



## UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2012-2013 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme of illegal bird trapping in Cyprus and providing an overview of the latest developments regarding the problem

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## Περίληψη

Η παρούσα αναφορά παρουσιάζει τα τελευταία ευρήματα του συνεχόμενου και συστηματικού προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του Πτηνολογικού Συνδέσμου Κύπρου για το χειμώνα 2012-2013, ενώ παράλληλα δίνει και μια σύνοψη για το έτος 2012. Επισημαίνεται ότι η αναφορά αυτή έχει ως κύριο στόχο τους υπεύθυνους στα κέντρα λήψης αποφάσεων και τους πολιτικούς, με σκοπό την ενημέρωση, την ευαισθητοποίηση και την κινητοποίηση για πιο αποτελεσματική δράση για αντιμετώπιση αυτού του οικολογικού προβλήματος, το οποίο έχει αυξηθεί δραματικά τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Η ανάλυση των δεδομένων της έρευνας πεδίου έδειξε ότι τα επίπεδα παγίδευσης με δίχτυα για το χειμώνα 2012-2013 μειώθηκαν κατά 40% σε σύγκριση με τον περσινό χειμώνα, τα χαμηλότερα που καταγράφηκαν από το 2007, έτος που ξεκίνησαν οι χειμερινές καταγραφές του Πτηνολογικού. Μια παρόμοια εικόνα παρατηρήθηκε για τη χειμερινή παγίδευση πουλιών σε περιοχές με διαφορετικές δικαιοδοσίες. Τόσο σε περιοχές της Κυπριακής Δημοκρατίας όσο και στις Βάσεις καταγράφηκε μείωση πάνω από 30% για το χειμώνα 2012-2013 σε σύγκριση με το χειμώνα 2011-2012. Ωστόσο, σημειώνεται ότι η παγίδευση πτηνών με δίχτυα στις Βάσεις παρέμεινε ψηλότερη (κατά 3 φορές) σε σύγκριση με τη Δημοκρατία αυτό το χειμώνα.

Είναι ενθαρρυντικό ότι καταγράφηκε μειωμένη παγίδευση αυτό το χειμώνα σε σύγκριση με τους προηγούμενους χειμώνες, ιδιαίτερα μετά το καταστροφικό φθινόπωρο του 2012. Οι προσπάθειες πάταξης αυξήθηκαν τους δύο τελευταίους μήνες του 2012 (Νοέμβριο και Δεκέμβριο), ιδιαίτερα σε σχέση με επιδρομές κατά εστιατορίων που σερβίρουν παγιδευμένα πουλιά παράνομα. Οι επιδρομές αυτές πραγματοποιήθηκαν σε διάφορες επαρχίες και αρκετοί ιδιοκτήτες εστιατορίων διώχθηκαν για παράνομο εμπόριο πουλιών. Πιθανόν αυτές οι επιδρομές να επηρέασαν αποτρεπτικά σε κάποιο βαθμό τη χειμερινή παγίδευση. Εξίσου σημαντική ήταν η χαμηλή άφιξη τσιχλών, οι οποίες διαχειμάζουν στην Κύπρο και αποτελούν τον κύριο στόχο των παράνομων παγιδευτών, κάτι που πιθανόν να αποτέλεσε σημαντικό παράγοντα για τα μειωμένα επίπεδα παγίδευσης που παρατηρήθηκαν.

Παρά τα μειωμένα επίπεδα παγίδευσης που καταγράφηκαν για την άνοιξη του 2012 και για το χειμώνα 2012-2013, η κύρια περίοδος παγίδευσης του περασμένου έτους, το φθινόπωρο, διαμορφώθηκε για ακόμα μια φορά σε οικολογική καταστροφή, με τα επίπεδα παγίδευσης να φτάνουν σε επίπεδα ρεκόρ για τα τελευταία 11 έτη, από τότε που ξεκίνησε το πρόγραμμα παρακολούθησης. Συνολικά εκτιμάται ότι τα επίπεδα παγίδευσης για το έτος 2012 (συμπεριλαμβανομένου της άνοιξης 2012, του φθινοπώρου 2012 και του χειμώνα 2012-2013) ήταν αρκετά για να σκοτώσουν σχεδόν 2,5 εκατομμύρια πουλιά σε όλη την Κύπρο. Παρόλο που αυτό παραμένει μια εκτίμηση, αναδεικνύει τη μεγάλη κλίμακα της θανάτωσης αποδημητικών πτηνών που λαμβάνει χώρα, μια εικόνα που παρατηρείται δυστυχώς τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Η κατάσταση της παγίδευσης των τελευταίων χρόνων είναι πολύ απογοητευτική και απειλεί να ανατρέψει όλα τα θετικά αποτελέσματα που επιτεύχθηκαν κατά την περίοδο 2004-2006,

