INTRODUCTION

Ponds and other small reservoirs of artificial water play an important role in the ecology of many bird species, especially if placed in dry habitats or agricultural ecosystems and often represent a valid alternative to natural environments (Lo Valvo et al., 1993; La Mantia, 1997; Ma et al., 2004; Barbera et al., 2005; Sánchez-Zapata et al., 2005; Kloskowski et al., 2009; Sebastián-González et al., 2010). They are used by birds for trophic requirements and activities related to reproduction, and, often, by migratory species, as a stopover (Mascara, 1990; Guillemain et al., 2000; Castillo-Guerrero & Carmona, 2001). More generally, small pools of water allow some flora and fauna to settle in these peculiar environments where optimal conditions for development of these species occur. The present study provides a contribution to the understanding of these small and peculiar environments, and, moreover report new data useful to improve our knowledge of the avifauna of the SIC-ITA 070005 “Bosco di Santo Pietro” (Sicily, Italy).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The artificial pond under study is located in the Caltagirone Municipality (Sicily, Italy) in the context of an agricultural environment represented by a productive olive grove endowed by trees the trunk diameter of which is 50 cm maximum. The pond was created in 2006 with an area of 9 square meters and a maximum depth of 25 cm; the presence of water is permanent due to the continuous inputs of fresh water through a pipe connected to a reservoir; the entire pond-perimeter is naturalized with big stones, twigs, and naturally grown herbaceous riparian vegetation.

The adjacent environment is characterized by almond and olive cultivated trees, *Eucalyptus* spp. and small pine (*Pinus pinea*) artificially planted trees and natural and semi-natural oak woods of the Site of Community Importance known as “Riserva Naturale Orientata Regionale del Bosco di Santo Pietro” (SIC –ITA 070005).

Census of birds that used, for various reasons, the artificial pond took place from the early months of 2006 up to July 2011; observations were made, monthly, from a bird-watching shed placed at 5 m from the pond shores.

For all surveyed species, a systematic list and ecological notes are provided. Species breeding in Sicily were obtained from recent literature (AA.VV., 2008) supplemented with personal observations; for “the Species’ Value” (total value standardized in cents) see Brichetti & Gariboldi (1992); for the Red List of breeding species see the...
list provided by LIPU-WWF (1999); the checklist used is that by Baccetti et al. (2005, 2008). The following protection lists were used:

- SPEC Categories (on the conservation status of breeding birds all over Europe):
  - SPEC 1. Species of global conservation concern, i.e. classified as Globally Threatened, Near Threatened or Data Deficient (BirdLife International 2004; IUCN, 2004; IUCN, 2008).
  - SPEC 2. Species concentrated in Europe and with an Unfavourable Conservation Status.
  - SPEC 3. Species not concentrated in Europe but with an Unfavourable Conservation Status.
  - Non-SPEC. Species concentrated in Europe but with a Favourable Conservation Status.
  - Non-SPEC. Species not concentrated in Europe and with a Favourable Conservation Status.
  - W indicates that the category relates to the winter population.
- The Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, 1979 (Appendices I and II)
- The Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats 1979 with Appendix II (strictly protected fauna species) and Appendix III (protected fauna species).

RESULTS

List of species

Order FALCONIFORMES

Family ACCIPITRIDAE

_Buteo buteo_ (Linnaeus, 1758)
Buzzard. This species is sedentary and occasionally visit the pond and frequent the area for food; it was observed perched on a perimeter-post. A pair breeds in the neighbour woods.

_Falco tinnunculus_ Linnaeus, 1758
Kestrel. Sedentary species, frequent the pond for cleaning of the plumage (Fig. 1). A pair nests in the area that is frequented also for food.

Order CARADRIFORMES

Family BURHINIDAE

_Burhinus oedicnemus_ (Linnaeus, 1758)
Stone-curlew. Sedentary species, rarely attend the pond to clean the feathers. Specimens breed in the adjacent area.

