



## UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2018-19 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 2018-19. 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 έκτη συνεχόμενη χειμερινή έρευνα πεδίου όπου εφαρμόζεται αυτή η μέθοδος ελέγχου σημείων.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 126 τοποθεσίες-σημεία και από αυτά 20 σημεία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Στα 17 από αυτά τα σημεία εντοπίστηκε παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών με τη χρήση διχτύων, ενώ τα άλλα 3 σημεία βρέθηκαν ενεργά με ξόβεργα. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε 31 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 617 μέτρα.

Παρόλο που δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν στατιστικά βάσιμες 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 υποδεικνύουν ότι υπήρξε μια σημαντική αύξηση στην παγίδευση με δίχτυα. Αυτό αποτελεί μια αρνητική εξέλιξη σε σύγκριση με τη πρόοδο που επιτεύχθηκε για το φθινόπωρο 2018. Πιστεύουμε ότι θα πρέπει να υπάρξει περαιτέρω πάταξη της χειμερινής παγίδευσης από τις αρμόδιες αρχές, και να δοθεί ιδιαίτερη έμφαση στην αύξηση συλλήψεων.

**Εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι το 2018 συνολικά γύρω στα 365 000 πουλιά μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν από την παράνομη παγίδευση σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, σε σύγκριση με τα 2,5 εκατομμύρια πουλιά που εκτιμούμε ότι σκοτώθηκαν το 2016, με βάση τις καταγραφές του Πτηνολογικού για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα. Η πρόοδος που έχει σημειωθεί τα τελευταία χρόνια είναι αξιοσημείωτη, ιδιαίτερα για την περίοδο της φθινοπωρινής παγίδευσης, και είναι αποτέλεσμα της στενής και αποτελεσματικής συνεργασίας μεταξύ των αρμόδιων αρχών και των ΜΚΟς, ιδιαίτερα με το Κλιμάκιο Πάταξης Λαθροθηρίας των Βρετανικών Βάσεων. Σημειώνεται ότι η έρευνα πεδίου μας επικεντρώνεται κυρίως στα δίχτυα, επομένως και η εκτίμηση είναι κατά κύριο λόγο για πουλιά που έχουν θανατωθεί από την παγίδευση διχτύων.**

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 2018-19 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 for the last six 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.

Overall, 126 locations were checked and out of these, 20 sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. At 17 of these sites, mistnetting activity was detected, while 3 sites were found active with limesticks. The field team recorded 31 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 summed up to a length of 617 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 is not followed for the winter, the findings from this season’s survey suggested a significant increase in winter mist-netting activity in Cyprus. This is a negative development compared to the progress achieved during autumn 2018. We believe that there needs to be more enforcement against winter trapping by the competent authorities, with the focus on increased arrests.

**It is estimated that in 2018 as a whole, around 365,000 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. The progress achieved in the last few years is noticeable, particularly for the autumn trapping season, and is the result of close and effective cooperation between the competent authorities, in particular the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) Police anti-poaching unit, and NGOs. It is highlighted that our field survey focuses mainly on mist netting, hence the estimate is primarily for birds that have been killed from trapping with mist nets.**

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](#). Almost 2 years have passed since the Law amendment of July 2017, and it seems that the introduction of on-the-spot fines has been successful in contributing to the reduction of trapping with mistnets. Up till February 2019 almost one million euros worth of on the spot fines have been handed out. For more details please read the *Enforcement on the ground – on-the-spot fine provision in the Republic, a year later* section of the autumn 2018 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. However, trapping as practiced in Cyprus today bears no relation to historical 'tradition'.

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 on limesticks, of which 82 are listed as conservation priority species under 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. 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

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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.

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 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 2018-19 survey. It should be noted that during winter the illegal trappers target mainly 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 the main areas of bird trapping; 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 2018-19 season as described in its monitoring protocol<sup>4</sup>, but rather a spot check exercise. This is the sixth consecutive winter season that BirdLife Cyprus has used this simpler survey method, primarily due to limited resources. This method involves undertaking spot checks at trapping

<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2018 trapping report [here](#).

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. Finally, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank the two volunteers that have helped in the monitoring survey and the gathering of the field data.



### 3. Results & Conclusions

- Field survey: the winter 2018-19 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out from mid-January to early February 2019, 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 utilise limited resources on awareness raising and other campaigning activities as well. However, in order to have an insight into 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 findings: In total, 126 locations were checked, 80 within the Republic of Cyprus and 46 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – from our survey **17 active mist netting sites** and 3 active limestick sites were detected. The field team recorded **31 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 summed up to a **length of 617 metres** (5 of these rides were classified as Active Set Net rides<sup>6</sup>, 22 rides were classified as Active No Net rides<sup>7</sup> and 4 rides were classified as Prepared<sup>8</sup>). Moreover, **32 birds were found trapped in the set nets and on the limesticks– sadly 25 of them were already dead.**
- 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 six winter seasons i.e. since 2013 onwards) – the field data suggest a much higher winter trapping activity compared to last year, reversing any positive progress made during the 2017/18 winter season.
- Table 1 summarizes the field data for the winter surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken since 2007, when winter monitoring begun. Compared to the winter 2017-18 season, it is evident that winter trapping has significantly increased.

