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## Executive Summary

Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl (also known as Selmunett and the St Paul's Islands), located about 100 m off Malta's north-eastern coast near Tal-Blata, cover approximately 0.11 km<sup>2</sup> and consists of two small islets connected by a low bridge of land. The site is already designated under national law as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of International Importance (MT0000022) forming part of the EU Natura 2000 network, a Nature Reserve, a Bird Sanctuary, and a Level 1 Area of Ecological Importance. It is also designated as a Specially Protected Areas in terms of the Barcelona Convention under the Specially Protected Areas Protocol. Given the significant seabird population that these islets host, the site is also being designated by Malta as a terrestrial Special Protection Area (SPA) under the EU Birds Directive.

Of particular importance is its breeding colony of the Yelkouan shearwater (*Puffinus Yelkouan*, il-garnija), a globally Vulnerable and Mediterranean-endemic seabird. Once thought extinct at this site, the colony was rediscovered in 2013, with current estimates of 45-75 breeding pairs — around 3% of Malta's national population. The species nests in caves and crevices along the cliffs, mainly on the island's northern side.

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.

Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl meets the ecological and legal criteria for SPA designation under Regulation 10 of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) and the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42).

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

## 1. Site Identification

Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl, also known as Selmunett or St Paul's Islands, is located along the north-eastern part of mainland Malta, and is situated at about 100m away from Tal-Blata, the nearest point. The two islands are separated by a very lowland bridge (circa 200 m long), which is often submerged on stormy days and can therefore be considered as one island. The site earmarked for SPA designation incorporates an area of approximately 0.11 km<sup>2</sup> – reference is made to Annex I to this report.

## 2. Existing Site Designations

Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl has been designated as a SAC of International Importance (MT0000022) since 2018 (G.N. 681 of 2018), as per Article 6 (4) and Annexes I, II and III of the Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) and included in the EU's Natura 2000 network. The management of this site was further empowered through the publication of the Conservation Order (G.N. 1378 of 2016), under Regulation 17 of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations, 2006 (S.L. 549.44).

The site's natural heritage importance is further emphasised by its multiple designations, including its status as a Nature Reserve and a Bird Sanctuary in terms of the Environment Protection Act (Cap. 549) and its inclusion in the list of Scheduled Properties as a Level 1 Area of Ecological Importance (AEI) and a Level 2 Site of Scientific Importance (SSI) under the Development Planning Act (Cap. 552). The site has also been declared as a Specially Protected Area through the Specially Protected Areas Protocol under the UN Barcelona Convention.

Additionally, the islets are also located within a marine SAC of International Importance (MT0000105 - Il-Grigal ta' Malta) and a marine SPA (MT0000112 - Żona fil-Baħar madwar Għawdex), in accordance with G.N. 682 of 2018. These designations are due to the presence of habitats and species listed in Schedules I and II of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations, 2006 (S.L. 549.44) and due to the presence of seabird species listed in Schedule I of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.22). This implies that the marine environment surrounding the islets also forms part of the EU's Natura 2000 Network.

Studies have highlighted the importance of Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl for seabirds.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) followed through the further designation of the site as an SPA under the Environment Protection Act (CAP. 549), through Regulation 10 of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) and in accordance with Schedule I of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42). These provisions are in turn linked to the EU Nature Directives.

## 3. Ecological Importance – Avifauna

The Yelkouan shearwater breeding colony on St Paul's Island was once thought to have been lost. However, it was rediscovered again in 2013 and estimated at a minimum of 30-60 pairs by BirdLife Malta, during the LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project (LIFE10 NAT/MT090).

The Yelkouan shearwater is a Mediterranean endemic seabird that spends its annual life-cycle between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas. Although this species is present all year round in Malta, it is mainly seen offshore between December and July, with largest flocks occurring between February and April. The global population of the Yelkouan shearwater is classified as 'Vulnerable' to extinction by IUCN (BirdLife International, 2018). As an archipelago located in the Central

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<sup>1</sup> BirdLife International (2020). Country profile: Malta. Available at <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/country/malta> (2025).

Mediterranean, Malta holds around 10% of the global population of the Yelkouan shearwater (BirdLife International, 2020). However, the Maltese population is facing different threats both on land and at sea that might be affecting its long-term viability.