όταν η παγίδευση είχε μειωθεί σημαντικά . Επιπλέον, ο Πτηνολογικός Σύνδεσμος Κύπρου πιστεύει ότι η Κυπριακή Δημοκρατία έχασε μια τέλεια ευκαιρία για να αποδείξει στα άλλα κράτη μέλη της ΕΕ την αποφασιστικότητά της για αντιμετώπιση του θέματος αυτού στη ρίζα του, ιδιαίτερα αφού η Κύπρος φιλοξένησε την Ευρωπαϊκή Προεδρία για το δεύτερο εξάμηνο του 2012.

Αναφορικά με την πάταξη της παγίδευσης κατά τη διάρκεια του χρόνου, αναγνωρίζονται οι προσπάθειες των αρμοδίων αρχών και παρά τους περιορισμένους πόρους τους, κατασχέθηκαν εκατοντάδες δίχτυα και χιλιάδες ξόβεργα. Επίσης έγιναν δεκάδες συλλήψεις σχετικά με την παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Είναι προφανές ότι το προσωπικό των αρχών δεν είναι πλέον αρκετό για να αντιμετωπίσει τη δραματική αύξηση της παγίδευσης πουλιών και ότι επιβάλλεται η ενίσχυση των αρμοδίων αρχών για εφαρμογή της υποσχόμενης ‘μηδενική ανοχής’. Την ίδια στιγμή , ο Πτηνολογικός πιστεύει ότι με περαιτέρω προσωπικό, καλύτερο συντονισμό και περισσότερες στοχευμένες δράσεις οι αρμόδιες αρχές μπορούν να λειτουργήσουν αποτρεπτικά.

Επιπλέον επιβάλλεται περαιτέρω πάταξη κατά των εστιατορίων που προσφέρουν αμπελοπούλια παράνομα, τα οποία αποτελούν το πιο σημαντικό οικονομικό κίνητρο αυτής της δραστηριότητας. Ωστόσο, για να συμβεί αυτό, χρειάζεται πραγματική πολιτική βούληση που θα αντιμετωπίζει το πρόβλημα στη ρίζα του, με περισσότερη πάταξη του φαινομένου στο πεδίο και κατά των εστιατορίων. Στο στόχαστρο πρέπει να μπει και η υλοποίηση μιας μεγάλης ενημερωτικής εκστρατείας, που στόχο θα έχει το αδιάφορο ευρύτερο κοινό, το οποίο σε μεγάλο βαθμό δεν γνωρίζει για τη μη-επιλεκτική φύση της παγίδευσης και τη θανάτωση αποδημητικών πουλιών σε μεγάλη κλίμακα.

Η αναφορά αυτή χωρίζεται στα ακόλουθα κεφάλαια:

- Κεφάλαιο 1 παρουσιάζει μια σύνοψη της παγίδευσης πουλιών στην Κύπρο, δίνει κάποια ιστορικά στοιχεία αυτής της δραστηριότητας, κάνει αναφορά στην εθνική νομοθεσία όσον αφορά την προστασία των πτηνών και παρουσιάζει τη τρέχουσα κατάσταση,
- Κεφάλαιο 2 παρουσιάζει το πρόγραμμα παρακολούθησης του Πτηνολογικού Συνδέσμου Κύπρου, και
- Κεφάλαιο 3 παρουσιάζει τα αποτελέσματα, τη συζήτηση και τις προτάσεις για τη συνέχεια.

## Summary

This report presents the latest findings of the ongoing and systematic BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme on illegal bird trapping, relating to the winter 2012-2013 season, while also providing an overview for all of 2012. It is highlighted that this report is mainly aimed at top decision makers and politicians, with the aim of informing, raising awareness and generating action to more effectively tackle this ecological problem, which has grown dramatically in the last few years.

