

Scientific Name:

Puffinus yelkouan

English:

Yelkouan Shearwater

Maltese:

il-garnija

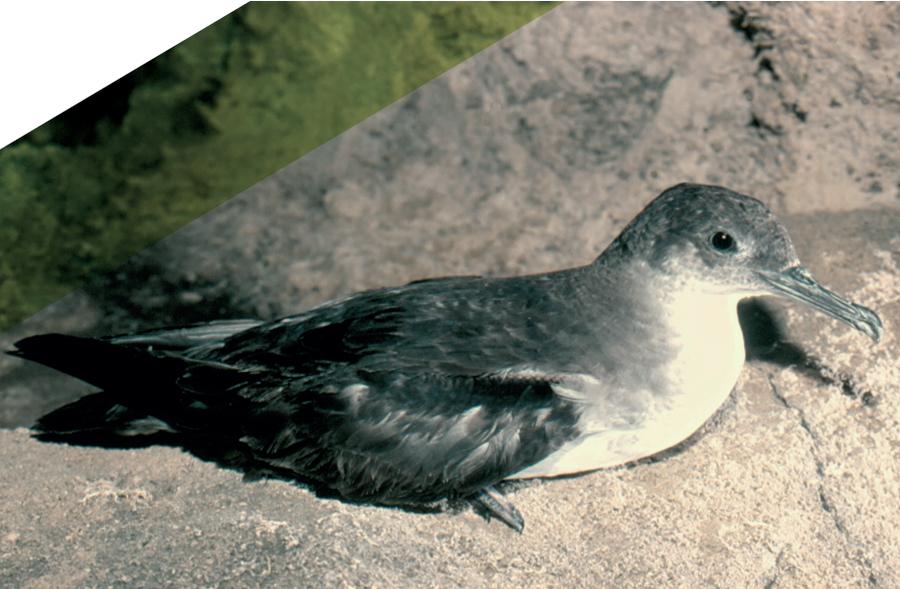


Photo credit: Joe Sultana

The Yelkouan Shearwater is a medium-sized seabird, endemic to the Mediterranean Basin. The main breeding colonies are found in Greece, Italy and Malta. It is frequently observed far out at sea, plunging for bait fish, small crustaceans, and other small animals; during strong winds however, the bird flies closer to the coast. Yelkouans bear a wingspan of around 85 cm, making them smaller than the Scopoli's Shearwater. Unlike their cousin, Yelkouans do not usually form rafts, but individuals are rather observed sitting on the water in the company of other seabirds.

Both sexes look very much alike, having a slender and black beak, which is hooked at the peak, blackish upperparts, and a whitish bottom. In winter, the arrival of Yelkouan Shearwaters at the colonies is marked by ghostly screams, giving rise to myths and superstitions; these calls can be heard most prominently between February and March. To avoid predation, individuals visit land only under the cover of darkness, even avoiding moonlit nights. Pairs breed in colonies in steep cliffs overlooking the sea, and nests are built in crevices, holes, burrows and caves. Females lay a single chalk-white egg in the end of February or beginning of March. Chicks hatch after 52 days, and after being reared by both parents, they fledge from mid-June. Subsequently, most birds then spend the non-breeding months in the Aegean and Black Sea; a small number however head westwards, flying back towards waters off the north coast of Africa. Two recent research projects, namely LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija and EU Life+ Malta Seabird Project, have shed some important information on this seabird species and others; Malta alone holds around 10% of the global Yelkouan Shearwater population, a third of which nest at the cliffs of Rđum tal-Madonna at I-Aħrax (il-Mellieħa).

The Yelkouan Shearwater is listed as vulnerable by the IUCN, and main threats include light and sound pollution, predation of eggs and chicks by rats, and other human-related impacts. Listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive, Yelkouan Shearwaters are not only protected, but Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have also been designated for the survival of this seabird species.