

Ta' Cenc, an area of international importance

Timothy J. Tabone



The Garigue at Ta' Cenc

Now that the spectre of mass development has raised its ugly head over Ta' Cenc once more, I feel compelled to highlight its enormous ecological and historical value. In this article I intend to inform the public, and in particular the people of Gozo, about some of the rare and threatened fauna and flora found in the area.

Global Important Bird Area (IBA)

The cliffs support the largest colony of Cory's Shearwaters (*Calonectris diomedea* - *ciefa*) in the Maltese Islands: 1,000 pairs; a colony of Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Puffinus yelkouan* - *garnijja*): 150-300 pairs. These two seabird breeding colonies have caused Ta' Cenc cliffs to be internationally recognised as an Important Bird Area.

Apologists for the proposed development may argue that there will be no buildings within 100 metres of the cliffs, but that is a lame argument. The shearwaters are very sensitive to light, only entering their breeding holes on moonless nights, feeding out at sea during the day.

During full moon nights, most wait until the moon has moved across the sky to the Eastern horizon before entering their nests. Hence all the light pollution from the newly built villas may well cause the breeding shearwaters to desert the area.

The cliffs also support 25 pairs of storm petrels (*Hydrobates pelagicus* - *Kancu ta' Filfla*) and eight to 10 pairs of the national bird, the Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius* - *merill*). Inland, the rocky plateau is one of the few remaining breeding areas for these declining species: the short-toed lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla* - *bilbla*); spectacled warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata* - *bufula hamra*); corn bunting (*Emberiza calandra* - *durrajsa*). All the above-mentioned species are legally protected.

Flora

The cliffs are the habitat of the following two rare endemic species: the national flower, the Maltese Rock Centaury (*Paleocyclus crassifolius* - *Widnet il-bahar*); the Maltese cliff orache (*Cremonophyton lanfrancoi* - *Bjanka ta' l-irdum*); - both legally protected. (Endemic means that they are found nowhere in the world except in the Maltese Islands).

The rocky karstland supports a wealth of locally rare wild plants, including: Southern Dwarf Iris (*Iris pseudopumila* - *bellus*), endemic to Malta, Sicily and Apulia; Maltese Squill (*Scilla sicula* - *Ghansar ikhal*), endemic to Malta and Sicily; Large Spurge (*Euphorbia characias*), very rare in Gozo, known only from Xlendi besides Ta' Cenc; *Thesium humile*, a scarce hemiparasite; Blue Millet-grass (*Piptatherum caerulegens*), endangered, known only from one locality in Malta besides Ta' Cenc; Shrubby crown-vetch (*Coronilla valentina*), infrequent in Malta and very rare in Gozo.

Also present are good numbers of very fine rock pools which support Mediterranean starfruit (*Damasonium bourgaei*), which is very rare and declining, and the endemic Maltese Horned Pondweed (*Zannichellia melitensis*).

The following two locally endangered species are found nowhere in the Maltese Islands except at Ta' Cenc: Sand Vipers - Bugloss (*Echium subulicola*); Common spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes* - *felci rqiqq*).

It must be said that Ta' Cenc has never been thoroughly investigated and so we only know of a fraction of all the flora and fauna present. Just to give an idea of how much remains to be found, the above-mentioned

Asplenium trichomanes had not been seen for 80 years and was thought to be extinct until I rediscovered it last October.

Archaeology

Ta' Cenc is one of the few places in Gozo where one can find cart ruts. Also present are the Borg ta' I-Imramma remains from the Temple Period (4100 BC - 2500 BC) and Bronze-Age dolmens.

The intended development

A mega-project of 49 bungalows, 67 villas and a new hotel, basically an entire village as large as Valletta and Floriana put together, would definitely wipe out the vastest wilderness area in Gozo and greatly impoverish our wildlife. And there are rumours of the eventual creation of a golf course too, though so far there is no development application for that.

May I suggest that Ta' Cenc is a prime area for developing the local honey industry, due to the extensive population of wild thyme (*Thymbra capitata* - saghtar) present. That would be an environment-friendly economic development, since bee colonies depend on intact stretches of wild garigue vegetation. Also, the area in question is one of the best in our country for ecotourism and cultural tourism.

During the summer months, groups of tourists may be guided to the cliffs at night to listen to and watch the hundreds of seabirds coming in. I have been there several times myself and it is a breathtaking experience. Tourists may also be shown the endemic flora and archaeological ruins. Hence the government ought to declare the whole area a heritage park and outlaw any further development.

Timothy J. Tabone is a freelance researcher on the botany and ethnobotany of the Maltese Islands. He is currently compiling a monograph on the ethnoflora.

[Print article](#) | [Back to article](#)