Wildlife and Fauna of Malta

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Introduction

Situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the Maltese archipelago is a treasure trove of biodiversity, offering an astonishing variety of wildlife and fauna within its modest boundaries. Despite covering just over 300 square kilometers, Malta and its sister islands are home to thousands of species, many of which are endemic or bear unique Mediterranean characteristics shaped by centuries of isolation and adaptation. The islands' rich biota encompasses everything from vibrant insects and elusive reptiles to an impressive range of migratory birds and abundant marine life.

Malta's environment has been molded by both natural forces and human influence. Its central maritime position offers a blend of European, African, and Middle Eastern species, resulting in a distinct fauna found nowhere else. However, this same strategic location, combined with dense human habitation, poses serious challenges to local ecosystems. Extensive development, pollution, the introduction of alien species, and climate change threaten the delicate balance that supports Malta's rich wildlife tapestry.

Amidst these challenges, conservation has emerged as an urgent priority. Recent decades have witnessed increased awareness and action to protect Malta's natural heritage. Initiatives such as the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), EU directives, and the establishment of Natura 2000 sites reflect Malta's ongoing commitment to safeguarding its biological wealth for future generations. Key non-governmental organizations, like BirdLife Malta, play an active role in promoting research, education, and habitat preservation.

This book, "Wildlife and Fauna of Malta: A Guide to the Wildlife and Fauna of Malta," aims to serve both residents and visitors who wish to deepen their understanding of the islands' extraordinary natural world. Through accessible chapters, it journeys from the rugged cliffs and garigue landscapes to the depths of Malta's blue seas, revealing the lives and stories of insects, reptiles, birds, mammals, and marinelife. Each section draws upon the latest research and ongoing conservation work, highlighting both the wonders and the vulnerabilities of this unique Mediterranean ecosystem.

As you explore the pages ahead, you will encounter remarkable creatures—from the dazzling Old World swallowtail to the secretive Maltese Wall Lizard, and the migratory flocks that paint Malta's skies each spring and autumn. The interplay of factors shaping Malta's ecosystems—biology, geography, history, and stewardship—forms a central theme of this book. Understanding these elements is vital not only for appreciating Malta's biodiversity, but also for recognizing the shared responsibility we hold in ensuring its continuity.

Whether you are a nature enthusiast, student, or casual observer, this guide invites you to discover and appreciate the mosaic of life that flourishes on Malta’s land and in its surrounding seas. In appreciating the islands’ fauna—in all its variety, fragility, and resilience—we connect more deeply to Malta itself, and to the broader web of Mediterranean biodiversity.

CHAPTER ONE: Malta’s Geographic and Ecological Setting

To understand the fascinating array of wildlife that calls Malta home, we must first delve into the very foundations of the islands: their geography and ecological setting. Think of it as setting the stage for the incredible cast of characters we'll meet later. The Maltese archipelago, a tiny dot in the vast blue of the Mediterranean Sea, might seem insignificant on a world map, but its location is key to its rich biodiversity. Situated almost right in the center of the Mediterranean, south of Sicily and north of North Africa, Malta is a stepping stone between continents, a crucial point for migratory birds and a melting pot for species from different regions. This position has, over millennia, shaped the islands' flora and fauna, resulting in a unique blend of European, African, and even Middle Eastern influences.

The archipelago consists of three main inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino, along with several smaller, uninhabited islets like Cominotto and Filfla. The total land area is a mere 316 square kilometers, making it one of the smallest countries in Europe. This small size means that different habitats are often in close proximity, creating a mosaic of ecological niches within a limited space. Despite the limited landmass, the variety of landscapes is surprisingly diverse, ranging from dramatic coastal cliffs plunging into the sea to fertile valleys and rocky plateaus.

The geological story of Malta is one of uplifted sedimentary rocks, primarily limestone, formed over millions of years from marine deposits. This has resulted in a landscape characterized by karstic features, such as caves and sinkholes, and a topography dominated by low hills and terraced fields. The prevalent rock type, Globigerina Limestone, is relatively soft and easily eroded, influencing the formation of valleys and the indented coastline with its numerous bays and harbors. The harder Lower Coralline Limestone is often found at the base of cliffs, forming resistant platforms. Fault lines also crisscross the islands, contributing to the varied landscape and the formation of features like the impressive Victoria Lines fault.

Malta's climate is typically Mediterranean, which means hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. The vast majority of rainfall occurs between October and March, with the summer months being particularly arid. This distinct seasonal pattern has a significant impact on the types of plants and animals that can thrive here, favoring species adapted to periods of drought. The average annual temperature is around 19°C, with summer highs often reaching the low thirties and winter lows rarely dropping below single digits. Sunshine is abundant, with Malta boasting over 300 hours of sunshine per year.

The prevailing winds, such as the cool northwesterly *majjistral* and the hot, humid southeasterly *xlokk* (or sirocco), also play a role in shaping the environment. The sirocco, blowing in from North Africa, can bring with it not only heat but also fine dust, impacting air quality and vegetation.

The limited freshwater resources are a crucial factor for Malta's ecosystems. There are no permanent rivers or lakes, and wildlife relies on temporary pools, groundwater sources, and human-made reservoirs. This scarcity of freshwater influences the distribution and survival of many species, particularly amphibians and aquatic invertebrates.

The interplay of these geographical and climatic factors has created a unique ecological setting. The limestone bedrock, Mediterranean climate, and limited freshwater availability have shaped the types of habitats found on the islands, from the rocky, exposed garigue to the more sheltered valleys and coastal areas. These diverse habitats, in turn, support the wide array of wildlife that we will explore in the following chapters. The islands' relative isolation, being surrounded by the sea, has also led to the evolution of endemic species, found nowhere else in the world. This combination of factors makes Malta a fascinating, albeit challenging, environment for its wild inhabitants.

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