Although migratory, breeding colonies of Yelkouan shearwater are known from caves, crevices and burrows along the coastal cliffs and boulder screes of the Maltese Islands. The breeding colony at Il-Gzejjer ta' San Pawl (Selmunett) is mostly restricted to a large cave on the north side of the island. This large cave contains several smaller nesting caves with a few accessible nests.

Recent monitoring and research related to 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 at Il-Gzejjer ta' San Pawl (Selmunett) – refer to Annex 2 of this report. The breeding population of *Puffinus yelkouan* (MT: il-garnija; EN: Yelkouan shearwater) have increased to approximately 45-75 breeding pairs<sup>2</sup>. 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 Il-Gzejjer ta' San Pawl (Selmunett) site holds approximately 3% of the breeding population of the Yelkouan shearwater found in the Maltese Islands.

The Yelkouan shearwater is listed as a species for which SPAs are to be designated in accordance with the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44), the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42), and the EU Habitats and Birds Directives. In view of this, the status of a previously designated Natura 2000 site (as an SAC) was revised and is now also recognised as an SPA, within the same existing SAC boundary.

#### **4. Pressures and Threats**

The main pressures and threats on the Yelkouan shearwater are from rat predation, with light and noise disturbance caused by coastal and maritime activity. The island hosts a rat population, with rats preying 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Austad, M., Crymble, J., Sahin, D., Greetham, H., Oppel, S., Cabello, J. S., Varnham, K., Borg, J.J., Barbara, N., Metzger, B., Lago, P., (2019). Site assessment report for Yelkouan shearwater populations in the Maltese Islands. LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija (LIFE14 NAT/MT/991) Report for Action A1 and A3. BirdLife Malta.73 pp.

