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Executive summary

An existing Special Protection Area (SPA) is being extended by 1.14 km² along Malta's northwestern coast, from Iċ-Ċumnija to Ġnejna Bay, encompassing diverse terrestrial habitats, including steep coastal cliffs. The area overlaps with an existing Natura 2000 site designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), this being the SAC of International Importance Rdumijiet ta' Malta (MT0000024). The site, with the previous SPA and the extension, is now being referred to as Rdumijiet ta' Malta: L-Inħawi taċ-Ċumnija sax-Xaqqa.

The site hosts breeding grounds for the Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*, il-garnija), a globally vulnerable seabird species of which Malta supports about 10% of the world population. Recent studies (2016-2018) estimate about 240-360 breeding pairs within this site, representing around 14% of the national population. The area also supports other important bird species, including the Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*).

The bird species face certain pressures and threats, particularly threats from rat predation on eggs and chicks. Light and noise disturbance may also cause reduced breeding success.

The site extension in question meets the criteria under the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) and the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42), warranting its designation as a Special Protection Area (SPA) to strengthen Malta's commitment to biodiversity conservation and seabird protection.

This report follows the scientific process by which such a designation is justified.

1. Site Identification

The extension of the existing SPA Rđumijiet ta' Malta: Ras il-Pellegrin sax-Xaqqa is located on the northwestern coast of the island of Malta and includes a coastal stretch, from the limits of Iċ-Ċumnija to Ġnejna Bay. The total extended area for SPA designation covers an area of 1.14 km². This hosts important breeding grounds for bird species. The site, with the previous SPA and the extension, is now being referred to as Rđumijiet ta' Malta: L-Inħawi taċ-Ċumnija sax-Xaqqa - reference is made to Annex I to this report.

2. Existing Site Designations

The extension of the SPA overlaps with the currently designated SAC of International Importance - Rđumijiet ta' Malta: Ir-Ramla taċ-Ċirkewwa sa Il-Ponta ta' Bengħisa (MT0000024), that has been designated through the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) and forms part of the Natura 2000 network of sites, in line with the EU Habitats Directive. The extension is also partly contiguous to the marine area designated as a marine Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of International Importance (MT0000101 - Żona fil-Baħar bejn Rđum Majjiesa u Ras ir-Raheb). Furthermore, the coastline borders the marine Special Protection Area (MT0000112 – Żona fil-Baħar madwar Ġhawdex).

3. Ecological Importance – Avifauna

The Yelkouan shearwater is a Mediterranean endemic seabird that spends its annual life cycle between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas. Although migratory, these birds nest mainly in caves, crevices and burrows in coastal cliffs and rocky islets as shown in Annex II of this report. The global population of the Yelkouan shearwater is classified as 'Vulnerable' to extinction by IUCN¹. As an archipelago located in the Central Mediterranean, Malta holds around 10% of the global population of the Yelkouan shearwater². However, the Maltese population of this species is facing different threats and pressures on land and at sea that might be affecting its long-term viability. The Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) has an extremely large range while the population trend appears to be stable. Indeed, this species does not approach the thresholds for Vulnerable under the population trend or the range size criterion; for these reasons, the species is evaluated as Least Concern in Europe.

Before 2012, the Yelkouan shearwater population size along the cliff area in the region of Majjistral area was estimated at 30-50 pairs³. Recent monitoring and research on seabird colonies carried out from 2016 to 2018, as part of the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija (LIFE14 NAT/MT/991) by BirdLife Malta, led to a re-assessment of the population sizes of several seabird colonies around north-western cliff areas in Malta. Overall population estimates of the breeding population of *Puffinus yelkouan* has increased to a minimum of 240 and a maximum of 360 breeding pairs (Austad, 2019). The total population size of Yelkouan shearwater in the Maltese Islands between 2016 and 2018 is estimated to be at a minimum of 1,770 and at a maximum of 2,580 breeding pairs. Thus, it is estimated that the site holds approximately 14% of the breeding population of the Yelkouan shearwater found in the Maltese Islands.

¹ BirdLife International (2018). *Puffinus yelkouan*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2018: e.T22698230A132637221. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2018-2.RLTS.T22698230A132637221.en>.

² BirdLife International (2020). Country profile: Malta. Available from <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/country/malta>.

³ Sultana, J., Borg, J.J., Gauci, C. & Falzon, V. (2011): *The Breeding Birds of Malta*. BirdLife Malta, Malta.

4. Pressures and Threats

The main pressures and threats on the Yelkouan shearwater are from rat predation, and light and noise disturbance caused by coastal and maritime activity. Rat populations inhabiting areas close to cliffs prey on eggs and chicks, leading to losses in breeding success. Light pollution from nearby human activities could further disrupt the species' breeding behaviour by causing colony abandonment, reducing fledgling and adult survival, and/or interfering with chick feeding.

