

# The feathered travellers

## A bird migration factsheet

### ● Why do birds migrate?

Birds migrate because of the weather. They travel to escape weather that is too cold or too hot and dry. Most birds do not have survival strategies to find food or live in extreme weather conditions. Being warm-blooded like us, they must feed regularly to keep their body temperature from falling. To avoid starvation or death from exposure in seasons of extreme weather, many birds fly to regions with milder climates.

### ● Where do they go?

Birds of northern Europe usually escape winter by migrating in a generally southern direction, mostly to the milder Mediterranean region, but many also continue across the Sahara Desert and as far as central and southern Africa. When the northern winter is over, the birds return home to nest. Similar patterns happen in other parts of the world. In the Americas, Canadian and US birds migrate to central or South America for the winter; in the Far East, birds of northern China and Siberia migrate to warm places like India and tropical places, even as far as New Zealand!

### ● How long are these migrations?

Most migrations are a few hundred kilometres and last a few days, but some birds accomplish epic journeys that span thousands of kilometres and take several weeks to complete. The common barn swallow (*ħuttafa*) regularly travels 5000km or more, and the Arctic tern (a kind of gull) actually flies from the Arctic to the Antarctic. And they all do this twice a year.

### ● How do birds find their way?

It is not known exactly how birds navigate thousands of kilometres - often across featureless expanses of sea or desert - and find their way without getting lost, sometimes returning to the same spot year after year. It is thought to be a combination of learning, instinct and navigation by landmarks, celestial bodies and detection of the earth's magnetic field. Many studies, such as scientific bird-ringing and the use of satellite-tracking devices, are carried out to learn more about bird migration. BirdLife Malta is very active in this kind of research.

### ● Do all birds migrate?

Most European birds are migratory, but some species (like woodpeckers and jays) stay put and manage to survive winter by gathering food to consume during the hard months. Others (like crows) have learned to capitalise on human litter - which unfortunately is in constant supply regardless of season! - and in this way survive the winter without starving.

### ● Do Maltese birds migrate?

About four hundred species of birds have so far been recorded in the Maltese Islands, and almost all of them are migratory. We can place Maltese birds in four categories:

#### ● Year-round residents

These birds do not migrate. As their name implies, they live all their life here and do not travel much except maybe from Malta to Gozo or vice-versa, which is not migration. In Malta we have just 11 species in this category, and these include the widespread and familiar Spanish sparrow (*għasfur tal-bejt*) and the blue rock thrush (*merill*), our national bird. Our winters are mild, so these resident birds do not face much hardship.

#### ● Winter residents

These are birds that nest in mainland Europe but migrate south in autumn, stopping here to spend the winter. These birds usually arrive in October and leave in March. There are about 50 species in this category, and they include robin (*pitirross*), white wagtail (*zakk abjad*), common starling (*sturnell*) and black redstart (*fjamma sewda*).

- **Summer residents**

These are also migratory birds, and they do the exact opposite of the winter residents: they come to Malta in spring and stay here to nest and raise a family, then in autumn they leave to spend the winter elsewhere. We have seven of these birds, and they include the short-toed lark (*bilbla*) and the Scopoli's shearwater (*ċiefa*).

- **Passage migrants**

- Most Maltese birds are in this category. More than 110 such species are seen regularly every year, but only for a very short while. Most of our passage migrants come from central and eastern Europe and, contrary to the winter and summer residents, these only stop for a day or two, just enough to rest - and maybe grab a meal - before they continue on their journey south or north (depending on the time of the year). These birds visit in spring (mostly in Apr-May) on their way to Europe, and in autumn (mostly in September-October) on their way to Africa. Passage migrants include the barn swallow (*ħuttfa*), herons like the little egret (*agrett abjad*) and many birds of prey, like the European honey-buzzard (*kuċċarda*).

- **Why do we get so many passage migrants?**

Since most birds cannot swim, they generally migrate along routes with the shortest sea-crossings. Birds crossing the central part of the Mediterranean Sea find the long Italian peninsula very convenient, with Sicily and Malta as stepping stones. This is why so many millions of birds travel up and down the Italian land corridor during migration, and we are lucky that our archipelago lies right on the highway! Despite this, birds still face many obstacles along the way (see *The Long Journey* p53) and a percentage die before arriving at their destination.

- **Do other animals migrate, apart from birds?**

Not only birds migrate. Whales, dolphins, reindeer, zebras, wildebeest, bats, sea turtles, dragonflies, butterflies and many fish - like tuna and dolphin-fish (*lampuki*) - regularly migrate as well.

