



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2013-14 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for 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 συνεχιζόμενου και συστηματικού προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του Πτηνολογικού Συνδέσμου Κύπρου για το χειμώνα 2013-14. 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 χρόνιου οικολογικού προβλήματος, το οποίο έχει αυξηθεί δραματικά τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Σημειώνεται ότι για το χειμώνα 2013-14 ο Πτηνολογικός δεν έκανε πλήρη έρευνα πεδίου όπως περιγράφεται στο πρωτόκολλο του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών. Εντούτοις, για να αποκτήσει μια εικόνα της κατάστασης της χειμερινής παγίδευσης έγινε μια έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων όπου ένα δείγμα σημείων παγίδευσης ελέγχθηκαν για τυχόν παράνομη δραστηριότητα.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 87 τοποθεσίες όπου καταγράφηκαν 1 067 μέτρα ενεργών διαδρομών για δίκτυα (διαδρόμες σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλαιώνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίκτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση) και εντοπίστηκαν 53 δίκτυα επί τόπου. Όλα τα σημεία παγίδευσης καταγγέλθηκαν στις αρμόδιες αρχές για περαιτέρω δράση.

Παρόλο που δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν οι τάσεις για τα χειμερινά επίπεδα παγίδευσης πουλιών, αφού δεν έγινε πλήρης έρευνα πεδίου όπως περιγράφεται στο πρωτόκολλο του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης του οργανισμού, τα ευρήματα του περασμένου χειμώνα ήταν ιδιαίτερα ανησυχητικά αφού παρουσιάζουν μια εικόνα εκτός ελέγχου, με δεκάδες δίκτυα διασκορπισμένα στην ύπαιθρο. Επιπλέον, η λαθροθηρία έφτασε σε πολύ υψηλά επίπεδα – ενδεικτικό αυτής της κατάστασης ήταν μεταξύ άλλων και οι θανάσιμοι πυροβολισμοί προστατευόμενων ειδών όπως ο Νανόγαλος (*Tetrax tetrax*) και ο Τζάνος (*Falco peregrinus*).

Ο Πτηνολογικός Σύνδεσμος Κύπρου πιστεύει ότι τα πρωτοφανή αυτά επίπεδα της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών και της λαθροθηρίας είναι αποτέλεσμα της ευρύτερης έλλειψης πολιτικής βούλησης για αποτελεσματική αντιμετώπιση των παράνομων αυτών δραστηριοτήτων. Είναι ξεκάθαρο ότι χρειάζεται ένα Στρατηγικό Σχέδιο Δράσης, με τη συμμετοχή όλων των εμπλεκόμενων φορέων (διωκτικές αρχές, μη κυβερνητικές οργανώσεις, κρατικές υπηρεσίες κτλ), προκειμένου να εξαλειφθεί αυτό το χρόνιο και επίμονο πρόβλημα, κάτι που ο Πτηνολογικός συντονίζει για υιοθέτηση και άμεση εφαρμογή μιας τέτοιας στρατηγικής.

Τα έξοδα για την εργασία πεδίου του Πτηνολογικού (π.χ. καύσιμα), καθώς και τα έξοδα των εκάστοτε εθελοντών, καλύπτει η οργάνωση του BirdLife International στη Γερμανία, NABU, καθώς και το Heinz Sielmann Stiftung Foundation, ενώ το RSPB καλύπτει τους μισθούς.

Summary

This report presents the latest findings of the on-going and systematic BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme on illegal bird trapping, relating to the winter 2013-14 season. It is highlighted that this report is mainly aimed at top decision makers and politicians, with the aim of informing, raising awareness and generating momentum for more effective action to tackle this chronic ecological problem, which has grown dramatically in the last few years.

It is noted that for the winter 2013-14 BirdLife did not undertake a complete survey following its standard survey protocol. However in order to have an insight of the winter trapping situation a spot check exercise was undertaken, where a sample of previously recorded trapping sites were checked for bird trapping activity.

Overall 87 locations were checked and a total of 1,067 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) were detected and 53 mist nets found in situ. All the trapping finds were reported to the competent authorities to take action.

Although it is not possible to draw conclusions about the long term trends for winter trapping activity, since the standard monitoring protocol was not followed, the findings of the past winter were truly shocking and they highlight an out-of-control situation in terms of illegal bird trapping, with tens of mist nets found in the countryside. Additionally poaching reached very high levels as well, with protected species such as Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) and Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) found shot dead.

BirdLife Cyprus believes that these unprecedented levels in illegal bird trapping and poaching are related to the general lack of political will to tackle effectively these issues. A Strategic Action Plan against illegal bird trapping is clearly needed, with the involvement of all key stakeholders (enforcement agencies, NGOs, government departments etc.) in order to eliminate this chronic and persistent problem, and BirdLife Cyprus has been coordinating the adoption of such a plan.

All the running costs for the field work (e.g. fuel), as well as all the volunteer costs were covered by the Partner of BirdLife International in Germany, NABU, together with the Heinz Sielmann Stiftung Foundation, while the RSPB covers salaries.

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, adopting 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, as well as 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. 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 BirdLife Cyprus website for the list of trapped bird species)¹. 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 2013-14. 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 are used for home consumption.

¹ ‘List of birds recorded trapped in mist nets and on limesticks’
http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/upload/PDFs/Trapping/Consolidated%20list%20of%20trapped%20birds_EN.pdf.

