



## UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2017-18 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 τη χειμερινή περίοδο 2017-18. 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.

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 πέμπτη συνεχόμενη χειμερινή έρευνα πεδίου όπου εφαρμόζεται αυτή η μέθοδος ελέγχου σημείων.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 100 τοποθεσίες-σημεία και από αυτά 3 σημεία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε 9 ενεργές διαδρομές για δίχτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλεώνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίχτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση), με συνολικό μήκος 183 μέτρα.

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 αυτής της χειμερινής περιόδου ήταν πολύ ενθαρρυντικά και υποδεικνύουν ότι υπήρξε μια σημαντική μείωση στην παγίδευση με δίχτυα.

**Εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι το 2017 συνολικά γύρω στα 640,000 πουλιά μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν από την παράνομη παγίδευση σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, σε σύγκριση με τα 2.5 εκατομμύρια πουλιά που εκτιμούμε να σκοτώθηκαν το 2016, με βάση τις καταγραφές του Πτηνολογικού για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα. Σημειώνεται ότι η έρευνα πεδίου μας επικεντρώνεται κυρίως στα δίχτυα, επομένως και η εκτίμηση είναι κατά κύριο λόγο για πουλιά που έχουν θανατωθεί με την παγίδευση δικτύων.**

Σημειώθηκε σημαντική μείωση το φθινόπωρο του 2017 στην παράνομη παγίδευση με δίχτυα και σημειώθηκε μια παρόμοια μείωση τον χειμώνα 2017-18. Είναι πολύ ενθαρρυντικά νέα τα οποία πιστεύουμε οφείλονται σε πιο αποτελεσματική πάταξη, και βαρύτερες ποινές. Αυτές οι ποινές λειτούργησαν αποτρεπτικά τον χειμώνα 2017-18. Το 2018 θα είναι μια ενδεικτική χρονιά για την παράνομη παγίδευση και θα πρέπει να συνεχίσουν οι προσπάθειες αν θα σταματήσει η παράνομη παγίδευση για τα καλά.

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 2017-18 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.

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 fifth consecutive winter survey during which such a spot check exercise is carried out.

Overall, 100 locations were checked and out of these 3 sites were found active for illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded 9 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 183 metres.

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 from this season’s survey were very positive and showed a significant decrease in winter mist-netting activity in Cyprus.

**It is estimated that in 2017 around 640,000 birds could have been killed across the whole island, in comparison to 2016’s estimate of 2.5 million birds, based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons . It is highlighted that our field survey focuses mainly on mist netting, hence also the estimate is primarily for birds that have been killed from trapping with mist nets.**

A significant reduction was recorded for the autumn 2017 trapping activity levels for mist nets and a similar situation was recorded for the winter 2017-18 season. This is indeed encouraging news and we believe they are primarily the result of more effective enforcement on the ground, backed up by much more heavier sentencing for offenders. This has acted as a deterrent for trappers into the winter 2017-18 season. Year 2018 will be milestone year for the illegal bird trapping problem and the efforts must continue if the corner is to be truly turned on the trapping issue.

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 introduced<sup>1</sup>. 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. In July 2017 the Cyprus Parliament passed a new amendment to the Law 152/2003, introducing a series of new provisions (including the on-the-spot fine regulation) . For more details please read the *Social and political attitudes* section of the autumn 2017 trapping [report](#).

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 82 are species of conservation concern according to the EU Birds Directive and / or BirdLife International<sup>2</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 valued in the order of 15 million euros per year<sup>3</sup>.

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 (Savva, G.A. 2016, 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 (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*), Sedge warblers (*Acrocephalus*

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> BirdLife Cyprus 'List of birds recorded trapped in mist nets and on limesticks'  
<https://birdlifecyprus.org/species-affected-by-trapping>.

<sup>3</sup> Game and Fauna Service (17<sup>th</sup> 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.

*schoenobaenus*), Garden warblers (*Sylvia borin*), Blackcaps (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and Grasshopper warblers (*Locustella naevia*) (Mukhin A. et al, 2008). These calling devices can often be heard easily from hundreds of metres away from each trapping site during night time, highlighting the extensive use of calling devices and their intensity within the trapping areas.

This report presents the results for winter 2017-18 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.

## 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 2017-18 season as described in its monitoring protocol<sup>4</sup>, but rather a spot check exercise. This is the fifth consecutive winter season that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken this simpler survey method, primarily due to limited resources. This method involves undertaking spot checks at

<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2017 trapping report [here](#).

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 contacts and reports them to 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 2017-18 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during late January and early February 2018, with 9 days of field work in total. As already stated, BirdLife Cyprus did not undertake a complete survey following the standard survey protocol for this season, in order to focus its limited 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 25% of the trapping sites where mist netting activity had been detected in the past<sup>5</sup>. 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, 100 locations were checked, 67 within the Republic of Cyprus and 33 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – out of these **3 active trapping sites** were detected. The field team recorded **9 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 183 metres** (8 of these rides were classified as Active No Net rides<sup>6</sup> and 1 was classified as Prepared<sup>7</sup>).
- Winter trapping activity: While it is not possible to use the field data to draw any statistically reliable long term trends for winter trapping activity - since the standard monitoring protocol has not been followed for the last five winter seasons (since 2013 onwards) – the general pattern is one of reduced winter trapping activity.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Active No Net : A net ride that from the evidence found e.g. bird feathers, blood stains, thrown pebbles, indicates that illegal activity was taking place the previous night / morning but no net is present *in situ*.

