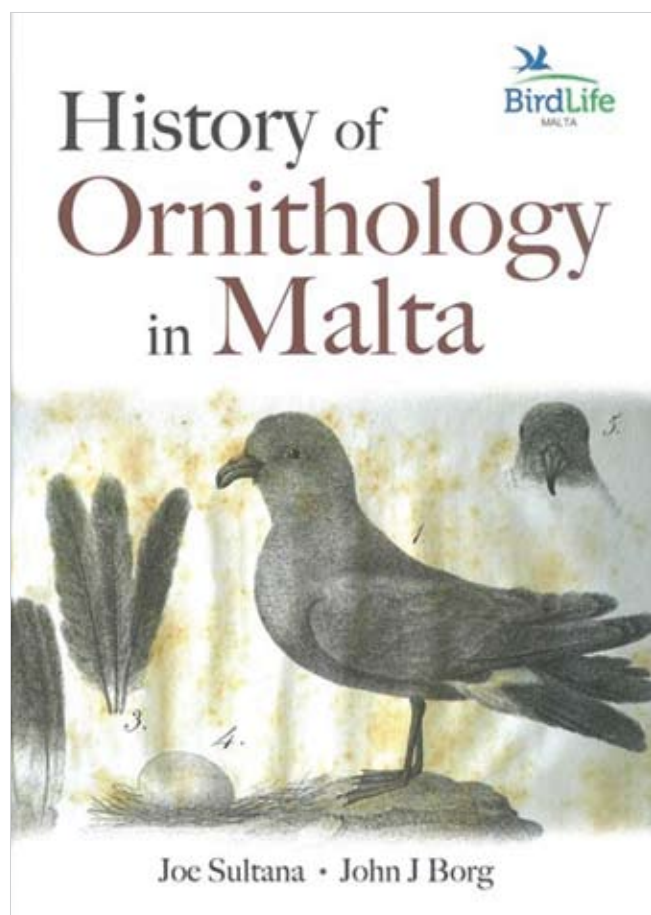


Book reviews



History of ornithology in Malta

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A bulky volume, heavy with food for thought about the differences between the ornithological culture of this tiny island, the navel of the Mediterranean, and Italy. But Malta *is* Italy, as our illuminated forefather Charles Lucien Bonaparte took for granted (you can read about this in these pages). Well, not really... or, at least, not for the study of birds. Quite another world, both in a positive and negative meaning, but this is just my personal conclusion.

The negative side of the comparison is based on well known facts, that are precisely summarized in the book; the hunting mania, useless taxidermy, vain-struggling for conservation, collusion between politicians and hunters. All this sounds worse than in our country, but not really another world. Do migrants find substantially better conditions when they stopover in the Pelagian or some of the Pontine islands? The main difference is probably that Malta still has legal forms of hunting (despite EU) that in Italy are now illegal, which is not the same as saying they have been eradicated.

Let's turn to the opposite comparison, in which Malta wins, that is the ornithological scientific produc-

tion. We tend to explain this by the fact that the British – warranty of data quality - have been there for long. This is true, but not exactly so, when one considers that Schembri – the first autochthonous ornithologist of the Mediterranean islands, had hardly any British culture or links. And there have been so many others, packed on an island hardly bigger than our Elba, that even a comparison with Italy as a whole is embarrassing.

The book looks very attractive, full of images that are never superfluous and depict the species which are mentioned, historical or present-day landscapes, museum specimens, reproductions of book covers, old hand written notes, portraits of the protagonists, and even the Capri cemetery where two of them were buried. The bibliography looks unusually nice too, beside being very complete and useful for modern research.

At the start or at the end of the book more unconventional subjects are treated and these too are interesting and easy to read: birds in local arts (starting from a Lapwing flock on a sherd that had laid buried for 7000 yrs in Gozo), Maltese birds on coins and stamps, and finally the avifauna of the Quaternary. A limestone is-

land has preserved a treasure of remains of extinct, endemic birds, starting from the famous giant swan (*Cygnus falconeri*, flightless) and including a number of taxa that Lydekker unimaginatively named *Stryx melitensis*, *Gyps melitensis*, *Columba melitensis*, *Grus melitensis*, the latter huge and flightless too.

In my opinion this book presents many things that you don't find in books about Italian birds. It is not particularly cheap; it cannot be such for obvious reasons. But it's a book to purchase for the very reason that it fills a big gap we do have in Italy. You can get it from ACTRADING (e-mail: actrading@onvol.net), at the cost of 50 Euro plus mailing. Book sellers that order at least 50 copies get a 20% reduction and no postal charges. I assume that a discount can be obtained also when birding groups order several copies in one go.