



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2014-15 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 προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του Πτηνολογικού Συνδέσμου Κύπρου για το χειμώνα 2014-15. 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 2014-15, ο Πτηνολογικός δεν έκανε πλήρη έρευνα πεδίου όπως περιγράφεται στο πρωτόκολλο του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών. Εντούτοις, για να έχει μια εικόνα της κατάστασης της χειμερινής παγίδευσης έγινε μια έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων όπου ένα δείγμα σημείων παγίδευσης ελέγχθηκαν για τυχόν παράνομη δραστηριότητα. Αυτή είναι η δεύτερη συνεχόμενη χειμερινή έρευνα πεδίου όπου εφαρμόζεται αυτή η μέθοδος ελέγχου σημείων.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 90 τοποθεσίες-σημεία. Τα ευρήματα της έρευνας κατέγραψαν 1 415 μέτρα ενεργών διαδρομών για δίχτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλαιώνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίχτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση), 48 δίχτυα επί τόπου, 5 ξόβεργα και 13 πουλιά που βρέθηκαν παγιδευμένα. Όλα τα σημεία παγίδευσης καταγγέληκαν 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 δίχτυα διασκορπισμένα στην ύπαιθρο. Μια παρόμοια εικόνα χειμερινής παγίδευσης καταγράφηκε και τον περασμένο χειμώνα 2013-14, όπου καταγράφηκαν 1 067 μέτρα ενεργών διαδρομών και 53 δίχτυα επί τόπου (BirdLife Cyprus, Ιούνιος 2014). Εκτιμάται ότι για ολόκληρο το έτος 2014 πάνω από 2,5 εκατομμύρια πουλιά μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν από την παράνομη παγίδευση σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, με βάση τις καταγραφές του Πτηνολογικού για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα. Αυτά τα επίπεδα καταδεικνύουν την πραγματική έκταση του προβλήματος και το γεγονός ότι αυτή η παράνομη δραστηριότητα έχει γίνει μια επικερδής επιχείρηση με τους οργανωμένους παγιδευτές που βγάζουν χιλιάδες ευρώ κάθε χρόνο.

Ο Πτηνολογικός Σύνδεσμος Κύπρου πιστεύει ότι ο μόνος τρόπος για να λυθεί αυτό το πολύπλοκο πρόβλημα είναι αν όλοι οι κύριοι εμπλεκόμενοι φορείς (διωκτικές αρχές, ΜΚΟς, κυβερνητικά τμήματα κτλ.) υιοθετήσουν και ξεκινήσουν την εφαρμογή του Στρατηγικού Σχεδίου Δράσης κατά της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών το 2015, στη βάση της μηδενικής ανοχής, όπως εισηγήθηκε και στην ανεξάρτητη έκθεση που διενήργησε το Γραφείο της Επιτρόπου Διοικήσεως (Ombudsperson, 2014).

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 Ίδρυμα Heinz Sielmann , ενώ η RSPB καλύπτει τους μισθούς.

Summary

This report presents the latest findings of the on-going BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme on illegal bird trapping, relating to the winter 2014-15 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 2014-15 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. This is the second consecutive winter survey that such a spot check exercise is carried out.

Overall 90 locations were checked. The findings of the survey included a total of 1,415 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), 48 mist nets *in situ*, 5 limesticks and 13 birds found trapped. 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. A similar picture for winter trapping was observed during the previous winter 2013-14, when 1,067 metres of active net rides and 53 mist nets *in situ* were recorded (BirdLife Cyprus, June 2014). It is estimated that for the whole 2014 year more than 2.5 million birds could have been killed from illegal trapping across Cyprus, based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons. This order of magnitude signifies the true extent of the problem and the fact that this illegal activity has become a lucrative business with organized trappers making thousands of euros every year.

BirdLife Cyprus believes that the only way to solve this complex problem is if all the key stakeholders (enforcement agencies, NGOs, government departments etc.) adopt and start implementing the Strategic Action Plan against illegal bird trapping in 2015 on the basis of a zero tolerance approach, as recommended also in the independent report carried out by the Office of the Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsperson, 2014).

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 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 153 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 International¹. 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 (2010) estimated this illegal business to be valued in the order of 15 million euros per year.