5. Conclusion

This report confirms that the selection of site in question as an SPA fulfils the criteria established under Regulation 10 of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) and is in accordance with Schedule I of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42). The site is considered as meriting designation as an SPA, especially noting the presence of an important Yelkouan shearwater population. The site will be subject to provisions stipulated in the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44), strengthening the national commitment towards the conservation and management of biodiversity.

Annex 1 – Boundary for Special Protection Area designation

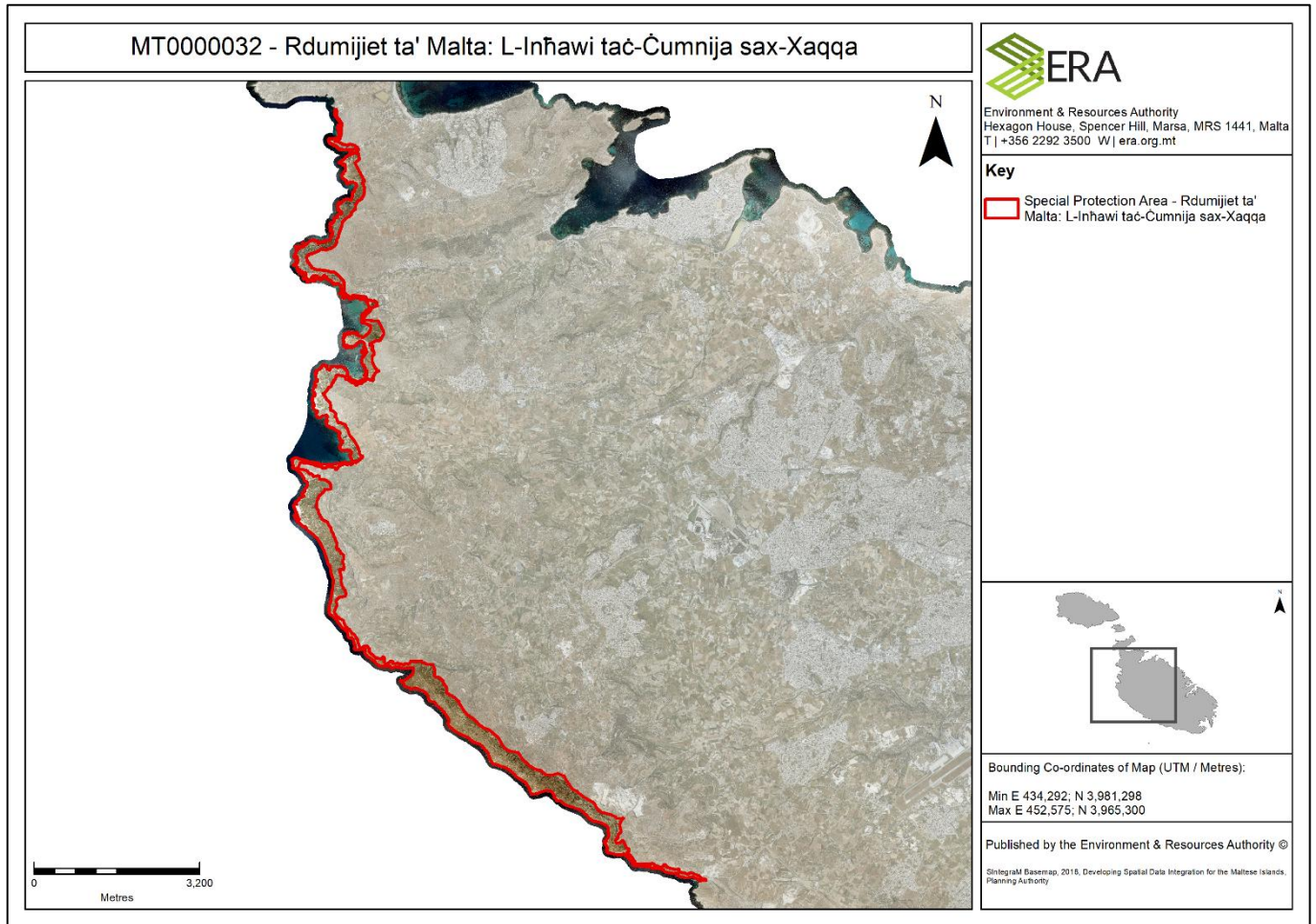


Figure 1: Rdumijiet ta' Malta: L-Inħawi taċ-Ċumnija sax-Xaqqa as a terrestrial Special Protection Area (SPA).

Annex 2 – Photos of Rdumijiet ta' Malta: L-Inħawi taċ-Ċumnija sax-Xaqqa



Figures 2: Coastal cliffs which act as a habitat for the Yelkouan shearwater breeding colonies



Figures 3: Coastal cliffs which act as a habitat for the Yelkouan shearwater breeding colonies