

Film feature

Requiem for feathered friends

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Birdlife Malta, founded in January 1962 and then known as the Malta Ornithological Society, started off primarily as a study group; but its members rapidly realised that wild birds were in dire need of someone to fight for their protection. Now, a documentary recounts the efforts of this organisation in its continued struggle to end illegal hunting.

Birdlife recently screened the documentary entitled *Birds, Bins and Bullets* at Eden's largest auditorium, which was packed for the occasion. The film's director, Stephen Cummings, a prize winning environmental filmmaker, was present for the occasion and also addressed the audience.

All of Birdlife's efforts today are directly or indirectly channelled towards bird protection. It does this by running various programmes mostly in collaboration with other international wildlife groups affiliated to Birdlife International. The film traces the efforts of various foreign and local ornithologists on a local raptor camp organised to collect data on the migration of birds of prey and to act as a deterrent to illegal hunting.

They do not have an easy task. Malta is a very densely populated

small island state with no truly wild areas left. The biggest threats to birds in Malta are habitat destruction mostly due to new roads and buildings, disturbance and direct persecution from hunting and trapping.

Over the years, the issue pitting Birdlife against the hunters' lobby determined to exercise its 'traditional rights' has mushroomed into a veritable hot potato.

The actual hunting/trapping sites are on public land that people just

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cannot visit to enjoy the countryside. Families on outings encounter smoking guns, and they fear being sprayed by lead pellets.

With both major political parties pampering and kowtowing to the militant hunters, the buck has been

unapologetically passed on to the European Union in a move akin to Pontius Pilate's deal to save either Jesus or Barabbas.

Malta is a really important site for migration since birds converge from three routes, the west via Gibraltar, the east via the Bosphorus and the Central European-African flyway via Sicily with many birds going over Malta and onto Africa. Filmed in Buskett, Dingli, Nadur, Gharghur and at Laferla Cross, among other remote locations, the documentary follows the seemingly routine operation of the observers and the hide and seek response of those who are being watched.

In between, we follow ancillary episodes involving the police, scenes of birds in flight, and visits to the veterinary who examines the wounded birds. For most of the time, the people involved in these sequences are explaining their actions directly to the camera.

When the action does not follow a planned shooting script, like the rough encounters with some very angry and irate hunters, or the hurried arrival on the scene of the police, the filming becomes really exciting.

The local law enforcers are quoted as doing "a fantastic job" but it is obvious that they are too thin on the ground and remain under-resourced. They don't even carry binoculars. In one sad scene, a



One of many raptors regularly shot as they migrate over Malta. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier.

group of bird watchers are filmed presenting some basic equipment to the local policemen to help them get on with their job.

A more poignant sequence depicts a vet examining a bird which had been shot in five places. "This is the major problem... this bird is not going to fly, so I think it is kinder to put him to sleep," the vet says with tears in her eyes.

I realised then that birds don't cry. They pass away in dignity. And when all is said and done this story amounts to a veritable requiem; dedicated to our feathered friends.

Over the years the media have treated this issue as an entertainment piece in the style of a Cowboys vs Indians topic, milking it for all its worth. Perhaps the time has come for the real heroes to emerge out of the shadows and to think outside the box. And perhaps this documentary provides the key in an effort to commence the closing of this Pandora's box, which has lain wide open for far too long to the embarrassment of this so called civilised society.

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