<sup>7</sup> Prepared: A net ride that is clearly ready to be used but there is no evidence e.g. bird feathers, blood stains, thrown pebbles, to suggest illegal activity was taking place the previous night / morning.

- Table 1 summarizes the field data for the winter surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken since 2007, when winter monitoring began. Compared to previous seasons, it is evident that winter trapping has been significantly reduced.

**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	2017-18
<b>Total squares surveyed</b>	44	44	81	53	39	38	87 <sup>1</sup>	90 <sup>1</sup>	73 <sup>1</sup>	108 <sup>1</sup>	100 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total active net rides (m)</b>	497	804	3830	936	616	384	1067	1415	627	765	183
<b>Mist nets in situ (no)</b>	22	3	31	11	34	14	53	48	15	15	0

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

CABS findings for the winter 2017-18 season also suggest a significant reduction in trapping levels<sup>8</sup>. It should be noted that CABS use a very different survey method to Birdlife Cyprus, hence findings are not directly comparable, but rather complementary to each other.

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2017-18:
  - For Republic areas, NO active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 67 locations.
  - For the SBA areas, 9 active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 33 locations, summing up to a length of 183 metres.
- Enforcement:  
BirdLife Cyprus reported all the active trapping sites located during the survey to the SBA Police anti-poaching unit:
  - SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback:
    - Confiscation of a calling device took place on the spot at one location, however there has been no feedback to this date regarding the other locations reported to the SBA police.
    - According to SBA Police enforcement statistics this agency confiscated 174 mist nets, 47 calling devices and arrested 2 persons for illegal bird trapping<sup>9</sup>.

Death estimate for the whole of 2017:

- During spring 2017 it was estimated that around 26,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, October 2017 [report](#)).
- During autumn 2017 it was estimated that nearly 610,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, March 2018 [report](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Information obtained from CABS winter camp report available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Data provided to Birdlife Cyprus during a meeting with the SBA Administration & Police on the 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

- The levels of winter 2017-18 mist netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see above) show that trapping was reduced compared to previous years. As the survey method for the winter survey is not the same as spring and autumn, it is not possible to establish a death estimate comparable to those of spring and autumn. It is however possible to estimate the number of birds killed in nets/netrides and on limesticks that were found active during our survey. It is therefore conservatively estimated that around 5,500 birds could have been killed during the winter season on the whole of the island.
- **Therefore it is estimated that during the whole year of 2017, just over 640,000 birds could have been killed.**

## **Conclusions**

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check exercise during late January and early February 2018 for a period of 9 days in total, checking 100 locations in total. These locations were randomly selected from the complete list of trapping sites where mist netting activity has been detected in the past. Out of these 100 locations, 3 active trapping sites were recorded and the findings included 9 active net rides for mist netting, which sum up to a length of 183 metres.

**Despite the fact that statistically reliable trends cannot be drawn from the data, it appears that there is a reduction in mist-netting in winter 2017/18 compared to the findings of the last few winter seasons. Field data from earlier winter seasons had pointed to an ‘out of control’ situation.**

Based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2017, autumn 2017 and winter 2017-18 seasons, it is conservatively estimated that around 640,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2017. For comparison, it was estimated that 2.5 million birds were killed in 2016.

A significant reduction was recorded for the autumn 2017 trapping activity levels for mist nets (read relevant [report](#)) and a similar pattern was found for the winter 2017-18 season. This encouraging development we believe is primarily the result of more effective enforcement on the ground, backed up by much heavier penalties for convicted offenders. This deterrent effect, first seen in the autumn 2017 season, has apparently carried on into the winter 2017-18 season. 2018 will be milestone year for the illegal bird trapping problem and the efforts must continue if the corner is to be truly turned on the trapping issue.

## Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2017 can be found [here](#).
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- SBA Police (7<sup>th</sup> June 2018). Data on winter trapping presented during a meeting between SBA administration/police and Birdlife Cyprus.

## Appendix 1

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 spring and autumn seasons.
- 50% scaling down factor – applied for spring and winter seasons to account for a lower number of migrating birds passing via Cyprus compared to the autumn
- Net ride categories 'ANN' (Active No Nets), 'ASN' (Active Set Nets) and 'AUN' (Active Unset Nets) nets are assumed that they are active every day during the trapping season (read Appendix 1 for details on net ride classification).
  - Note: Net ride category 'P' (Prepared) is not taken into account for the estimation of numbers of birds killed anymore, following the recommendation of BTO science experts (BTO report, July 2015) to revise slightly the equation.

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

$$\begin{aligned} \text{For nets} &= [(\text{Total length of ANN+AUN+ASN rides})] / (\text{average length of a net}) \times (20 \text{ birds per net per day}) \times (\text{length of trapping season in days}) \times (50\% \text{ scaling down factor}) \\ &= 163/12 \times 20 \times 40 = 10,867 \times 50\% \\ &= 5,434 \end{aligned}$$

**Estimated number of birds killed in both nets/netrides and on limesticks found during our survey = 5,434**

## **Appendix 2**

**Survey data for winter 2017-18**

**Evidence of illegal bird trapping activity from the spot check exercise**

**CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION. This information may be provided upon request.**