



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2016-17 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus and providing an overview of the latest developments regarding the problem

Report put together by Tassos Shialis, Campaigns Coordinator, BirdLife Cyprus

Date: August 2017

Contents

Sections	Page
Περίληψη	3
Summary	4
Overview of bird trapping in Cyprus	5
BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme	7
Results & Conclusions	9
Bibliography	13
Appendix 1 – Survey data for winter 2016-17	14

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα αναφορά παρουσιάζει τα τελευταία ευρήματα του συνεχιζόμενου προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του Πτηνολογικού Συνδέσμου Κύπρου για τη χειμερινή περίοδο 2016-17. 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 τα τελευταία χρόνια για την χειμερινή περίοδο ο Πτηνολογικός δεν κάνει 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 διενεργεί έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων όπου ένα δείγμα σημείων παγίδευσης ελέγχονται για τυχόν παράνομη παγίδευση. Αυτή είναι η τέταρτη συνεχόμενη χειμερινή έρευνα πεδίου όπου εφαρμόζεται αυτή η μέθοδος ελέγχου σημείων.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 108 τοποθεσίες-σημεία και από αυτά 21 σημεία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε 47 ενεργές διαδρομές για δίχτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλέωνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίχτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση), με συνολικό μήκος 765 μέτρα, 15 δίχτυα επί τόπου και 8 πουλιά που βρέθηκαν παγιδευμένα. Όλα τα σημεία παγίδευσης καταγγέλλθηκαν στις αρμόδιες αρχές για περαιτέρω ενέργειες.

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 Πτηνολογικού, τα ευρήματα των τελευταίων χειμερινών καταγραφών καταδεικνύουν ότι η χειμερινή παγίδευση με δίχτυα είναι εκτενής και παρουσιάζουν μια κατάσταση εκτός ελέγχου.

Εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι συνολικά πάνω από 2,5 εκατομμύρια πουλιά μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν από την παράνομη παγίδευση σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο για το έτος 2016, με βάση τις καταγραφές του Πτηνολογικού για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα.

Με αυτά τα δεδομένα η Κύπρος αποτελεί μια από τις χειρότερες περιοχές (blackspot) για την παράνομη θανάτωση πουλιών στη Μεσόγειο κατά μήκος του μεταναστευτικού διαδρόμου μεταξύ της Αφρικής και Ευρασίας, όπως σημειώνεται και στο επιστημονικό άρθρο που δημοσιεύτηκε στο περιοδικό Bird Conservation International (BirdLife International, March 2016). Σήμερα αυτή η παράνομη δραστηριότητα έχει γίνει μια επικερδής επιχείρηση με οργανωμένους παγιδευτές που βγάζουν χιλιάδες ευρώ κάθε χρόνο.

Τα έξοδα για την εργασία πεδίου του Πτηνολογικού (π.χ. καύσιμα), καθώς και τα έξοδα των εκάστοτε εθελοντών, καλύπτει η οργάνωση NABU (BirdLife στη Γερμανία), ενώ η RSPB (BirdLife στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο) 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 2016-17 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 worth noting that in the last few winter seasons BirdLife does not undertake a complete survey following its standard survey protocol. However, in order to have an insight into the winter trapping situation a spot check exercise is undertaken, whereby a sample of previously recorded trapping sites is checked for bird trapping activity. This is the fourth consecutive winter survey during which such a spot check exercise is carried out.

Overall, 108 locations were checked and out of these 21 sites were found active for illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded 47 active net rides for mist netting (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), which sum up to a length of 765 metres, 15 mist nets found *in situ* and 8 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 of BirdLife Cyprus was not followed, the findings of the last few winter seasons indicate that winter trapping with mist nets is widespread and signal an ‘out of control’ situation.

It is conservatively estimated that for the whole of 2016, more than 2.5 million birds could have been killed from illegal trapping across the whole of Cyprus, based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons.