The analysis of the survey data showed that mist netting activity for winter 2012-2013 decreased by 40% compared to last winter period and was the lowest recorded since 2007, when BirdLife's monitoring of winter trapping started. A similar pattern was observed for winter trapping in different jurisdictions, with *both* Republic and SBA areas showing a decrease of more than 30% for winter 2012-2013 compared to winter 2011-2012. However, it is noted that mist netting levels in British Base (SBA) areas were higher (3 times) than in Republic areas for this winter.

It is encouraging to record reduced winter trapping compared to previous winters, particularly after the disastrous autumn 2012 trapping period. Enforcement efforts increased in the last two months of 2012 (November & December), with, in particular, restaurants raids that took place in different districts and a number of restaurateurs were prosecuted for illegal bird trade. This probably had a knock off effect on winter trapping activity. Equally important was the low influx of winter thrush species arriving in Cyprus, the main target species for winter trappers, which is a likely significant factor in the observed reduced trapping levels.

Despite the reduced trapping levels recorded for spring 2012 and for winter 2012-2013, the main autumn trapping period of last year shaped into another ecological disaster, bringing the autumn trapping activity to a new 11-year high record. Overall the death toll estimate for year 2012 (including spring 2012, autumn 2012 and winter 2012-2013) was nearly 2.5 million birds across the whole of Cyprus. Although this is an estimate, it highlights the large scale killing of migratory birds that is taking place, a pattern sadly observed in the last few years.

The trapping situation of the last few years is highly disappointing and is threatening to reverse all the positive results achieved during the period 2004-2006, when trapping activity was significantly reduced. Moreover, BirdLife Cyprus believes that the Republic of Cyprus missed a perfect opportunity to show to other EU Member States its determination to tackle this issue at its root, particularly as Cyprus hosted the EU Presidency for the second half of 2012.

In terms of enforcement action during the year, the efforts of the competent authorities should be acknowledged and despite their limited resources, hundreds of mist nets and thousands of limesticks were confiscated. Also, tens of prosecutions took place in relation to illegal bird trapping. It is evident that resources on the ground are stretched and insufficient to tackle the dramatically increasing bird trapping activity and it has become clear that the strengthening of resources is necessary to implement the pledged 'zero tolerance' approach.

At the same time, BirdLife Cyprus believes that with increased man-power, better coordination and more targeted action, the competent authorities could operate in a deterrent manner.

Furthermore more enforcement is needed against the restaurants illegally offering *ambelopoulia*, the single most important economic driver of this activity. However, for this to happen real political will is needed to tackle the issue at its root, with greater enforcement on the ground and at the restaurants. Finally, a large awareness campaign needs to take place, targeting the indifferent wider public, which to a large extent is ignorant of the non-selective nature of trapping and the large scale killing of migratory birds.

The report is separated into the following sections:

- Section 1 provides an overview of the bird trapping in Cyprus, gives some historical background to this activity, makes reference to the national legislation regarding bird protection and presents the current situation,
- Section 2 describes the historical outline of the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, and
- Section 3 presents the results, discussion and recommendations for the next steps.

## 1. Overview of bird trapping in Cyprus

Bird trapping in Cyprus has been illegal since 1974, when legislation on hunting was introduced with Law 39/74 and non-selective methods such as mist nets, limesticks and traps were prohibited. Moreover, in 1988 Cyprus ratified the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, enlisting a long list of birds as protected, including the Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) (blackcaps are the main target species of illegal bird trapping in Cyprus). With Cyprus joining the EU, EU Birds Directive (2009/147/EC, formerly 79/409/EEC) was transposed into Cyprus Law N. 152(I)/2003, prohibiting anew the use of non-selective methods including mist nets, limesticks and calling devices but also the possession of trapping equipment, trapped birds and the trading and eating of trapped birds.

Historically, trapped birds – mostly Blackcaps - were a food supplement for the mostly poor island inhabitants living off the land or would be traded as a traditional delicacy for export commodity. The practice of bird trapping in Cyprus has been recorded in historical documents from the Middle Ages and even earlier times. Trapping as practiced in Cyprus today bears no relation to the 'traditional' or historical situation.

