



## UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the spring 2020 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus.

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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 την ανοιξιάτικη περίοδο 2020. 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 αυτή είναι η πρώτη χρονιά που ο Πτηνολογικός δεν έκανε πλήρη έρευνα πεδίου για την ανοιξιάτικη σεζόν, όπως περιγράφεται στο πρωτόκολλο του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών. Εντούτοις, για να έχει μια εικόνα της κατάστασης της ανοιξιάτικης παγίδευσης διενέργησε έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων ('spot checks') τα οποία έχουν βρεθεί ενεργά τα τελευταία τρία χρόνια.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 69 τοποθεσίες-σημεία και από αυτά οχτώ σημεία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε πέντε ενεργά σημεία τα οποία είχαν ενδείξεις ότι γινόταν παγίδευση με ξόβεργα, και τρία σημεία στα οποία βρέθηκαν στημένα ξόβεργα. Όλες οι ενεργές τοποθεσίες-σημεία προωθήθηκαν στην Υπηρεσία Θήρας και Πανίδας, οι οποία κατάγγειλε ένα παγιδευτή.

Αν και δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τις τάσεις της παγίδευσης για την άνοιξη, δεδομένου ότι το πρωτόκολλο παρακολούθησης του Πτηνολογικού δεν ακολουθήθηκε για αυτήν την άνοιξη, είναι σαφές από τα δεδομένα πεδίου ότι η παγίδευση με ξόβεργα την άνοιξη εξακολουθεί να ισχύει σε περιορισμένο βαθμό. Φαίνεται ότι ακόμη και με τους περιορισμούς κυκλοφορίας για το COVID-19, ορισμένοι παγιδευτές εξακολουθούν να είναι διατεθειμένοι να διακινδυνεύσουν την επιβολή προστίμων, όχι μόνο για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών, αλλά και για παραβίαση των κανονισμών κυκλοφορίας. Για αυτό το λόγο δεν θα πρέπει να υπάρξει χαλάρωση ή εφησυχασμός των διωκτικών αρχών για αυτήν την περίοδο, ώστε να αποφευχθεί οποιοδήποτε πισωγύρισμα της προόδου που έχει επιτευχθεί τα τελευταία χρόνια στη μείωση της ανοιξιάτικης παγίδευσης.

Τα έξοδα αυτής της ανοιξιάτικης έρευνας καλύφθηκαν από το NABU (BirdLife στη Γερμανία) και το RSPB (BirdLife στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο).

## Summary

This report presents the latest findings of the on-going BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme on illegal bird trapping, relating to the spring 2020 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 this year is the first year that BirdLife has not undertaken a complete survey in spring following its standard survey protocol. However, in order to gain an insight into the spring trapping situation, a 'spot check' exercise was undertaken, whereby a sample of active trapping sites from the previous three spring seasons were selected and checked for activity.

Overall, 69 locations were checked and out of these, eight sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded five active trapping sites which had evidence of trapping with limesticks, while three sites were detected with limesticks set out. All active sites were reported to the Game and Fauna Service, which successfully prosecuted one trapper.

Although it is not possible to draw conclusions about the trends for spring trapping activity, since the standard monitoring protocol of BirdLife Cyprus was not followed for spring 2020, it is clear from the field data collected that trapping with limesticks in spring is still occurring, at least to a limited extent. It appears that even with lockdown restrictions in place for COVID-19, some trappers were still willing to risk the imposition of fines, not only for illegal trapping, but also for breaking lockdown regulations. For this reason there should be no relaxation or complacency by the competent authorities during the spring seasons, in order to avoid any setback to the progress made in recent years in reducing spring trapping.

The costs for this spring survey was covered by NABU (BirdLife in Germany), and the RSPB (BirdLife in UK).

# 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 autumn in Cyprus). With Cyprus joining the EU in 2004, 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 what were 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 157 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 by 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 controlled to a large extent by the 'big' trappers who are often 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 illegal electronic calling devices that imitate the calls of migratory birds. These calling devices are normally operated at night, luring the birds into the trapping sites and hence increasing the illegal catch. A recent academic study undertaken in Cyprus has shown that the use of electronic calling devices (song playback) is highly effective in luring birds towards trapping sites (Sebastianelli M. *et al*, 2020). The findings of this study showed that playback not only increased the number of individuals of target species captured by six to eight times, but also significantly increased bycatch. The study authors concluded that: *'Our findings thus show that in contrast to popular belief that tape lures are a selective trapping*

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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' found [here](#).