Order COLUMBIFORMES

Family COLUMBIDAE

_Columba livia_ Gmelin, 1789 domestic type, i.e. _Columba livia var. domestica_
Rock Pigeon. Sedentary, attend the pond and the adjacent area for food, and cleaning of the plumage.

_Columba palumbus_ Linnaeus, 1758
Wood Pigeon. Sedentary, attend the pond as well as the adjacent area, for food, and cleaning of the plumage (Fig. 2). Specimens breed in the olive grove where the pond is located in. Both adults and young were observed.

_Streptopelia turtur_ (Linnaeus, 1758)
Turtle Dove. Summer breeding species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage (Fig. 3). Specimens breed in the olive grove where the pond is located in. Both adults and young were observed.

_Streptopelia decaocto_ (Frivaldszky, 1838)
Eurasian Collared Dove. Sedentary species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage. Both adults and young were observed.

Order CORACIFORMES

Family MEROPIDAE

_Merops apiaster_ Linnaeus, 1758
European Bee-eater. Summer breeding species, frequent the pond for food, with family groups comprising a maximum of 35 individuals, from mid-August to late September. In the neighborhood there are some hives and a garden of Mediterranean plants, very attractive for wasps and other insects.

Family UPUPIDAE

_Upupa epops_ Linnaeus, 1758
Hoopoe. Summer breeding species, frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and nest
in the olive trees; breeding was observed in 2006 and 2008. Nests were placed in hollow trunks of large trees, a few cm above the ground (Fig. 4).

Order PICIFORMES
Family PICIDAE

*Dendrocopos major* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Great Spotted Woodpecker. Sedentary species, rarely attend the pond to clean the feathers. Specimens breed in the adjacent forest.

Order PASSERIFORMES
Family ALAUDIDAE

*Calandrella brachydactyla* (Leisler, 1814)
Greater Short-toed Lark. Migrant species, breeding in Sicily (AA.VV., 2008), irregularly observed in the area adjacent to the pond in April.

Family HIRUNDINIDAE

*Hirundo rustica* Linnaeus, 1758
Barn Swallow. Summer breeding species, attends the pond for food and for finding material necessary for nests making (Fig. 5). Individuals breed in the buildings of the nearby area.

Family MOTACILLIDAE

*Motacilla alba* Linnaeus, 1758
White Wagtail. Wintering species, nesting in Sicily (AA.VV., 2008), frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage.

*Anthus pratensis* Linnaeus, 1758
Meadow Pipit. Wintering and migrant species, frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. The first arrivals were recorded at the end of October of these years; at least twelve migrating individuals were observed on February 10th 2008.

Family TURDIDAE

*Turdus merula* Linnaeus, 1758
Blackbird. Sedentary species, rarely attend the pond to clean the feathers. Specimens breed in the adjacent forest.

*Turdus philomelos* Brehm, 1831
Song Thrush. Wintering species, frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage.

Family SYLVIIDAE

*Hippolais polyglotta* (Vieillot, 1817)
Melodious Warbler. Migrant species, irregularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. It was observed in September of these years.

*Phylloscopus trochilus* Linnaeus, 1758
Willow Warbler. Migrant species, irregularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. It was observed always in September.

*Phylloscopus collybita* (Vieillot, 1817)
Common Chiffchaff. Wintering and migratory species, regularly frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage.

*Sylvia atricapilla* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Blackcap. Summer breeding species, migrant, partially sedentary. Specimens regularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage and breed in the adjacent woods. At least ten migrating individuals were observed in March 30th 2008.

*Sylvia borin* Boddaert, 1783
Garden Warbler. Nesting of this species in Sicily was mentioned but never proved yet (Corso, 2005; AA.VV., 2008). Birds regularly attend the pond for cleaning of the plumage and are is presumed to nest in the area and in the adjacent forests. It was regularly observed from June to August of these years (Fig. 6).

*Sylvia communis* Latham, 1787
Greater Whitetroat. Summer breeding species, regularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage; specimens breed in the forests of the natural reserve.

*Sylvia cantillans* (Pallas, 1784)
Subalpine Warbler. Summer breeding species, irregularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage; specimens nest in the forests of the natural reserve.