Nowadays, bird trapping in Cyprus is widespread and extensive, contributing to the large scale killing of hundreds of thousands of migratory and wintering birds, and survey records show that 152 bird species have been found trapped in mist nets or limesticks, of which 78 are listed as threatened by the EU Birds Directive and / or BirdLife International (see the autumn 2012 report for the list of trapped bird species)<sup>1</sup>. This is a clear indication of the non-selective nature of these methods. This illegal activity has become a profitable business which is controlled to a large extent by the 'big' trappers who are also involved in organised crime, and the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service estimated this illegal business to be of the order of millions of euros.

This report is presenting the latest survey results for the winter season 2012-2013. It should be noted that during winter illegal trappers are targeting mainly the wintering song thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*), in contrast to spring and autumn seasons when the main target species are blackcaps (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and other migrant songbirds. Trapped birds are either served as expensive *ambelopoulia* delicacies in local restaurants or for home consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Update on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus', December 2012. BirdLife Cyprus.  
<http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/upload/Trapping%20Reports/Autumn%202012%20Trapping%20Report.pdf>.

## 2. BirdLife Cyprus Surveillance programme

BirdLife Cyprus is a non-profit NGO working for the protection and conservation of birds and it is the Partner of BirdLife International in Cyprus. With the support of the RSPB (BirdLife partner in the UK), BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken a systematic surveillance programme regarding illegal bird trapping in Cyprus since autumn 2002, providing a long record of trapping activity and giving the NGO a very good measure of expertise on the issue. With regards to monitoring of winter trapping, this has been undertaken for the last 6 years. The surveillance programme follows a 'Bird Trapping Monitoring Protocol' that was developed by BirdLife Cyprus and the RSPB, in consultation with the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service and the British Sovereign Base Area (SBA) police. Figure 1 shows a map where bird trapping takes place in Cyprus; monitoring is concentrated in the two areas (numbered 1 and 2) where extensive trapping takes place:

1. Kokkinochoria area (Eastern Larnaca/Famagusta area) – this area also includes the Dhekelia Eastern Sovereign Base (ESBA) area), and
2. Ayios Theodoros and Maroni area (Western Larnaca).



**Figure 1** Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

Although trapping is also an issue in other areas of Cyprus, the survey efforts focus on these two main areas due to resource limitations.

The monitoring is undertaken by visiting a random selection of sample squares (1 km<sup>2</sup>) during daytime hours, with a focus on detecting mist netting activity and limesticks being recorded if they are found while searching for mist netting activity. The number of squares has been stratified to ensure a representative coverage of areas under SBA administration and the Republic of Cyprus. For more details on the methodology of BirdLife Cyprus read the latest autumn report<sup>1</sup>.



The project is undertaken with the close co-operation of the competent authorities of the Republic of Cyprus (the Game & Fauna Service and the Cyprus Police Anti-poaching unit) and the SBA Police. When trapping paraphernalia is found, the BirdLife Cyprus team immediately contacts the relevant enforcement authorities. It should be highlighted that the BirdLife Cyprus observers never confront suspected trappers and never remove trapping paraphernalia.

BirdLife Cyprus would like to note its particular thanks to the RSPB/BirdLife in the UK, for supporting the project financially since the beginning. Furthermore BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank NABU (partner of BirdLife International in Germany) for their financial support for this winter survey.

### 3. Results & Discussion

- Field survey: the winter anti-trapping survey 2012-2013 was carried out during January 2013 following the standard survey protocol. In total 38 squares were surveyed during this period, out of which 36 have been consistently monitored since 2007. In keeping with BirdLife’s standard practice, the survey team immediately reported all trapping finds to the relevant enforcement authorities, either the SBA Police or the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service, depending on the location of the finds.
- Summary of field data: Appendix 1 presents all the survey field data for winter 2012-2013. In total the findings of the survey included 384 metres of active net rides (cleared “runs” in acacia plantations or other habitats e.g. orchards, olive trees, either holding nets or where there was clear evidence of preparation for the setting and/or use of nets), 14 mist nets found *in situ* (either classified as Active Set Nets or Active Unset Nets) and 11 birds found trapped in nets, mostly robins (*Erithacus rubecula*), but also song thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*). Opportunistic checks outside the survey squares detected an additional 75 metres of active net rides and 4 mist nets *in situ* (see Appendix 1).
- Trends in winter trapping activity: Figure 2 shows the long term trends for winter trapping activity using mist nets for the 36 squares that have been consistently surveyed since 2007. The analysis showed that mist netting activity for winter 2012-2013 has decreased by 40% compared to last winter period and has been the lowest since 2007.

