

31st March 2020

**Honorable Prime Minister
Dr Robert Abela
Office of the Prime Minister
Auberge de Castille
Valletta VLT 1061
Malta**

Dear Prime Minister Abela,

On behalf of BirdLife International allow me to congratulate you for your recent election to be Malta's Prime Minister, but also share our immense solidarity during these times where the COVID-19 pandemic has put all of us on crisis mode.

I understand today is Freedom Day in Malta. While we may not be feeling very free given the circumstances, I wish you and the Maltese a happy Freedom Day. Freedom is a great accomplishment and one we also wish to see protected for our birds and nature in general.

BirdLife International is the largest Partnership for Nature on the planet with over 115 organisations (NGOs) around the world that strive to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife is widely recognised as the world leader in bird and nature conservation with rigorous science informed by practical experience from projects on the ground in important sites and habitats. Our local to global nature enables us to implement successful conservation actions for birds and all nature, and our actions are providing both practical and sustainable solutions significantly benefiting nature and people.

BirdLife Malta is one of the oldest partners in our family, formed in 1962, when legislation and cultural attitudes in the country of Malta were letting nature down. We are so pleased to see the improvements achieved in Malta and Gozo in this respect. As much as the government has played an important role in this success, one has to give credit to Birdlife Malta for their professionalism in managing nature reserves, for their foresight in a well-designed educational strategy, for their perseverance in getting necessary legislation enacted, and for their communication skills to enable the people to understand the beauty and importance of the natural environment in order to be its main safe keepers.

Unfortunately, I got the news that your Government is considering opening a hunting season in the weeks to come. While this contradicts drastically what Europe is promoting amidst the COVID 19 crisis and the visionary Green Deal, I find it baffling that a progressive party like yours resists change in favour of nature, in particular bird protection. One surely needs to be courageous to bring about change which might effect a very noisy lobby.

However, these are precisely the leadership that our planet needs at this time when brave decisions need to be taken, and surely some that could showcase the strength of your vision for your mandate and the legacy you would like to leave by which people will remember you.

One can clearly debate for days on end about derogations from the EU Birds and Habitats directives, but at the end of the day it is the law enforcing efficiency that will determine how well a country does in preserving its biodiversity. With the dramatic consequences COVID 19 is having in Europe, what resources could Malta possibly have to safeguard and control a spring hunting derogation as stipulated by law. I wish you could listen to the plea of thousands of our supporters of nature and of BirdLife Malta and decide not to open a spring hunting season this year.

We also share BirdLife Malta's concern on the upwards trend of illegally shot protected birds especially during migration in Malta. Please remember that the whole pandemic started because of governments not enforcing wildlife trade regulations. We join their plea towards your Government to seriously tackle this issue by setting up of a section within the Police Force which is solely dedicated at stopping wildlife crime, while working closely with the Environment Resource Authority. We understand that law amendments in the past seven years have led to a weaker legislative structure and this also needs to be revised.

The BirdLife International partnership is united in support to BirdLife Malta in getting their message across to you and trusts that you will ensure their requests are listened to and actioned upon. Make us and the future generations proud, Prime Minister. You have the opportunity to set up an example that not only Malta and Europe will admire, but the rest of the world, precisely now that because of the pandemic, people are starting to review our relationship with our planet. I wish you a successful and effective leadership of a country that attracts the admiration from various sectors, even if it still lacks behind on certain environmental issues.

Kind regards



Patricia Zurita
CEO
BirdLife International

Cc: Mark Sultana CEO BirdLife Malta
Nada Tosheva Director BirdLife Europe and Central Asia