This marks Cyprus as one of the worst blackspots for illegal bird killing along the Africa-Eurasia bird migratory flyway in the Mediterranean sea, as also identified in the scientific article published in the Bird Conservation International (BirdLife International, March 2016). The fact is that nowadays this illegal activity has become a lucrative business with organized trappers making thousands of euros every year.

All the running costs for the field work (e.g. fuel), as well as all the volunteer costs were covered by NABU (BirdLife in Germany), while the RSPB (BirdLife in UK) covers salaries.

1. Overview of bird trapping in Cyprus

Trapping with non-selective methods (mist nets and limesticks) and the trade of wild birds have been prohibited since 1974 under Cyprus legislation, when the law 'Protection and Development of Game and Wild Birds Law of 1974 (39/1974)' was introduced¹. 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*), hence prohibiting the killing (hunting) and consumption of blackcaps (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. Survey records show that 155 bird species have been found trapped in mist nets or limesticks, of which 78 are species of conservation concern according to the EU Birds Directive and / or BirdLife International². 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 valued in the order of 15 million euros per year³.

Apart from the extensive use of non-selective methods for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus, organised trappers nowadays use outlawed electronic calling devices that imitate the calls of migratory birds. These calling devices are normally activated during night-time, luring the birds into the trapping sites and hence increasing the illegal catch. Academic studies have shown that tape luring can increase the catch by 3 to 13 times (Schaub M. *et al*, 1999) and that various species are attracted by song playback, including target species for the trappers such as Eurasian reed warblers, Sedge warblers, Garden warblers, Blackcaps and Grasshopper warblers (Mukhin A. *etal*, 2008). These calling devices can often be heard easily from hundreds

¹ The specific articles of Law 39/1974 that prohibited the trapping and trade of wild birds include: Article 10 ('prohibition of hunting etc. of certain bird species', without including the blackcap either in the protected or the game species), Article 14 ('prohibition of offering game or wild birds in restaurants etc.') and Article 15 ('prohibition of the use of light projectors, traps, luring methods, limesticks and flushing of birds).

² BirdLife Cyprus 'List of birds recorded trapped in mist nets and on limesticks'
https://www.birdlifecyprus.org/udata/contents//files/Trapping-PDFs/Consolidated_list_of_trapped_birds_EN_FINAL-155.pdf.

³ Game and Fauna Service (17th March 2010), Position paper presented at the Committee of Environment of the Cyprus House of Parliament during a discussion to change the legislation on the protection and management of wild birds and game species.

of metres away from each trapping site during night time, highlighting the extensive use of calling devices and their intensity within the trapping areas⁴.

This report presents the results for winter 2016-17 survey. It should be noted that during winter the 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 sold and used for home consumption.

⁴ During the Autumn 2016 anti-trapping field survey period of September - October 2016, the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) made four night time visits to Cape Pyla to record electronic decoy activity – one of this visits was jointly done with BirdLife Cyprus. Though not surveying the entire area, the field teams recorded between 20 and c40 electronic calling devices on all visits, confirming the blatant and widespread use of these devices by illegal trappers.

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 in 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 of 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 worth noting that BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete field survey for the winter 2016-17 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁵, but rather a spot check exercise. This is the fourth consecutive winter season that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken this simpler survey method, primarily due to limited resources. This method involves undertaking spot checks at

⁵ For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest Autumn 2016 trapping report - <https://www.birdlifecyprus.org/surveillance-programme>.

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 express its particular thanks to the RSPB (BirdLife in UK) for supporting the project financially since the beginning in 2002. Furthermore BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank NABU (BirdLife in Germany) for their financial support since 2013 onwards. NABU covers the running costs and volunteer costs of the surveillance programme, whereas the RSPB covers related salaries.