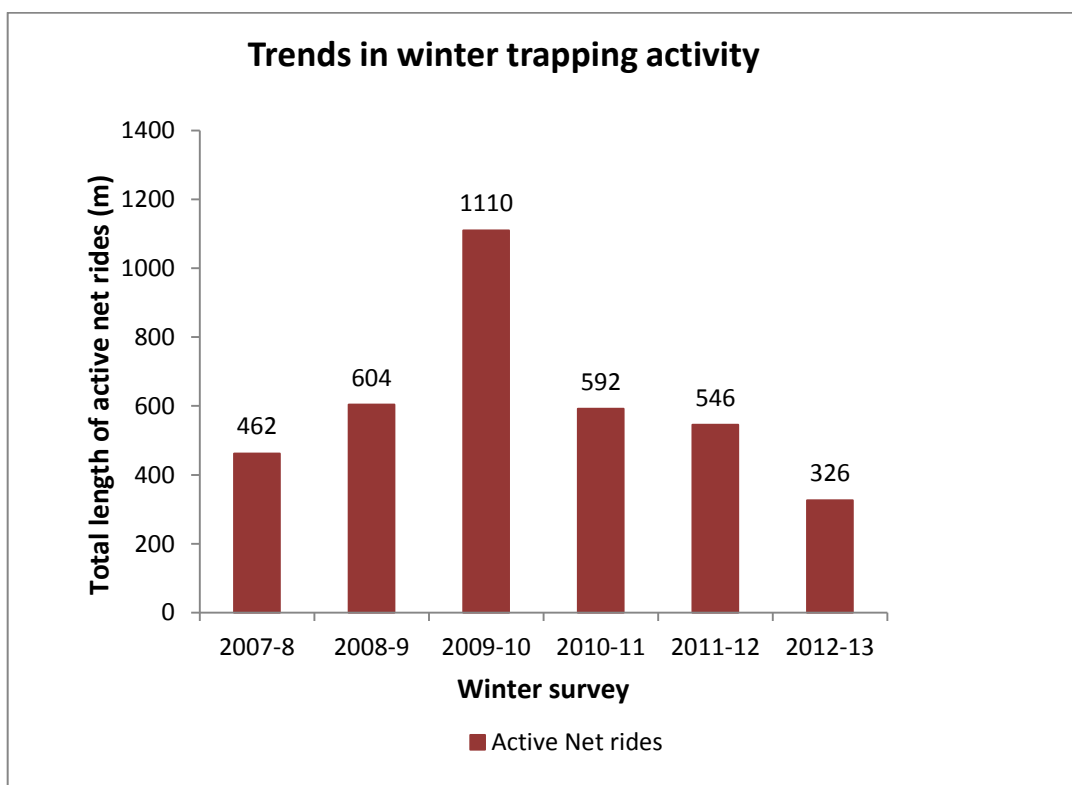
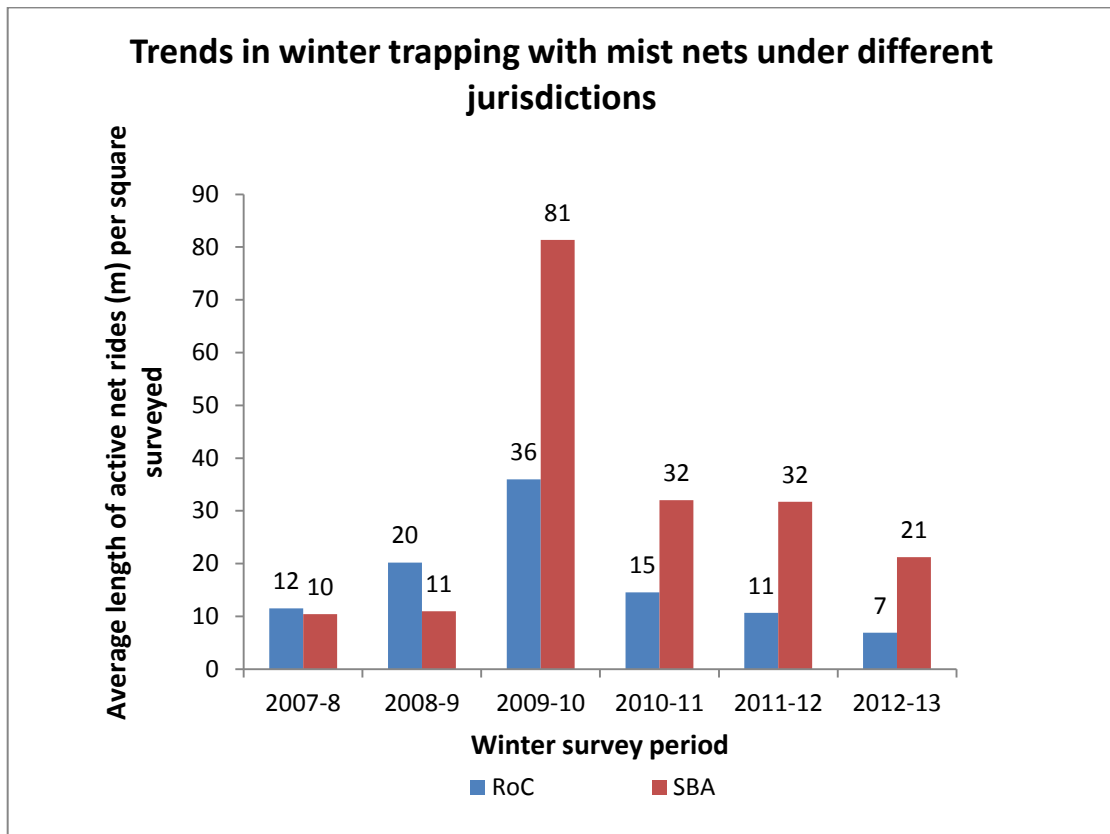


