



Scientific Name:

Monticola solitarius

English:

Blue Rock Thrush

Maltese:

il-merill, ċikku diddiju

The Blue Rock Thrush is a small-sized omnivorous bird, 21-23 cm in length with a slim and long bill. In addition to seeds, it forages on a wide variety of small reptiles and insects. The male's distinctive blue-grey plumage is unmistakable, with darker wings and tail, whilst the female is mottled, with both the throat and the tail dark-grey brown. The Blue Rock Thrush inhabits mostly open coastal rocky hills, scree and seaside coralline limestone cliffs. The local, resident population is still fairly abundant, with individuals being present along all the cliffs of the northern and western coasts of mainland Malta, and along the coasts of Gozo and Comino, where it nests in holes, crevices, large boulders by the sea or abandoned buildings, and sometimes even in rubble walls. The nest is built by both sexes using fine roots, dry grass and small twigs.

The breeding season starts in March-April, when individuals are seen carrying twigs towards the cliffs, and ends in May-June. The Blue Rock Thrush has a melodious song, which is repetitive, fluty and warbling, and can be heard from the end of January until mid-May. In autumn then again, territorial calls can be heard too. The female lays two to six eggs from late March and incubates them for some 15 days. The eggs are pale blue in colour with varying amount of fine reddish spots which are occasionally lacking. When hatched, the chicks are fed with various insects and lizards, and leave the nest at an age of about 15 days. The same breeding pair may have up to two broods per season.

The Blue Rock Thrush is vulnerable to human disturbance and illegal capturing of the males for their song, and hence it is a protected species under the Environment Protection Act. In 1971 it was declared as the Maltese National Bird and was consequently depicted on the former Lm1 coin.

