author are for average years. In some years exceptional numbers are shot, notable occurrences being the estimated shooting of about 6,000 Red-footed Falcons on 25th May 1987 and of about 7,000 Marsh Harriers during March/April 1989.

The increase in the number of raptors shot over the past five years may be explained by the increase in the number of hunters shooting from boats. In the early 1980s it was discovered that more birds could be shot at sea. Over the past 10 years there has been an increase in this practice. A survey carried out in 1988 showed that *ca.* 300 dinghies and high-powered speed-boats were being used by hunters. A similar survey carried out in 1991 showed that the figure had increased to over 600.

The increase in popularity in sea hunting is due to several reasons, mainly:

- a) The large number of birds that may be shot at sea

Table 1. Numbers of raptors shot or trapped annually in Malta.

Species	1986 estimates	1991 estimates
Osprey	25-30	50-60
Black Kite	50-75	50-75
Short-toed Eagle	10-20	10-20
Sparrow Hawk	25-50	25-50
Honey Buzzard	500-1,000	500-1,500
Egyptian Vulture	1-5	1-5
Marsh Harrier	400-800	2,500-3,000
Hen/Pallid Harrier	10-50	10-50
Montagu's Harrier	30-100	100-200
Eleonora's Falcon	25	25
Hobby	500-1,000	500-1,000
Red-footed Falcon	150-300	150-300
Lesser/Kestrel	11,000-1,750	2,000-2,700

b) The total lack of enforcement at sea, due mainly to the fact that the law states that "it is illegal to discharge a firearm whilst afloat within 3km of the foreshore". The army, which is responsible for law enforcement at sea, does not have the necessary craft to chase hunters who are all equipped with high-powered motors. Often hunters just wait for army patrol boats to move away, knowing that as long as they are not seen shooting they will not be prosecuted.

Maltese hunters do not have to pass an examination before being given a hunting licence. It is enough to obtain the signatures of two hunters vouching that the applicant is able to shoot. In spite of the lack of training, most hunters are aware of bird species and are keen to obtain specimens of the rarer ones. Due to the intensive shooting, raptors no longer breed in the Islands. The last pair of Peregrine Falcons were shot from a dinghy in 1982. The Kestrel has not bred since 1972 and the last pair of breeding Barn Owls were shot in 1988.

CONSERVATION

The Malta Ornithological Society (MOS) is campaigning to stop the killing of birds, especially raptors, in the Islands. MOS initiated a systematic campaign to change public opinion. This has achieved the desired results as far as the non-shooting public is concerned but has not yet managed to bring the situation under control. MOS is now lobbying for more effective legislation, taking advantage of the fact that Malta has applied for membership in the European Community, and pressure is being brought on the government to update and enforce the bird protection legislation, to conform with the standards required by the 1979 EEC Bird Directive.

MOS is proposing that the close season for hunting should start on March 1st, that hunting at sea should be abolished and that it should become illegal to possess a protected species, even if dead or mounted. MOS is also proposing that the income from hunting fees should be used to finance wardens who will be responsible for the enforcement of the bird protection laws.

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