2. BirdLife Cyprus Surveillance programme

BirdLife Cyprus is a non-profit NGO working for the protection and conservation of birds, their habitats and wider biodiversity, and is the Partner of BirdLife International in Cyprus. With support from the RSPB (BirdLife partner in the UK), BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken a systematic surveillance programme of 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. 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 at the start of the programme. Figure 1 shows a map where bird trapping takes place in Cyprus; monitoring is concentrated in 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 and because they hold the highest trapping activity.

It is noted that BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete field survey for the winter 2013-14 season as described in its monitoring protocol². Instead for last winter period it was decided to undertake spot checks at trapping sites, randomly selected and stratified to

² For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest Autumn 2013 trapping report.

<http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/backup/user/Autumn%202013%20Trapping%20Report.pdf>.

ensure a representative coverage of areas under the SBA administration and the Republic of Cyprus.

The project is undertaken in close co-operation with 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 noted 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) and the Heinz Sielmann Stiftung Foundation for their financial support for the spring, autumn and winter 2013 surveys. NABU and the Heinz Sielmann Stiftung Foundation cover the running costs and volunteer costs of the surveillance programme, whereas the RSPB covers salaries.

3. Results & Conclusions

- Field survey: the winter 2013-14 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during January and early February 2014. As mentioned previously, BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete survey following the standard survey protocol last winter, in order to focus its resources more on awareness raising and other campaigning actions. However in order to have an insight of the winter trapping situation a spot check exercise was undertaken, checking 50% of the trapping sites where in the past mist netting activity had been detected³. In total 75 trapping sites were randomly selected for this exercise, 50 sites within the Republic of Cyprus (covering both Ayios Theodoros & Maroni and East Larnaca & Famagusta areas) and 25 sites within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA). All trapping locations were reported 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: In total 87 locations were checked, including some opportunistic finds that were located while checking the original sample of trappings sites. In total the findings of the spot check exercise included **1,067 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) and **53 mist nets found in situ** (49 classified as Active Set Nets and 4 as Active Unset Nets).
- Winter trapping activity: Although it is not possible to use this field data to draw the long term trends for winter trapping activity, since the standard monitoring protocol was not followed for this season, the total number of mist nets found in situ last winter is shocking. **Although it is not comparable as such, the previous highest winter trapping activity was recorded in the winter period 2009-10, when a total of 31 mist nets were detected while covering a total of 81 squares. The number of mist nets found this winter is evidently much higher.**
- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2013-14:
 - For Republic areas, a total of 457 metres of active net rides and 22 mist nets in situ were detected after checking 59 locations.
 - For the SBA areas, a total 610 metres of active net rides and 31 mist nets in situ were detected after checking 28 locations.
 - Although trapping levels cannot be produced as the standard methodology was not followed for winter 2013-14, a simple comparison of the finds would suggest that mist netting activity is still much higher within the SBAs compared to the Republic.
- Enforcement:
 - BirdLife Cyprus reported to the competent authorities, Game & Fauna Service and the SBA Police, all the active trapping sites located during the survey:

³ It is noted that sites where limesticks were detected for bird trapping in the past were excluded from the winter spot check exercise. This was done in order to select a sample of likely active trapping locations, since trapping with limesticks is mainly done during spring and autumn periods.

- Game & Fauna service feedback: a total of 16 locations were reported to this enforcement agency. However no feedback was provided to BirdLife Cyprus as to what action was taken by the Game Service, therefore it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of this agency regarding our trapping reports.
- SBA Police feedback: a total of 11 locations were reported to this enforcement agency. Confiscations of mist nets and other trapping paraphernalia took place at 9 locations, while at 2 locations no activity was recorded. Overall the enforcement effort and the results on the ground of the SBA Police are acknowledged by BirdLife Cyprus, however the SBA Police should seek a combination of prosecutions and confiscations as part of its enforcement action plan.

Conclusions

Illegal bird trapping with mist nets has seen a dramatic increase in winter 2013-14. Although BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check field survey rather than a complete field survey, the field data included tens of mist nets found everywhere in the countryside, highlighting the extent of the problem and the fact that this illegal activity has become a lucrative business with organized trappers making thousands of euros every year⁴. Moreover poaching reached very high levels as well, with protected species such as Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) and Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) found shot dead⁵.

BirdLife Cyprus believes that these unprecedented levels of illegal bird trapping and poaching are related to the lack of political will of the current Republic of Cyprus government to tackle illegal bird killing at its root, as described in more detail in the Autumn 2013 trapping report⁶. A Strategic Action Plan against illegal bird trapping is clearly needed, with the involvement of all key stakeholders (enforcement agencies, NGOs, government departments etc.) in order to eliminate this chronic and persistent problem.

⁴ This is a video of BirdLife Cyprus which shows mist nets with a total length of 400 meters (in total 16 set mist nets were found) in just one location detected in February 2014.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWxl_ceE9u0

⁵ BirdLife Cyprus prepared a Press Release regarding the out of control poaching and illegal bird trapping taking place (February 2014), calling for the need to have a joint strategy to tackle wildlife crime in Cyprus.

http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/upload/PR_Poaching_Trapping_Feb2013_EN_FINAL.pdf.

⁶ Autumn 2013 trapping report (January 2014), section 'Social and political attitudes', p. 19-21.

<http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/backup/user/Autumn%202013%20Trapping%20Report.pdf>

Appendix 1

Survey data for winter 2013-14

Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity from spot check exercise

Confidential data – provided upon request