

Yelkouan Shearwater (Mt: *Garnija*) – factsheet

Puffinus yelkouan (Acerbi, 1827)



The Yelkouan Shearwater is a medium-sized seabird from the tubenose family, length around 35 cm, wingspan around 85cm. It has blackish upperparts and is mainly whitish below. Its slender beak is black and hooked at the peak. Both sexes look alike but differ slightly in their calls with males having a clearer and higher pitched voice than females. Their ghostly screams can be heard most prominently standing at the cliff ledge close to a colony in a dark night in February and March.

Yelkouan Shearwaters spend the day far out at sea, plunging and diving alone or in small groups for fish, crustaceans and squid and forming small rafts in the evening. The birds breed colonial in holes, crevices, caves and screes of steep sea-cliffs. To avoid predation, they exclusively come to land under cover of darkness, even avoiding moonlit nights.

The strictly monogamous birds arrive in the colonies in winter. End of February or beginning of March, the female lays a single chalk-white egg, which both partners incubate in turns for a total of 50-52 days. Site fidelity is high and a pair might come to breed in the very same nest-hole every year for more than a decade. Chick-rearing takes two month and a half and the young shearwater is ready to start a life on her own wings and at sea in June or July, when the colonies are abandoned. Recent research in Malta has shown that most birds (adult and young) spend the non-breeding period in the Aegean and Black Sea.

The Yelkouan Shearwater is endemic to the Mediterranean Basin, with a total population of 15,300 – 30,500 pairs. Malta alone holds approximately 10% of this population. A sharp and rapid decline of the population in recent years all over the Mediterranean led to an up-listing of the species to ‘vulnerable’ in the IUCN (red list). Main threats for the birds are development close to their colonies, sound and light pollution, predation of eggs and chicks by introduced rats and feral cats and oil spills and chemical pollution of the sea.

The current EU-Life+ Malta Seabird Project builds up on the Yelkouan Shearwater Project to better protect the Yelkouan Shearwaters at land and at sea and safeguard their future, together with their larger and smaller ‘cousins’ the Scopoli’s Shearwater and the Mediterranean Storm Petrel, which all have their homes in the cliffs of the Maltese Island from time immemorial.

The numbers of Yelkouan Shearwaters recently found breeding in the cliffs of Majjistral Nature and History Park will most likely justify the recognition of the site as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International in the near future.

*Compiled by Dr Benjamin Metzger, Head of Research of the **EU Life+ Malta Seabird Project***

BirdLife (Malta): <http://www.birdlifemalta.org/Content/LIFEPROJECTS/maltaseabirdproject/1115/#.Utl3srSifoN>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LifeSeabirdMaltaProject>

Photos: Dr Benjamin Metzger

