

2015 Press Releases

EuroBirdwatch 2015 - fascinating Bird Migration

Millions of migrating birds will leave Europe during these weeks, flying to their wintering places in Africa. BirdLife International invites people in Europe to take the opportunity on 4 October 2015 to discover the fascinating world of bird migration.

BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation organisations working in more than 120 countries, which together form the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the issues and problems affecting bird life. In Gibraltar, the local BirdLife International Partner is the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society (GONHS).

This year, the national partners of BirdLife International of 37 countries in Europe and Central Asia once again invite people to join them and learn about migrating birds. In Europe, many hundreds of activities are planned, including on the Rock.

A recent study by BirdLife International shows that 25 million (!) migratory birds are being caught around the Mediterranean annually. And after overcoming that huge hurdle, most birds still have to cross the inhospitable Sahara desert and other dangers along the way, twice a year. BirdLife partner organisations in the countries involved are making it their top priority to combat this useless killing, for which there is no excuse. Fortunately, Gibraltar stands out as a Mediterranean country where no hunting takes place.

The aim of EuroBirdwatch 2015 is to raise awareness for the wonders of bird migration and the needs of the migratory birds on the breeding areas, the flyways and in the wintering areas in the Mediterranean and in Africa. EuroBirdwatch is an annual event comprising hundreds of nationally organised activities. Last year, 38 countries in Europe and Central Asia took part in organising 1184 events, with more than 33,000 people turning out to watch and help count the birds. The numbers, when it comes to the birds, are even more staggering: almost 7,5 million birds were counted last year, the highest in the history of the event!

GONHS will be organising several events to celebrate EuroBirdwatch 2015, all of which are open to the public.

The first of these will be a bird ringing demonstration at the Gibraltar Botanic

Gardens, where migratory and other birds will be caught using mist nets and then ringed by licensed bird ringers, with specific measurements being taken, before being released back into the wild.

Later, the Raptor Unit will host a bird of prey display and the unit members will be on hand to provide further information on how each bird is cared for by the unit, which in addition to rehabilitation also breeds rare birds of prey such as the Lesser Kestrel for subsequent release into the wild.

In the afternoon, observers will be at the Europa Point Marine Observatory looking for birds (and cetaceans) in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Key times and locations (all Sunday 4th October 2013)

8am-11am Bird Ringing – up Heathfield Steps and left at the entrance to the Alameda Botanic Gardens.

10.30am-12.30pm Bird of Prey Display – between the top of Heathfield Steps and The Cottage.

Please remember that dogs are not allowed within the gardens.

3pm – 6pm - Europa Point Marine Observatory. Below and to the left of the Harding's Battery mound.

International Bat Night

International Bat Night takes place every year since 1997 in more than 30 countries.

Locally, the Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society (GONHS) is hosting this event for the eighth year, on Saturday 12th September.

Nature conservation agencies and NGOs from across Europe pass on information to the public about the way bats live and their needs with presentations, exhibitions and bat walks, often offering the opportunity to listen to bat sounds with the support of ultrasound technology. We re once again joined by our partners in the Gib-Bats Project from the Gibraltar Museum.

The event will be based in the Open Air Theatre at the Alameda Botanic Gardens, with project members on hand with ultrasonic bat detectors, through which bats' echolocation calls can be heard. Those attending the event should also be able to see flying bats, either at twilight or as they fly across lit-up areas.

This event is suitable for all, although primary and middle school pupils are usually the most enthusiastic participants. The event starts at 8pm with an informal introductory talk, which usually lasts until the first bats swoop in across the stage or over the pond.

We shall be handing out copies of a leaflet, 'Our Amazing Bats – An

Introduction to the Bats of Gibraltar', which has been kindly funded by the Ministry for the Environment. These describe the types of bats found in Gibraltar, where and how they live, what they eat and how they catch their prey, as well as aspects of their conservation.

GONHS would also like to thank the management and staff at the Alameda Botanic Gardens for allowing us to use the Open Air Theatre and for providing lighting and sound support.

For further information please email bats@gonhs.org or 'Like' the Gib-Bats Project Facebook Page at <https://www.facebook.com/GibBats> and join the event there.

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Further information - GONHS is a Partner of BatLife Europe
<http://www.batlife-europe.info/>

This is the 19th year of International Bat Night (formerly European Bat Night) held under the auspices of UNEP EUROBATS - Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats <http://www.eurobats.org/>

Balloons Release

The Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society (GONHS) has today written to the Chief Minister and the Self-Determination for Gibraltar Group in order to reiterate its opposition to the release of balloons as part of Gibraltar's National Day festivities.

GONHS has previously expressed its concerns about the environmental impact of such a massive balloon release, particularly their effect on the marine environment, where most balloons will probably end up after these become deflated.

The UK's Marine Conservation Society (MCS) has described how "Balloons are mistaken for food by many species of wildlife, especially turtles. Once balloons have been eaten they can block digestive systems and cause animals to starve. The string on balloons can also entangle and trap animals." Aside from the effect on marine life, deflated balloons litter urban and countryside spaces. Although the majority of balloons used in intentional releases are latex - also known as biodegradable balloons - even they can take several months, if not years, to break down.

For the reasons described above, GONHS has asked the Chief Minister and to the Self-Determination for Gibraltar Group (SDGG) to call for an end to this practice.

Our knowledge of the impact that such seemingly harmless actions can have on the environment has improved considerably since 1992 when the first celebrations were held, just as Gibraltarian society has evolved and matured.

We should thus be looking to celebrate our identity in a manner than is consonant with sound environmental practices.