*Sylvia melanocephala* (Gmelin, 1789)
Sardinian Warbler. Sedentary species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage (Fig. 7). Specimens breed in the area and adjacent woods. Both adults and young birds were regularly observed.
Figure 1. *Falco tinnunculus*.
Figure 2. *Columba palumbus*.
Figure 3. *Streptopelia turtur*.
Figure 4. *Upupa epops*.
Figure 5. *Hirundo rustica*.
Family MUSCICAPIDAE

*Muscicapa striata* (Pallas, 1764)
Spotted Flycatcher. Migrant species, breeding in Sicily (AA.VV., 2008), regularly frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. It was observed both in spring and autumn of these years.

*Ficedula albicollis* Temminck, 1815
Collared Flycatcher. Migrant species, irregularly attend the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. It was observed always in April.

*Erithacus rubecula* Linnaeus, 1758
European Robin. Wintering species, breeding in Sicily (AA.VV., 2008), frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded in the second half of October of these years.

*Phoenicurus ochruros* (Gmelin, 1774)
Black Redstart. Migrant, wintering and breeding species, frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded at the end (in the third decade) of October of these years.

*Saxicola rubetra* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Whinchat. Migrant species; it was observed in the second week of January 2007 (Fig. 8).

*Saxicola torquatus* Linnaeus, 1766
African Stonechat. Sedentary species, rarely attend the pond for cleaning; specimens breed in the adjacent area.

Family AEGITHALIDAE

*Aegithalos caudatus siculus* Whitaker, 1901
Long-tailed Tit. Regularly attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage, specimens breed in the adjacent woods. Families were constantly observed from June to August (Fig. 9).

Family PARIDAE

*Periparus ater* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Coal Tit. In the adjacent area it is an irregular migrant species, in the pond area it was observed always in the third decade of October.

*Parus major* Linnaeus, 1758
Great Tit. Sedentary species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in the adjacent woods. Breeding individuals used nest boxes placed in the olive grove. Both adults and young birds were regularly observed.

*Cyanistes caeruleus* Linnaeus, 1758
Blue Tit. Sedentary species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in cavities and cracks of buildings and in the adjacent woods (Fig. 10). Both adults and young birds were regularly observed.

Family CERTHIIDAE

*Certhia brachydactyla* Brehm, 1820
Short-toed Treecreeper. Sedentary species, attend the pond for food and for cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods and, in addition, used nest boxes placed in the olive grove (Fig. 11). Both adults and young birds were regularly observed.

Family ORIOLIDAE

*Oriolus oriolus* Linnaeus, 1758
Eurasian Golden Oriole. Migrant and summer breeding species, irregularly attend the pond for drinking and the adjacent area for food; specimens breed in the forests of the natural reserve.

Family CORVIDAE

*Garrulus glandarius* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Eurasian Jay. Sedentary, common species, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage (Fig. 12). Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Both adults and young birds were regularly observed in groups of 6-8 individuals.

*Pica pica* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Eurasian Magpie. Sedentary species, common, frequent the pond for food, cleaning of the plumage and finding material necessary for nest building (Fig. 13). Specimens breed in the adjacent area. Both adults and young birds were regularly observed in groups of 8-10 individuals.

*Corvus cornix* Linnaeus, 1758
Hooded Crow. Sedentary species, rarely attend the pond to drink. Specimens nest in the adjacent area.
Figure 6. *Sylvia borin*.
Figure 7. *Sylvia melanocephala*.
Figure 8. *Saxicola rubetra*.
Figure 9. *Aegithalos caudatus siculus*.
Figure 10. *Cyanistes caeruleus*.
Figure 11. *Certhia brachydactyla*.
Family STURNIDAE

*Sturnus vulgaris* Linnaeus, 1758
European Starling. Wintering species, breeding in SE Sicily (see Lo Valvo et al., 1993), along with *Sturnus unicolor*, a few individuals frequent the pond and the adjacent area for food and for cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded in October of these years.