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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 Set Net: A net ride that has a set mistnet.

<sup>7</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>8</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. 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	2018-19
<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>	126 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total active net rides (m)</b>	497	804	3830	936	616	384	1067	1415	627	765	183	617
<b>Mist nets in situ (no)</b>	22	3	31	11	34	14	53	48	15	15	0	5

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

The Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) findings for the winter 2018-19 season also suggest an increase in trapping levels<sup>9</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 2018-19:
  - For Republic areas, 13 active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 80 locations summing up to a length of 263 meters, as well as 56 limesticks found at 3 different locations.
  - For the SBA areas, 18 active net rides for mist netting were detected after checking 46 locations, summing up to a length of 354 meters<sup>10</sup>.
  
- Enforcement:

BirdLife Cyprus reported the active trapping sites detected during the survey to the relevant competent authorities.

  - SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback:
    - Confiscation of 2 mistnets took place at one location, while the other locations were placed under observation<sup>11</sup>.
    - According to SBA Police enforcement statistics, in total, this agency confiscated 91 mist nets, 73 limesitcks, 32 calling devices, and arrested 4 people for illegal bird trapping for the months of December 2018 - February 2019<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Information obtained from CABS winter camp report available sent to us via email on 16/5/19

<sup>10</sup> Joint monitoring was carried out for 3 days with the SBA Police. On the 15/1/19 13 locations were checked, 3 of which were found active with 7 netrides. On the 24/1/19 15 locations were checked, 3 of which were found active with 5 netrides. On the 7/2/19 18 locations were checked, 2 of which were found active with 6 netrides.

<sup>11</sup>Mistnets were confiscated on the spot with Birdlife Cyprus field team present.

<sup>12</sup> Data provided to Birdlife Cyprus by SBA police on 19/2/19 via email.

- Game & Fauna Service:
  - Confiscation of one mistnet, confiscation of 41 limesticks and one prosecution took place at 2 different locations<sup>13</sup>. No feedback was provided for the other sites reported by Birdlife Cyprus.
- Cyprus Police Anti-poaching unit:
  - Confiscation of one mistnet took place at one location and confiscation of 20 limesticks took place at another location<sup>14</sup>. Nothing was found at the other locations reported.

Death estimate for the whole of 2018:

- During spring 2018, it was estimated that just over 9,500 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, November 2018 report).
- During autumn 2018, it was estimated that just over 335,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, March 2019 report).
- The levels of winter 2018-19 mist netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see above) suggest that trapping increased compared to last year and is on par with 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 at active locations during our survey. It is conservatively estimated to be just over 21,000 birds, however it is highlighted that this number would be significantly higher for the whole of Cyprus.
- **Therefore, it is conservatively estimated that during the whole of 2018, over 365,000 birds could have been killed.**

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<sup>13</sup> Confiscation of 41 limesticks and prosecution took place with Birdlife Cyprus field team present. The mistnet was reported to us by GFS as having been confiscated.

<sup>14</sup> The confiscations were reported to us by APS as having taken place.

## **Conclusions**

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check exercise during mid-January – early February 2019 for a period of 9 days in total, checking 126 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 under our full survey programme. Out of these 126 locations, 17 active mistnetting sites were recorded as well as 3 active limestick sites. The findings included 31 active net rides for mist netting which summed up to a length of 617 metres, as well as 56 limesticks.

**Despite the fact that statistically reliable trends cannot be drawn from the winter survey data, the field data have shown much increased mist-netting activity during winter 2018/19 in comparison to the previous winter season.**

The winter trapping season tends to fluctuate each year according to the number of Song thrushes which come to Cyprus to overwinter. This winter, according to our records, large numbers of thrush migrated to the island particularly in January and February. This could at least partly explain the apparent increase in trapping compared to last year. Regardless of the reason for this increase, we believe that an increased enforcement effort against winter trapping by the competent authorities is called for, with the focus on increasing arrests.

Based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2018, autumn 2018 and winter 2018-19 seasons, it is conservatively estimated that around 365,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2018. For comparison, it was estimated that 650,000 birds were killed in 2017 and 2.5 million birds in 2016. The progress achieved in the last few years is impressive, particularly for the autumn trapping season, and it is the result of close and effective cooperation between the competent authorities, in particular the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) Police anti-poaching unit, and NGOs, notably BirdLife Cyprus.

## Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2018 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](#).
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## 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 winter seasons.
- 50% scaling 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 winter:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{For nets} &= [(\text{Total length of ANN+AUN+ASN rides})] / (\text{average length of a net}) \times (20 \text{ birds per} \\ &\text{net per day}) \times (\text{length of trapping season in days}) \times (50\% \text{ scaling factor}) \\ &= 617/12 \times 20 \times 40 = 41,133 \times 50\% \\ &= 20,567\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\text{For limesticks} &= (\text{Total number of limesticks found}) \times (0.5 \text{ birds per limestick per day}) \times (\text{length} \\ &\text{of trapping season in days}) \times (50\% \text{ scaling factor}) \\ &= 56 \times 0.5 \times 40 = 1,120 \times 50\% \\ &= 560\end{aligned}$$

**Estimated number of birds killed in both nets/netrides and on limesticks found during our survey = 21,127**

## **Appendix 2**

**Survey data for winter 2018-19**

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

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