3. Results & Conclusions

- Field survey: the winter 2016-17 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during January and early February 2017, with 7 days of field work in total. 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 activities. However, in order to have an insight of the winter trapping situation a spot check exercise was undertaken, checking about 30% of the trapping sites where mist netting activity had been detected in the past⁶. The sites were randomly selected for this exercise in order to cover both the Republic of Cyprus (covering both Ayios Theodoros & Maroni and East Larnaca & Famagusta areas) and 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 108 locations were checked, 81 within the Republic of Cyprus and 27 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – out of these **21 active trapping sites** were detected. The field team recorded **47 active net rides** for mist netting (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), which sum up to a **length of 765 metres, 15 mist nets found *in situ*** (7 classified as Active Set Nets and 8 as Active Unset Nets), **and 8 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 has not been followed for the last four winter seasons i.e. 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17. 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 derived, the survey findings of the last few winter seasons highlight that mist netting trapping for song thrushes is at very high levels, indicating an ‘out of control’ situation.**

⁶ It is worth noting 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	2015-16	2016-17
Total squares surveyed	44	44	81	53	39	38	87 ¹	90 ¹	73 ¹	108 ¹
Total active net rides (m)	497	804	3830	936	616	384	1067	1415	627	765
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	22	3	31	11	34	14	53	48	15	15

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

The findings and conclusions of the CABS winter 2016-17 report (May 2017)⁷ further highlight that winter trapping has increased dramatically and is out of control in the last few years, *'The levels of illegal bird trapping during winter 2016 – 2017 in Cyprus were massive, much like in autumn 2016. Field investigations revealed 186 trapping sites with 550 set nets...Trapping remains out of control and the massive slaughter of protected wild birds in Cyprus continues'*.

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2016-17:
 - For Republic areas, 20 active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 81 locations, summing up to a length of 362 metres.
 - For the SBA areas, 27 active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 27 locations, summing up to a length of 403 metres.

- Enforcement:

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

 - Game & Fauna Service feedback: 7 locations were reported to this enforcement agency. However, no feedback was provided to BirdLife Cyprus as to what action was taken by the Game & Fauna Service, therefore it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of this agency regarding our trapping reports.
 - Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit feedback: 3 locations were reported to this enforcement agency. However, no feedback was provided to BirdLife Cyprus as to what action was taken by the Cyprus Police, therefore it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of this agency regarding our trapping reports.
 - According to the CABS Winter 2016-17 report⁷, the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit worked jointly with the CABS team for 8 days, resulting in 9 prosecutions (in total 39 mist nets, 253 limesticks and 14 electronic bird callers were confiscated). Overall, 11 out of the 12 active trapping sites reported by CABS were investigated by the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit (about 92% of reported sites were investigated).

⁷ CABS Winter 2016-17 report available [here](#).

- SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback: a total of 8 locations were reported to this enforcement agency. Confiscations of mist nets took place at 2 locations while confiscations of trapping paraphernalia (e.g. pole bases and poles) took place at the remaining 6 locations.
 - According to the CABS Winter 2016-17 report⁷, the SBA Police anti-poaching unit worked jointly with the CABS team for 13 days, resulting in 5 prosecutions and 10 confiscations (in total 68 mist nets, 41 limesticks and 15 electronic bird callers were confiscated). Overall all 15 active trapping sites reported by CABS were investigated by the SBA Police anti-poaching unit (100% of reported sites were investigated).

The enforcement efforts of the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit and the SBA Police anti-poaching unit are acknowledged. However, it is clear that enforcement efforts by the competent authorities are not sufficient compared to the large scale of winter trapping activity taking place in the last few years. With regards to the Game and Fauna Service, unfortunately no enforcement efforts against illegal bird trapping for the winter season were reported to BirdLife Cyprus, despite the fact that in the last few years large scale winter trapping for song thrushes is taking place.