Apart from the extensive use of non-selective methods for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus, organised trappers nowadays use calling devices that have imitating calls of migratory birds. These calling devices are normally played during night-time, luring the birds into the trapping sites and hence increasing the catch for each trapper. Academic studies have shown that tape luring can increase the capture probability of birds from 3 to 13 times (Schaub M. et al, 1999). Additionally, they have shown that the simultaneous playing of songs of two species can attract other related species also, e.g. researchers when playing Eurasian Reed Warbler and Pied Flycatcher, also trapped, sedge warblers, garden warblers, blackcaps and grasshopper warblers (Mukhin A. et al, 2008). The field report for Autumn 2013 of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS, March 2014, pages 7 & 18) highlighted the extensive use of calling devices and their intensity within the trapping areas during night time, which are often heard easily from hundreds of metres away from each trapping site.

This report presents the latest results for winter 2014-15 survey. 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 (BirdLife Cyprus)
http://birdlifecyprus.org/upload/Consolidatedlistoftrappedbirds_.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 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 and because they hold the highest trapping activity.

It is noted that BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete field survey for the winter 2014-15 season as described in its monitoring protocol², but rather a spot check exercise. This is the second consecutive winter season that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken this simpler survey

² For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest Autumn 2014 trapping report.

<http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/upload/Trapping%20Reports/Autumn2014TrappingReport.pdf>.

method, primarily due to limited resources. This method involves undertaking spot checks at trapping sites, randomly selected and stratified to ensure a representative coverage of areas under the SBA administration and the Republic of Cyprus, in order to get an overall picture of winter trapping.

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 (partner of BirdLife International 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 Foundation for their financial support from 2013 onwards. NABU and the Heinz Sielmann Foundation cover the running costs and volunteer costs of the surveillance programme, whereas the RSPB covers salaries.

3. Results & Conclusions

- Field survey: the winter 2014-15 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during January and early February 2015. As mentioned previously, BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete survey following the standard survey protocol for this season, 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 nearly 40% 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, 55 sites within the Republic of Cyprus (covering both Ayios Theodoros & Maroni and East Larnaca & Famagusta areas) and 20 sites within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA). All trapping locations were reported to the relevant enforcement authorities, either the SBA Police Anti-poaching unit, the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service or the Cyprus Police Anti-poaching unit, depending on the location of the finds.
- Summary of field data: In total 90 locations were checked, 75 selected sites, plus some opportunistic finds that were located while checking the original sample of trappings sites – out of these, **27 active trapping sites** were detected. The findings of the spot check exercise included **1,415 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), **48 mist nets found *in situ*** (26 classified as Active Set Nets and 22 as Active Unset Nets), **5 limesticks and 13 birds found trapped**.
- Winter trapping activity: It is not possible to use the field data to draw any long term trends for winter trapping activity, since the standard monitoring protocol was not followed for the last two winter seasons i.e. 2013-14 and 2014-15. Table 1 summarises the field data for the winter surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken since 2007, when winter monitoring begun. Even though trends cannot be drawn, **the findings of the last 2 winter seasons highlight that there is most likely a resurgence in winter trapping with mist nets, indicating that the situation is out of control**. A similar conclusion was reported in the CABS report (March 2015) which mentioned that *‘During our first winter BPC (Bird Protection Camp) we witnessed the large scale of illegal bird trapping in Larnaca and Famagusta districts in the Republic of Cyprus and the British ESBA of Dhekelia. In only 10 days, we discovered 49 active trapping sites. Trapping in winter time is massive and almost at the same level recorded in autumn season, which is considered as the most intensive season for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus’*.

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.

Table 1 Summary of winter field data of mist netting activity

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Total squares surveyed	44	44	81	53	39	38	87 ¹	90 ¹
Total active net rides (m)	497	804	3830	936	616	384	1067	1415
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	22	3	31	11	34	14	53	48

Note 1: This is the number of locations checked (and not number of squares surveyed).

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2014-15:
 - For Republic areas, a total of 992 metres of active net rides and 37 mist nets *in situ* were detected after checking 64 locations.
 - For the SBA areas, a total 423 metres of active net rides and 11 mist nets *in situ* were detected after checking 26 locations.
 - Although trapping levels cannot be produced as the standard methodology was modified for winter 2014-15, a simple comparison of the finds with previous seasons would suggest that mist netting activity for the winter season is widespread and out of control both in the SBAs and the Republic. **A simple comparison between the 2013-14 and 2014-15 winter periods shows an increase of 33%** (from 1,067 to 1,415 metres of active net rides) for a similar number of locations checked (around 90 locations).
 - Similarly although the monitoring system was not directly comparable it's worth noting the huge increase in nets of rides found in winter over the years as well as the increase in nets found *in situ*.