Figure 2 Trends for winter trapping activity

- Trapping under different jurisdictions: Figure 3 summarises winter trapping activity using mist nets under different jurisdictions.

- For Republic areas, winter 2012-2013 showed a decrease of 35% in mist netting activity compared to winter 2011-2012.
- For the SBA areas, winter 2012-2013 showed a decrease of 33% in mist netting activity compared to winter 2011-2012. As shown in Figure 3, trapping in SBA areas remained 3 times higher per square surveyed compared to areas in the Republic.



**Figure 3 Trends for winter trapping under different jurisdictions**

- Note that the data shown Figure 3 (above) are derived from all the squares surveyed in each period. The sample size of squares surveyed for each winter period varies, as is shown in the following table, but average measures are used for comparison and the sample was always stratified in order to maintain the geographical balance between SBA and RoC areas as set out in the surveillance monitoring protocol.

**Table 1 Number of squares surveyed each winter period since 2007**

Winter season	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
No of squares surveyed	44	44	81	53	39	38

- Reduction in winter trapping: it is encouraging that reduced trapping activity has been recorded for this winter compared to previous winters, especially after the disastrous previous autumn trapping period that showed record trapping levels for

the 11-year duration of the surveillance programme (see autumn 2012<sup>2</sup>). This pattern suggests enforcement in the winter season was more effective than in the autumn. But it is also important to note the low influx of wintering thrush species, the main target species for winter trappers. Information from birdwatchers, the Game & Fauna Service but also newspaper articles on hunting concurred that there was a relatively small number of song thrushes visiting Cyprus this winter. The limited number of song thrushes is likely a significant factor in the reduced trapping levels recorded. A similar pattern was observed during the survey of last winter (2011-2012) when high mist netting activity was recorded upon the arrival of large numbers of song thrushes<sup>3</sup>.

