

## Short communication

# Nesting of the Spotless Starling, *Sturnus unicolor*, on the island of Favignana (Aegadian Islands, Sicily)

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**Abstract** - The presence of the Spotless Starling in Sicily was reported for the first time at the beginning of the XIX century, although the first nests for the province of Trapani are reported almost at the end of the XX century. As a breeder, the Spotless Starling remained absent from all the circumsicilian islands until the first report for the island of Pantelleria, in 2012. In 2020, the nest of Spotless Starling was observed on the island of Favignana, within a hole on an antenna. The couple fed the chicks with *Ligia italica* crustacean isopod of the family Ligiidae. The nesting on the island of Favignana confirms the continuous expansion of the species in Sicily.

**Key words:** *Ligia italica*, isopod, diet.

**Riassunto** - Nidificazione dello storno nero, *Sturnus unicolor* Temmink, 1820, sull'isola di Favignana (Isole Egadi, Sicilia).

La presenza dello storno nero in Sicilia fu segnalata per la prima volta all'inizio del XIX secolo, anche se le prime nidificazioni per la provincia di Trapani vengono segnalate quasi alla fine del XX secolo. Come nidificante lo storno nero rimane assente da tutte le isole minori circumsiciliane fino alla prima segnalazione per l'isola di Pantelleria, avvenuta nel 2012. Nel 2020 è stata accertata la nidificazione dello storno nero sull'isola di Favignana all'interno di un foro di un'antenna per le telecomunicazioni. La coppia ha alimentato i pulcini anche con *Ligia italica* crostaceo isopode della famiglia Ligiidae. Questa nuova nidificazione sull'isola di Favignana conferma la continua espansione dell'areale di questa specie in Sicilia.

**Parole chiave:** *Ligia italica*, isopodi, alimentazione.

The Spotless Starling (*Sturnus unicolor* Temmink, 1820) is a monotypic species with Mediterranean distribution, mostly sedentary, and its breeding range usually

overlaps with its wintering range (Bricchetti & Fracasso, 2013). Its geographical distribution includes the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, South France, Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily, but formerly also the Balearic Islands (Bricchetti & Fracasso, 2013).

In Sicily, according to Doderlein (1873), Palazzotto was the first, in 1818, to observe it on the Madonie Mts. and to consider this species as accidental visitor to the island. However, the species was described shortly thereafter by Temmink in 1820.

This species was believed to be widespread in the southern central part and the southeast of the main island (Benoit, 1840), and absent in the Trapani province (Doderlein, 1871; Sorci *et al.*, 1973; Massa, 1985). The rare observations in this province (Steinbacher, 1955, 1956; Burgio, 1977) have been attributed to erratism. The first nestings, highly localized, around Trapani were in 1985 (Lo Valvo *et al.*, 1993), and their localization expanded in this province in the following years (AA. VV., 2008), eventually colonizing Isola Grande (Surdo *et al.*, 2017).

About the small islands around Sicily, reports state that the Spotless Starling does not nest there (Sorci *et al.*, 1973; Massa, 1985). The rare observations on the island of Pantelleria between 1955 (Steinbacher, 1956; Moltoni, 1973) and 2002 (Massa *et al.*, 2015), and sightings probably from the late nineteenth century and reported with doubts by Sommier (1908) based on information obtained from E. H. Giglioli, and the observation in 2009 (Massa *et al.*, 2015) on Lampedusa Island have been attributed to cases of erratism.

As a breeding species, the Spotless Starling is absent from the small islands (AA.VV., 2008; Bricchetti & Fracasso, 2013) at least until summer 2012, when Corso *et al.* (2012) observed two pairs of Spotless Starlings with six juveniles on the island of Pantelleria.

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, during a seabird census session on the island of Favignana, a pair of Spotless Starlings was observed while nesting in a hole on an antenna (Fig. 1), adjacent to the lighthouse of Punta Marsala (WGS 1984 - UTM 33N 268354 E 4198775 N).

The island is the biggest of the Aegadian Islands, about 7 km from the western coast of Sicily. The site is bordered by a prairie of uncultivated lands to the northeast and the reef of Cala Azzurra to the southwest.

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Fig. 1 - Nest of Spotless Starling in a hole on an antenna / Nido di storno nero nella cavità di un'antenna. (Photo: / Foto: M. Lo Valvo).

During our visit to Favignana, we observed one of the individuals feeding the chicks in the nest with several specimens of *Ligia italica* Fabricius, 1798 (Fig. 2), a marine isopod crustacean of the Ligiidae family widespread on the coast of this Sicilian island and on Sicily itself (Caruso, 1973; Pezzino, 2014), preyed on inside the cavities of the rocks.



Fig. 2 - Adult Spotless Starling with several specimens of *Ligia italica* / Un adulto di storno nero trasporta nel becco diversi esemplari di *Ligia italica*. (Photo: / Foto: M. Lo Valvo).

According to Brichetti & Fracasso (2013), the Spotless Starling has an omnivorous diet which includes larvae of different orders of insects, other invertebrates of different classes and small vertebrates (Amphibians, Reptiles and Mammals). Fruits and seeds, including cultivated varieties, also enrich their diet. Cramp & Perrins (1994) already reported Crustacea Isopoda in the diet of Spotless Starling.

The nesting on the island of Favignana confirms the continuous expansion of the species in Sicily, favored by a more complex road network, with numerous viaducts (AA.VV., 2008) under which the starling nests in great numbers, and which facilitates the connection between Sicilian vines, and olive and citrus trees, all suitable habitats for its survival.

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