<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

*method, they also lead to increased captures of non-target species, which can include species of conservation concern’.*

These calling devices can often be heard easily from hundreds of metres away from trapping sites at night, highlighting the extensive use of calling devices and their intensity within the trapping areas.

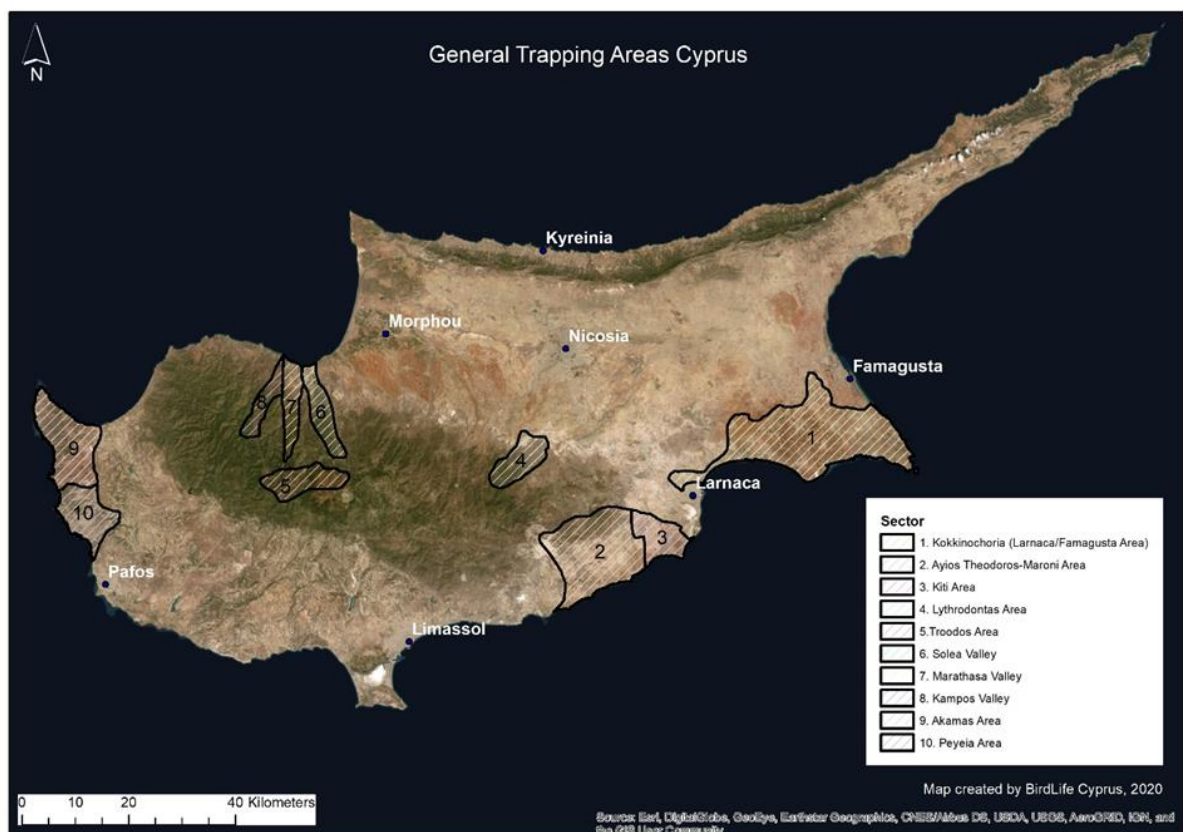
This report presents the results for spring 2020 survey. It should be noted that during spring illegal trappers target mainly Blackcaps, although other migrating songbirdss are also taken. Trapped birds are either served as expensive *ambelopoulia* ‘delicacies’ in local restaurants or are sold and used for home consumption.

Overall in the past few years the field data gathered have shown a reduction in trapping levels, with exception of winter trapping which tends to fluctuate depending on migration and the weather conditions. This is a positive change and Birdlife Cyprus hopes it will be maintained.

## 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 spring 2020 season as described in its monitoring protocol<sup>4</sup>, but rather a 'spot check' exercise. A similar 'spot check' exercise has been carried out during winter for the past 6 seasons. However, this is the first spring season that BirdLife Cyprus has used this simpler survey method, primarily due to the fact that trapping levels with mistnets in spring have been reducing year after year - during the 2019 spring trapping season no active netrides were recorded. Hence, Birdlife Cyprus re-evaluated its resources and methodology and it was decided that for this spring season a simpler but more targeted survey would be undertaken, checking locations that were found active by both Birdlife Cyprus and CABS in the last three spring seasons.