- Enforcement:

BirdLife Cyprus reported to the competent authorities all the active trapping sites located during the survey, namely the Game & Fauna Service, the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit or the SBA Police anti-poaching unit:

 - Game & Fauna service feedback: a total of 12 locations⁴ 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.
 - Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit feedback: a total of 10 locations⁵ were reported to this enforcement agency. At 1 location there was confiscation of mist nets, while at the other 9 locations no activity was recorded or no feedback was provided.

⁴ Note that out of these 12 locations, 2 were also reported to the SBA Police (close to border between the two jurisdictions) and 2 were also reported to the Cyprus Police.

⁵ Note that out of these 10 locations, 2 were also reported to the Game and Fauna Service.

- SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback: a total of 11 locations⁶ were reported to this enforcement agency. Confiscations of mist nets and other trapping paraphernalia took place at 6 locations, while at 5 locations no activity was recorded.

It is important to mention that there was a significant law change to the 'Law for the Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Law 152(I)/2003', when on the 27th July 2012 the Cyprus parliament approved the application of on-the-spot fines for use of calling devices while hunting, instead of a court conviction that was applied previously. This change of law was particularly targeted to thrush hunting. BirdLife Cyprus opposed this law modification from the very beginning, as we believed it was a clear relaxation of the hunting law (read relevant e-news article⁷). Unfortunately, it's difficult not to notice the huge increase of nets in winter and not to attribute this to the change in the law.

- Death estimate for the whole year 2014:
 - During spring 2014 it was estimated that around 265,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, July 2014).
 - During autumn 2014 it was estimated that over 2 million birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, March 2015).
 - Considering the very high levels of mist netting activity recorded during the 2014-15 winter season (see Table 1) and the death tolls of spring and autumn, **it is estimated that more than 2.5 million birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2014.**

Conclusions

Illegal bird trapping with mist nets was recorded at very high levels for winter 2014-15, following a similar pattern to the previous winter 2013-14. Although BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check field survey rather than a complete field survey (this is the second consecutive winter season that spot checks are carried out), the field data included tens of mist nets found around 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 year.

It is particularly noticeable that the levels of winter trapping have increased dramatically since the change to the 'Law for the Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Law 152(I)/2003' in 2012, when the Cyprus parliament approved the application of on-the-spot fines for use of calling devices while hunting, instead of a court conviction. BirdLife Cyprus strongly opposed this law modification, as for us it was a clear relaxation of the hunting law. The evidence of the winter field surveys for 2013 -14 and 2014-15 clearly indicates that this

⁶ Note that out of these 11 locations, 2 were also reported to the Game and Fauna Service (close to border between the two jurisdictions).

⁷ Read relevant e-news articles regarding the law modification for calling devices that took place in July 2012: a) August 2012 with title 'Latest update of the Parliamentary discussion regarding the hunting law proposal' <http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/mailing.php?id=28>, b) July 2012 with title 'Parliament discusses law proposal to change the hunting legislation' <http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/mailing.php?id=27>.

law modification, which the Game and Fauna Service had supported as a more effective and efficient tool for enforcement on the ground, has had the opposite results as BirdLife Cyprus had warned in its position papers to the Cyprus Parliament at the time.

Concerns about the very high levels of poaching (for game species such as the song thrush - the target species for winter trapping – hare etc.), is also reflected by the Cyprus hunting community. A recent study by the Game and Fauna Service (June 2015) showed that on the question *'Which is, according to your opinion, the biggest problem that game species are facing today in Cyprus?'*, 50% of the interviewees replied *'Poaching'*, with the next biggest problem being the answer *'Foxes / Corvids'* with only 12%.

BirdLife Cyprus believes that the only way to solve the complex problem of illegal bird trapping in Cyprus is if all the key stakeholders (enforcement agencies, NGOs, government departments etc.) adopt and start implementing the Strategic Action Plan against illegal bird trapping in 2015 on the basis of a zero tolerance approach, as recommended also in the independent report carried out by the Office of the Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsperson, 2014).

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Appendix 1

Survey data for winter 2014-15

Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity from spot check exercise

Confidential data – provided upon request