*Sturnus unicolor* Temminck, 1820
Spotless Starling. Sedentary species, common, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Adults and young birds were regularly observed in groups of 15-20 individuals.

Family PASSERIDAE

*Passer domesticus italiae* (Vieillot, 1817)
House Sparrow. Uncommon species, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. The systematics of this species and its presence in Sicily are controversial (Corso, 2005; AA.VV., 2008).

*Passer hispaniolensis* (Temminck, 1820)
Spanish Sparrow. Sedentary species, common, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Adults and young birds were constantly observed in groups of 8-10 individuals.

*Passer montanus* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Tree Sparrow. Sedentary species, common, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. Nesting individuals used nest boxes placed in the olive grove (Fig. 14). Adults and young birds were regularly observed in groups of 25-30 individuals.

Family FRINGILLIDAE

*Fringilla coelebs* Linnaeus, 1758
Chaffinch. Wintering and breeding in Sicily, uncommon, a few individual attend the pond and the olive grove for food and cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded last week of October of these years.

*Fringilla montifringilla* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Brambling. Irregular migrant species. It was observed in the second decade of March of these years, one single specimen at a time (Fig. 15).

*Carduelis chloris* (Linnaeus, 1758)
European Greenfinch. Wintering species, not common, breeding in Sicily; a few individuals frequent the pond and the olive grove for food and for cleaning of the plumage, along with other species of finches.

*Carduelis spinus* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Eurasian Siskin. Wintering and migrant species, common, more abundant in the winter of some years rather than in others. Specimens attend the pond and the olive grove for food and for cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded in last week of October and, in the spring, from February to the first decade of April of these years. This species nests on Mount Etna (CT, Sicily) (AA.VV., 2008).

*Carduelis carduelis* (Linnaeus, 1758)
European Goldfinch. Sedentary species, common, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Adults and young birds were regularly observed in family groups.

*Carduelis cannabina* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Eurasian Linnet. Sedentary species, uncommon, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. Specimens breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Adults and young birds were constantly observed in family groups.

*Serinus serinus* Linnaeus, 1766
European Serin. Sedentary species, common, with a few wintering individuals; specimens attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage, and breed in the area and in adjacent woods. Adults and young birds were constantly observed in family groups and in groups of 30-40 individuals, with other finches.

*Coccothraustes coccothraustes* (Linnaeus, 1758)
Hawfinch. Wintering species, uncommon, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. From one to three individuals were observed in January and February of these years (Fig. 16).

Family EMBERIZIDAE

*Emberiza cirlus* Linnaeus, 1758
Cirl Bunting. Sedentary species, uncommon, attend the pond for drinking and cleaning of the plumage. First arrivals were recorded last week of October of these years.
Figure 12. Garrulus glandarius.
Figure 13. Pica pica.
Figure 14. Passer montanus.
Figure 15. Fringilla montifringilla.
Figure 16. Coccothraustes coccothraustes.
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Table 1. Conservation Status of birds according to the most important national and international protection lists (see Material and Methods; VU=Vulnerable, LR= rare).
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

First observations on the use of the pond by sedentary avifauna occurring in the area, for biocological activities of various kinds, were immediately made, a few days after the pond realization. In particular, Magpie, Sparrows (Spanish Sparrow and Tree Sparrow) and finches (Goldfinch and Serin) were the first users.

After four years, there have been many contacts (fifty-three species were observed) and nearly all of them were photographically documented. These species used the pond mainly for cleaning of the plumage, for food and drink, but also for getting the material necessary for nest construction (dried grass, twigs and mud).

For each surveyed species respective lists of protection, when present, are listed in Table 1. Despite of the small size of the habitat under investigation and taking into account that observations were made only on bird populations, the ecological role of this small artificial pond, also in relation to its surroundings, is markedly clear.

This preliminary study may be useful to stimulate close inspection and careful monitoring of these particular areas, especially in a region such as Sicily, particularly rich in extensive arid areas or great deal of land used for agricultural purposes.

REFERENCES


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