- Death toll estimate:
  - It is estimated that over 150,000 birds could have been killed within the survey area and over 200,000 could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (see Appendix 2 for details of the estimation) for winter 2012-2013. If one were to split the potential death toll estimate between jurisdictions within the survey area (150,000 birds) based on the trapping paraphernalia found, then 80,000 would be the potential kill in the Republic and 70,000 in the SBAs, based on where the evidence of trapping activity was found during the survey.
  - For the whole year 2012 (spring 2012, autumn 2012 and winter 2012-2013) the **death toll estimate** was over 1.8 million birds within the survey area and nearly **2.5 million birds across the whole of Cyprus**. It is noted that this estimate is one of the highest yearly death toll estimates of the last 6 years of the BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme, with the highest estimate being for year 2011 (more than 2.8 million birds for the whole of Cyprus).
- Enforcement:
  - BirdLife Cyprus reported to the competent authorities, Game & Fauna Service and the SBA Police, all the active trapping sites located during the survey.
    - Game & Fauna service: 6 trapping sites were reported to Game & Fauna but to this date no feedback has been provided.
    - SBA Police: 13 trapping sites were reported to SBA Police and over 60% ended up in confiscations, a very encouraging outcome. However no prosecutions were made possible.
  - A number of restaurant raids have taken place during the months of November 2012 to January 2013, by the Game & Fauna Service and the Cyprus Police Anti-poaching unit, with 5 restaurateurs being prosecuted for illegal possession and trade of wild birds. BirdLife Cyprus acknowledges and fully supports the enforcement efforts of the competent authorities to

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<sup>2</sup> 'Update on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus', December 2012. BirdLife Cyprus.  
<http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/upload/Trapping%20Reports/Autumn%202012%20Trapping%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cyprus bird trapping surveillance project: Winter 2011/12', March 2012, BirdLife Cyprus.  
[http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/en/html-36-Trapping\\_Reports.html](http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/en/html-36-Trapping_Reports.html)

tackle what is the most significant economic driver of this illegal activity, the restaurants serving ambelopoulia.

- However, BirdLife Cyprus calls on the relevant ministers and decision makers to push for greater enforcement on restaurants, with more regular raids taking place during the main trapping season, from September until December, in order to achieve a real reverse of the dramatic increase in bird trapping observed in the last few years.
- Social and political attitudes: There is still an overall lack of political will to tackle this issue at its root and the general public is to a large extent either indifferent or neutral to this problem (as shown by opinion polls commissioned by BirdLife Cyprus in 2005 and 2008). A large awareness campaign is needed to cause a shift in public opinion, with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. For more details on this and the implementation of a 'zero tolerance' approach read the latest autumn report of BirdLife Cyprus (December 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

## **Appendix 1**

**Survey data for winter 2012-2013**

**Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity within survey squares**

Confidential data – provided upon request

**Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity outside survey squares**

Confidential data – provided upon request

## Appendix 2

### Estimation of numbers of birds caught during winter 2012-2013

The following key assumptions are applied for the estimation of the birds killed:

- 12 metres is the assumed average length for a mist net
- 20 birds are caught per 12-m net per day (Magnin, 1986 )
- 0.5 birds are caught per limestick per day
- 40 days is the duration of the trapping period for winter seasons
- 301 are the possible bird trapping squares within the survey area as identified from the surveillance programme in 2007 (the random sample of squares surveyed by BirdLife Cyprus is taken from these 301 squares)
- 75% of illegal trapping activity for all of Cyprus takes place within the survey area (based on input from enforcement authorities and other experts)
- For P (prepared) nets it is assumed that they are active every other day while for ANN (Active No Nets), ASN (Active Set Nets) and AUN (Active Unset Nets) nets it is assumed that they are active every day during the trapping season

Using the above assumptions the bird death toll is estimated as follows for winter:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{For nets} &= [(\text{Total length of P category net rides}/2) + (\text{Total length of ANN+AUN+ASN rides})] / \\ &(\text{average length of a net}) \times (\text{20 birds per net per day}) \times (\text{total number of 'possible bird} \\ &\text{trapping area' squares} / \text{number of squares surveyed}) \times (\text{length of trapping season in days}) \\ &= [(189/2) + 0 + 153 + 42] / (12) \times (20) \times (301/38) \times (40) \\ &= \mathbf{152,876 \text{ birds}} \text{ could have been caught within the survey area in } \mathbf{\text{mist nets}}. \end{aligned}$$

For limesticks = 0 limesticks detected.

**In total 152,876 birds** is estimated that could have been killed in mist nets within the survey area during winter 2012-2013. Assuming that the survey area accounts for 75% of the trapping activity in Cyprus, the bird death toll across Cyprus is:

$$= 152,876 / 75\%$$

= **203,835 could have been killed in nets across all Cyprus during winter 2012-2013.**