GONHS belongs to several international bodies, including IUCN, BirdLife International, BatLife Europe and the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum. These balloon releases detract from the valuable conservation work which GONHS is carrying out locally and in partnership with these and other organisations.

The Mount: Expressions of Interest.

The Gibraltar Heritage Trust (GHT) and the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society (GONHS) are pleased to see the important historical and natural heritage area of The Mount released by the Government for expressions of interest, as per the official notice dated 13/03/15. Both organisations have, for many years, been concerned at the run down state of most of the Mount grounds and at the dilapidated state of most of its buildings. Both organisations feel that it is critical that any development of the site must be carefully managed within strict guidelines aimed at preserving and promoting the uniqueness and importance of the area.

We recognise that the Mount and its grounds provide an unparalleled opportunity for development and are mindful of the Government's vision as outlined in the invitation for expressions of interest.

In this regard, and to provide the necessary safeguards for the protection of this unique site, we would recommend that the following be taken into consideration when examining the various schemes submitted.

- The mature, natural woodland that comprises the eastern section of the property is a very important habitat, because it is one of the only remaining vestiges of woodland left in Gibraltar. This area is included within the boundary of the Gibraltar Nature Reserve and is protected by the Nature Protection Act. Any proposed development should have no impact at all on this section. Additional ecological surveys of the flora and fauna of the grounds and woodland should be carried out, so that a management plan can be implemented for this natural habitat.
- That the Mount, its grounds, gardens and buildings should be listed in Schedule A of the current and any future amendment of the Heritage Act(s). This would provide a means of ensuring the protection and preservation of all significant elements on the site. Listing would also provide a quality assurance mechanism for the kind of materials and workmanship that would eventually be deployed in any approved

redevelopment scheme.

- We would recommend, additionally, that appropriate surveys of the built environment be carried out. This would identify the significance of each element as well as highlighting those requiring immediate attention for their protection.
- That responsibility for the site should rest with one entity, with a view to achieving an integrated management approach and appropriate accountability.
- That the conditions of the Lease granted to any interested party should adequately reflect the sensitive nature of the site:
 - Permission for commercial use should be under strict guidelines with no adverse effect on the buildings, flora or fauna of the site.
 - No further development other than on the existing hard standing ground should be allowed.
 - These developments are to be low and in keeping with the character of the site. The extension of the main buildings either in expansion of footprint or in height is to be avoided, as is the demolition of any parts of the extant building, including the remaining Northern Gatehouse.
 - No detrimental access to the various areas of the site should be allowed.
 - No construction in currently landscaped or wooded areas should be allowed.
- That any scheme considered by the Government, should be subjected to a thorough feasibility study to ensure the sustainability and financial viability of such a scheme, prior to its acceptance.
- That plans for the development of the site should be subjected to a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

The Mount is a multi-faceted site with many elements requiring protection and management. However, we also recognise that the Mount and its grounds provide a unique opportunity to provide Gibraltar with a multi-purpose facility that can cater for a multiplicity of needs, the prospect of which is exciting. The point of departure for our comments above are from the standpoint that we consider the site's character is integral to its heritage value and appeal. It is crucial that any schemes proposed for the site take this into account as a key influencing factor.

Perhaps a model to be considered could be such as that used by the National Trust, where the public pays to enter the grounds and make use of the amenities within, such as for example a restaurant, exhibition or event rooms. Use of the grounds and facilities for weddings, commercial events, functions and catering would all generate income without compromising the site's

character. The redevelopment and use of this historical site needs to be based on a holistic vision with a commitment from a successful party not only to protect, preserve and restore the Mount's buildings and grounds, but also to ensure its sustainable long-term management.

Historical Summary of the Mount and its grounds:

The history of the Mount dates back to before the Great Siege (1779-83), when Major William Green (1725-1811) was posted to the Rock as Chief Engineer in 1760 to strengthen the rock's defences. In 1777 he was promoted to Colonel. Although Green's official residence was Engineer House in Engineer Lane (today the site of Hindu Temple), he also acquired a private residence. In 1775 he was granted a piece of land in the south district on the proviso that he cleared it at his own expense. There, Col. Green built his house, which he called Mount Pleasant, a name later given by the Eastern Telegraph Company for the property in South Barrack Road.

During the Great Siege the Green family often lived at Mount Pleasant, where a bomb proof shelter had been built under the southern end of the tennis court – today used as a water tank. The family moved permanently to Mount Pleasant in 1781 after Engineer House was destroyed by a bombardment. Col. Green lived at the Mount until 1783, upon which point he returned to England, after having been stationed in Gibraltar for 23 years.

Until 1785, the Admiralty Commissioner in charge of Naval Stores had lived in Irish Town, but by the end of Siege so many buildings were in ruins that the Admiralty decided to rent Mount Pleasant from Col. Green until finally buying it from him in 1797. The original Navy residence was built in 1797 and was further extended in 1811. The Navy renamed the property The Mount. Major alterations followed in 1846, the stables were built in 1859 and the property was further enlarged in 1905. The building has over the centuries been home to various Admiralty Commissioners, Senior Naval Officers, Admiral Superintendent, Flag Officers and the Commander British Forces (CBF). Altogether some 74 Senior Naval Officers.

Its grounds are home to many mature specimens and one of Gibraltar's only woodland habitats (most areas of Gibraltar were stripped of trees post Great Siege in the search for building materials). Over the centuries, visiting dignitaries to Gibraltar have planted trees, such as King George V in 1912 and as recently as Princess Anne in 2004.

Since the land and buildings were returned to the Government of Gibraltar in 1998, there have been numerous proposals for its use ranging from an International Music Conservatory to a study centre of Mediterranean Studies, to a Parador style hotel.