## Annex 1 – Boundary for Special Protection Area designation

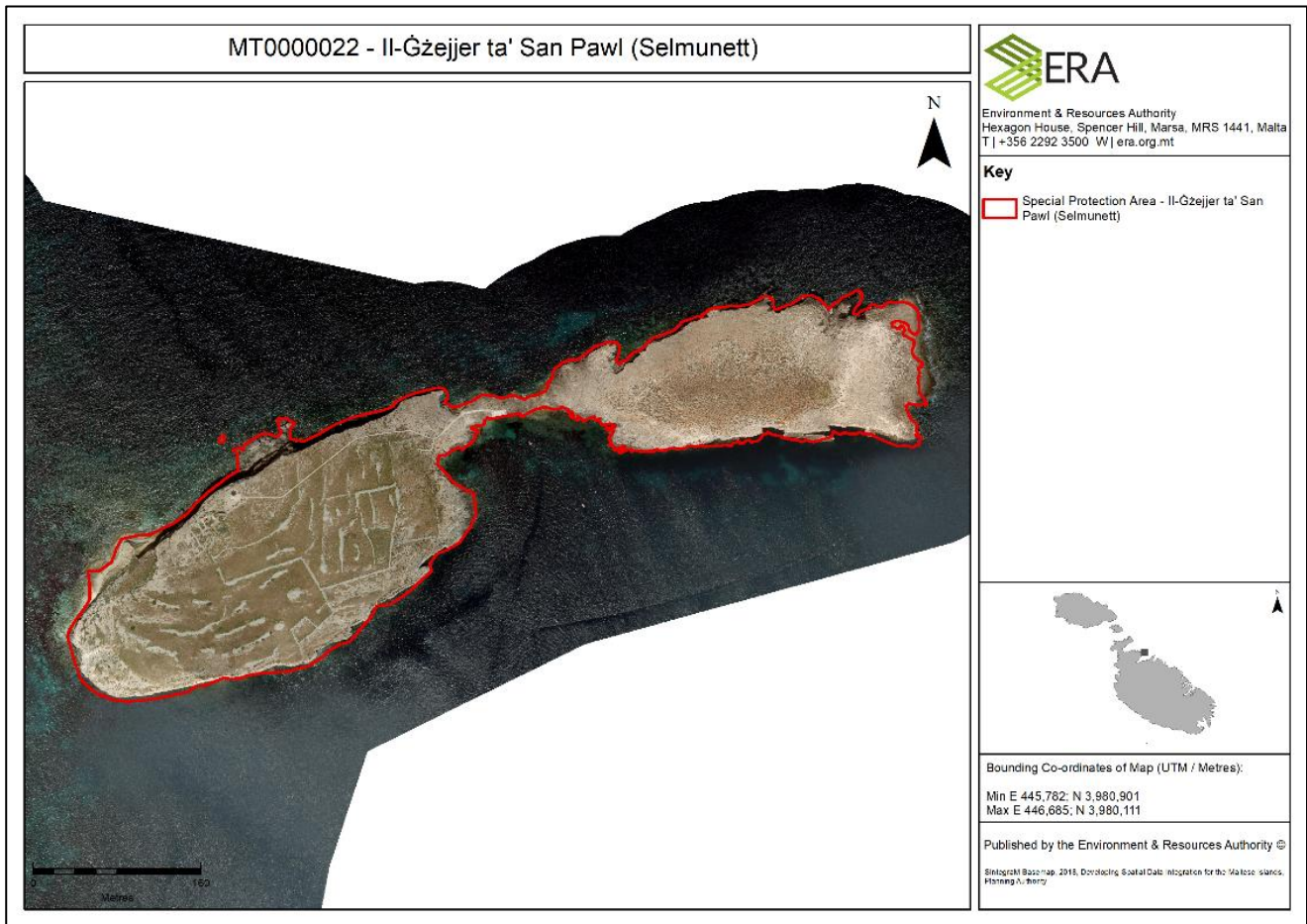


Figure 1: Il-Gżejjer ta' San Pawl (Selmunett) - Special Protection Area (SPA) site boundary

**Annex 2 – Photos of Il-Gżejjer ta’ San Pawl (Selmunett) Site**



Figure 2: Il-Gżejjer ta’ San Pawl (Selmunett) as seen from the main land

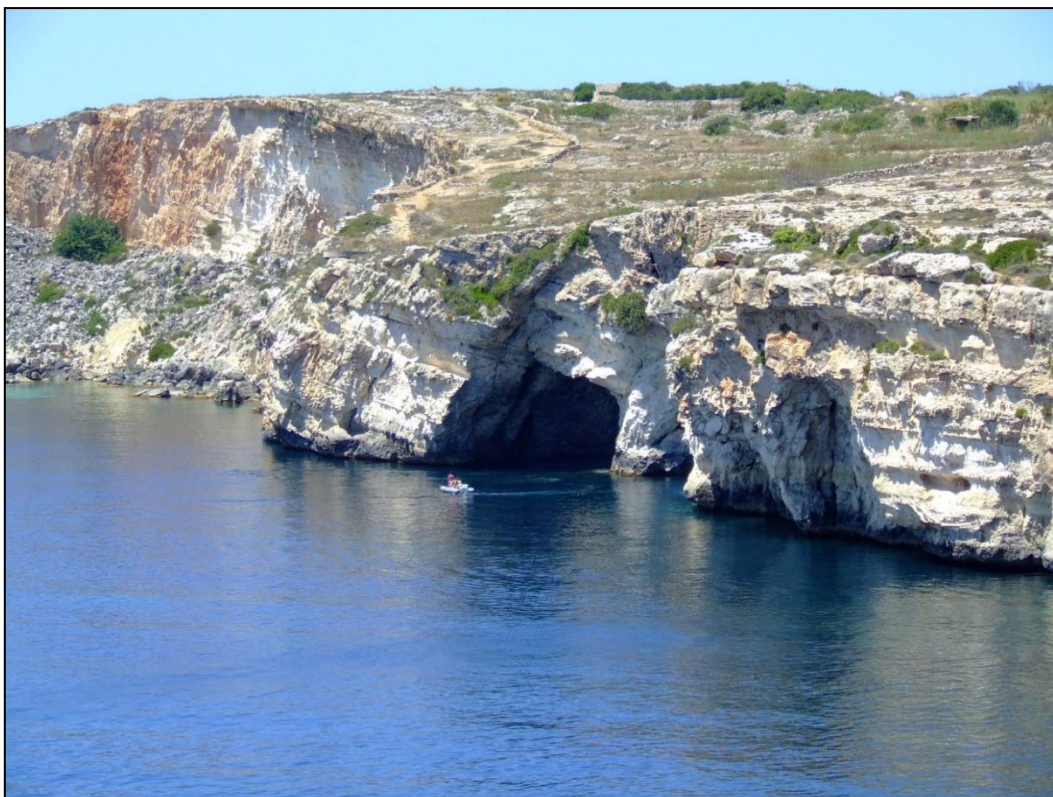


Figure 3: Vegetated sea cliffs caves at Il-Gżejjer ta’ San Pawl (Selmunett) which act as a habitat for Yelkouan shearwater breeding colonies