The project is undertaken in close co-operation with the Game & Fauna Service 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 thank 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. Finally, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank the volunteer that helped in the monitoring survey and the gathering of the field data in spring 2020.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2019 trapping report [here](#).



### 3. Results

- Field survey: the spring 2020 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out from mid-April till the end of April 2020, with seven 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 its limited resources on awareness raising and other campaigning activities as well. Instead, and in order to gain an insight into the spring trapping situation a 'spot check' exercise was undertaken. A proportion of the sites selected were from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) database, and it should be noted that 90% of the sites checked were associated with limestick trapping in the past, most of them having been found active over the last three spring seasons. It was ensured that the selected sites covered both the Republic of Cyprus (covering both Ayios Theodoros & Maroni and East Larnaca & Famagusta areas) and the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area - SBA. It was also interesting to see if people would be trapping at all in spring 2020 under the COVID-19 lockdown conditions, which the Cyprus Government enforced from mid-March to mid-May. All trapping locations were reported to the relevant enforcement authorities, either the SBA Police Anti-poaching unit or the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service, depending on the location of the finds.
- Summary of field findings: In total, 69 locations were checked, 56 within the Republic of Cyprus and 13 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – **Eight active limestick trapping sites were detected**. Five of the sites showed evidence of trapping with limesticks whereas at three sites limesticks were found set out – in total eleven limesticks were detected.
- Spring trapping activity: It is not possible to use the 2020 field data to draw any statistically reliable long term trends for spring trapping activity. Firstly, this is the first year that BirdLife did not follow the standard monitoring protocol for the spring survey, hence our field data are not comparable across the seasons. Secondly, this year's survey focussed on selecting sites where trapping had been detected in the last three spring trapping seasons. And thirdly, almost all sites checked this season were associated with past limestick trapping, rather than the mistnetting sites which our survey usually focuses on. This is because our data from previous seasons showed a large decline in mistnetting activity during the spring seasons, an encouraging decrease, while trapping with limesticks appeared to still be happening.

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- Table 1 summarizes the field data for the spring surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken.

**Table 1. Summary of spring field data of mist netting activity**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Total squares checked</b>	41	40	40	40	40	40	38	42	41	69 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total active net rides (m)</b>	1475	387	669	908	190	120	101	53	0	0
<b>Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)</b>	18	12	5	7	0	1	0	0	0	0
<b>Limesticks/Limestick sites found active</b>	0/0	142/4	5/1	26/2	0/0	4/1	0/0	0/0	4/1	11/3

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

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for Spring 2020:
  - For Republic areas, seven limestick trapping sites were found active, at three of them limesticks were set out on site.
  - For the SBA areas, one limestick trapping site was found active.
- Enforcement:

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

  - SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback:
    - One site was reported to the SBA police, which was placed under surveillance, however nothing further occurred.
  - Game & Fauna Service (GFS):
    - Seven sites were reported to the GFS and at one site a trapper was prosecuted and eleven limesticks were confiscated.

## **4. Conclusions**

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a 'spot check' exercise in April 2020 for a period of seven days in total, checking 69 locations. These locations were selected from trapping sites where spring trapping activity was recorded in the last three years. Out of these 69 locations, eight active limestick trapping sites were recorded. The findings included eleven set limesticks.

This is the first season that this survey method is adopted for spring trapping by BirdLife Cyprus – it should be noted that 'spot check' field surveys have been carried out for winter monitoring for a number of years though. Hence our field data are not comparable across the spring seasons, however our findings suggest that spring trapping with limesticks is still an issue which needs to be addressed. For this reason there should be no relaxation or complacency by the competent authorities during the spring seasons, in order to avoid any setback to the progress made in recent years in reducing spring trapping.

## Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2020 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](#).
- 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.
- Magnin G. 1987. ‘An account of illegal catching and shooting of birds in Cyprus during 1986’.
- Sebastianelli, M., Moysi, M., Savva, G. and Kirschel, A. 2020. Tape Lures Swell Bycatch On A Mediterranean Island Harbouring Illegal Bird Trapping. p.2. Article available [here](#):

## **Appendix 1**

**Survey data for Spring 2020**

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

**Confidential Information. Only provided upon approval of request.**