- Death estimate for the whole year 2016:
 - During spring 2016 it was estimated that around 9,600 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, October 2016 [report](#)).
 - During autumn 2016 it was estimated that nearly 2.3 million birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, March 2017 [report](#)).
 - The levels of winter 2016-17 mist netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see Table 1) and the levels reported in the CABS report⁷ highlight that mist netting trapping for song thrushes (the main target species) was at very high levels. Based on these high winter 2016-17 trapping activity levels detected, which are very likely linked to the high number of wintering song thrushes⁸ that arrived in Cyprus, **it is conservatively estimated that more than 2.5 million birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2016.**

⁸ A report prepared by the Game and Fauna Service (May 2017) on bag statistics for the hunting period 2016-17 reported more than 3,000,000 song thrushes were shot as game in Cyprus. This clearly indicates that a large number of wintering song thrushes had arrived in Cyprus, which is also in agreement with the BirdLife Cyprus bird records for winter 2016-17.

Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check exercise during January and February 2017 for a period of 7 days in total, checking in total 108 locations. These locations were randomly selected from the complete list of trapping sites where in the past mist netting activity has been detected. Out of these locations, 21 active trapping sites were recorded and the findings included 47 active net rides for mist netting, which sum up to a length of 765 metres, and 15 mist nets found *in situ*.

Despite the fact that trends cannot be drawn from the data, the findings of the last few winter seasons indicate that winter trapping with mist nets is widespread and signal an 'out of control' situation. This situation is also confirmed by the CABS Winter 2016-17 report where hundreds of mist nets were recorded⁷. These very high levels of illegal winter trapping are very likely to be connected to the high number of wintering Song thrushes that had arrived in Cyprus - BirdLife Cyprus bird records for winter 2016-17 indicate a high number of Song thrushes were present on the island. Sadly these bird records are further supported by a report prepared by the Game and Fauna Service (May 2017) on bag statistics for the hunting period 2016-17 when more than 3,000,000 song thrushes was estimated to be legally shot as game in Cyprus.

Based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2016, autumn 2016 and winter 2016-17 seasons, **it is conservatively estimated that more than 2.5 million birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2016.** This marks Cyprus as one of the key blackspots for illegal bird killing along the Africa-Eurasia bird migratory flyway in the Mediterranean sea, as also identified in the [scientific article](#) published in the Bird Conservation International (BirdLife International, March 2016).

The enforcement efforts during winter 2016-17 of the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit and the SBA Police anti-poaching unit are acknowledged, whereas the enforcement from the Game and Fauna Service was sadly very limited (to our knowledge no enforcement action was reported to BirdLife Cyprus from the Game & Fauna Service). Considering the large scale of illegal winter trapping activity taking place in the last few years, it has become evident that enforcement action by the competent authorities is not sufficient and more resources need to be prioritised to tackle winter bird trapping.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2016 can be found [here](#).
- BirdLife International (March 2016) – ‘Preliminary assessment of the scope and scale of illegal killing and taking of birds in the Mediterranean’. Report available [here](#).
- Committee Against Bird Slaughter – CABS. May 2017. ‘Field Report. CABS & SPA Winter 2016-2017, Bird Protection Camp, Cyprus, 15-18 December 2016 & 13 January – 13 February 2017’. Report available [here](#).
- Game and Fauna Service (May 2017). ‘Results from telephone interviews on game bag data for the hunting period 2016 - 2017’. Report available [here](#).
- Game and Fauna Service (17th March 2010). Position paper presented at the Committee of Environment of the Cyprus House of Parliament during a discussion to change the legislation on the protection and management of wild birds and game species.
- Magnin G. 1987. ‘An account of illegal catching and shooting of birds in Cyprus during 1986’.
- Mukhin A, Chernetsov N, Kishkinev D. 2008. ‘Acoustic information as a distant cue for habitat recognition by nocturnally migrating passerines during landfall’. *Behavioural Ecology* 19: 716-723.
- Schaub M, Schwilch R, Jenni L. 1999. ‘Does tape-luring of migrating Eurasian reed warblers increase number of recruits or capture probability?’ *The Auk* 116(4): 1047-1053.

Appendix 1

Survey data for winter 2016-17

Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity from the spot check exercise

Confidential information – provided upon request