



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the spring 2021 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus

Report put together by Markos Charalambides, Campaigns and Monitoring Officer, BirdLife Cyprus

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Περίληψη

Η παρούσα αναφορά παρουσιάζει τα τελευταία ευρήματα του συνεχιζόμενου προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του BirdLife Cyprus (Πτηνολογικός Σύνδεσμος Κύπρου), για την ανοιξιάτικη περίοδο 2021. Επισημαίνεται ότι η αναφορά αυτή απευθύνεται κυρίως στους υπεύθυνους στα κέντρα λήψης αποφάσεων και τους πολιτικούς, με σκοπό την ενημέρωση, την ευαισθητοποίηση και την κινητοποίηση για ανάληψη πιο αποτελεσματικής δράσης για αντιμετώπιση αυτού του χρόνιου οικολογικού προβλήματος.

Όπως και την άνοιξη του 2020, η ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης το 2021 περιλάμβανε έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων ('spot checks'), όπου επιλέχθηκε ένα δείγμα ενεργών τοποθεσιών παγίδευσης από τις προηγούμενες ανοιξιάτικες περιόδους, οι οποίες ελέγχθηκαν για τυχόν δραστηριότητα παράνομης παγίδευσης. Έτσι, δεν πραγματοποιήθηκε πλήρης έρευνα βάσει του πρωτοκόλλου του BirdLife Cyprus για παρακολούθηση της παγίδευσης. Αυτό έγινε λόγω μειωμένου ανθρώπινου δυναμικού και λόγω της μειωμένης δραστηριότητας παράνομης παγίδευσης κατά την άνοιξη τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 74 σημεία, εκ των οποίων δέκα καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε επτά ενεργά σημεία τα οποία είχαν ενδείξεις παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα, και τέσσερα σημεία στα οποία βρέθηκαν στημένα ξόβεργα. Όλα τα ενεργά σημεία καταγγέλθηκαν στην Υπηρεσία Θήρας και Πανίδας, η οποία κατάσχεσε 13 ξόβεργα.

Αν και δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τις τάσεις της παγίδευσης για την άνοιξη, δεδομένου ότι το πλήρες πρωτόκολλο παρακολούθησης του BirdLife Cyprus δεν ακολουθήθηκε, μπορούμε να συγκρίνουμε τα αποτελέσματα της φετινής έρευνας με τα αποτελέσματα του προηγούμενου έτους (Άνοιξη 2020). Μέσω αυτής της σύγκρισης φαίνεται ότι την άνοιξη του 2021 υπήρξε αύξηση στα επίπεδα παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα. Αυτό επιβεβαιώνεται και από τα δεδομένα που συλλέχθηκαν από την οργάνωση CABS. Αυτό δείχνει ότι υπήρχαν παγιδευτές που ήταν ενεργοί εκείνη την περίοδο, ακόμα και παρά το γεγονός ότι υπήρχαν περιορισμοί στην κυκλοφορία λόγω της πανδημίας.

Σε μια σχετική και ανησυχητική εξέλιξη, τον Δεκέμβριο του 2020, η Κυπριακή Βουλή υπερψήφισε μια σειρά τροποποιήσεων στο νόμο «Περί Προστασίας και Διαχείρισης Άγριων Πουλιών και Θηραμάτων» (152/2003). Μια τροποποίηση αφορούσε τη μείωση του εξώδικου πρόστιμου για την θανάτωση μεταναστευτικών πουλιών, και συγκεκριμένα για 14 προστατευόμενα, μη-θηρεύσιμα είδη, είτε με τη χρήση ξόβεργων ή με κυνηγετικό όπλο. Το πρόστιμο για αυτό το αδίκημα ήταν προηγουμένως 2000 ευρώ ανά πουλί, ενώ τώρα έχει μειωθεί σε 200 ευρώ για έως και 50 πουλιά. Πρόκειται για μια ξεκάθαρη χαλάρωση του νόμου, ειδικά όταν αυτά τα 14 είδη είναι τα είδη τα οποία στοχεύουν οι παγιδευτές και λαθροθήρες ως «αμπελοπούλια». Για περισσότερες πληροφορίες σχετικά με την τροποποίηση του νόμου, διαβάστε την αναφορά μας από το φθινόπωρο του 2020 [εδώ](#). Πιστεύουμε ότι η αύξηση στη χρήση ξόβεργων που σημειώθηκε την άνοιξη του 2021 συνδέεται με αυτήν τη χαλάρωση του νόμου, αφού στην πράξη με αυτές τις πολύ χαμηλότερες ποινές έχει περάσει ένα μήνυμα 'αποποινικοποίησης' για την παράνομη θανάτωση και παγίδευση μεταναστευτικών πουλιών.

Συνάμα, το BirdLife Cyprus πιστεύει ότι αυτή η τροπολογία θα αυξήσει το παράνομο κυνήγι και την παγίδευση με ξόβεργα, ιδιαίτερα κατά τους φθινοπωρινούς και χειμερινούς μήνες, καθώς τέτοια χαμηλά εξώδικα δεν είναι αποτρεπτικά για τους λαθροθήρες και τους παράνομους παγιδευτές.

Την ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης για το 2021 χρηματοδότησε η 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 2021 season. As ever, it is highlighted here 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.

As in Spring 2020, our Spring survey in 2021 consisted of a 'spot check' exercise, whereby a sample of active trapping sites from the previous spring seasons were selected and checked for activity. So a full survey following the BirdLife Cyprus trapping monitoring protocol was not undertaken. This was done for capacity reasons and because of reduced spring trapping in recent years.

Overall, 74 locations were checked and out of these, ten sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded seven active trapping sites, which showed evidence of trapping with limesticks, while four sites were detected with limesticks set out. All active sites were reported to the Game and Fauna Service, which confiscated 13 limesticks.

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 2021, we can compare the results of this year's survey with the previous year's results (spring 2020). This comparison shows that there has been an apparent increase in trapping with limesticks during spring 2021. This is also confirmed by the field data gathered by the visiting organization Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS). This shows that there were trappers who were active this spring, despite the fact that there were movement restrictions in place in order to combat the pandemic.

In December 2020, the Cyprus Parliament voted in various amendments to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" Law 152/2003. One amendment was for the reduction of the fine for the killing of migratory birds on a list of 14 protected, non-game species, either with the use of limesticks or with shooting. The fine for killing a bird of these species was previously set at 2000 euros per bird, but under the amendment was reduced to 200 euros for up to 50 birds. This is a clear relaxation of the law, especially as these 14 species are the target species for trappers and poachers for the 'ambelopoulia' dish. For more information on the law amendment please read our report from autumn 2020 [here](#). We believe that the increase in the use of trapping with limesticks noted this spring is linked to this law relaxation, as in practical terms these much lower fines have sent a message of 'decriminalization' of the illegal killing and trapping of migratory birds. Moreover Birdlife Cyprus believes that this amendment will increase illegal hunting and trapping with limesticks, particularly in the autumn and winter months, since such low fines are non-deterrent for poachers and bird trappers.

The costs for this spring survey were 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 '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 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 International². 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 year³.

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*

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' found [here](#).

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

method, they also lead to increased captures of non-target species, which can include species of conservation concern'. 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 2021 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 or 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).

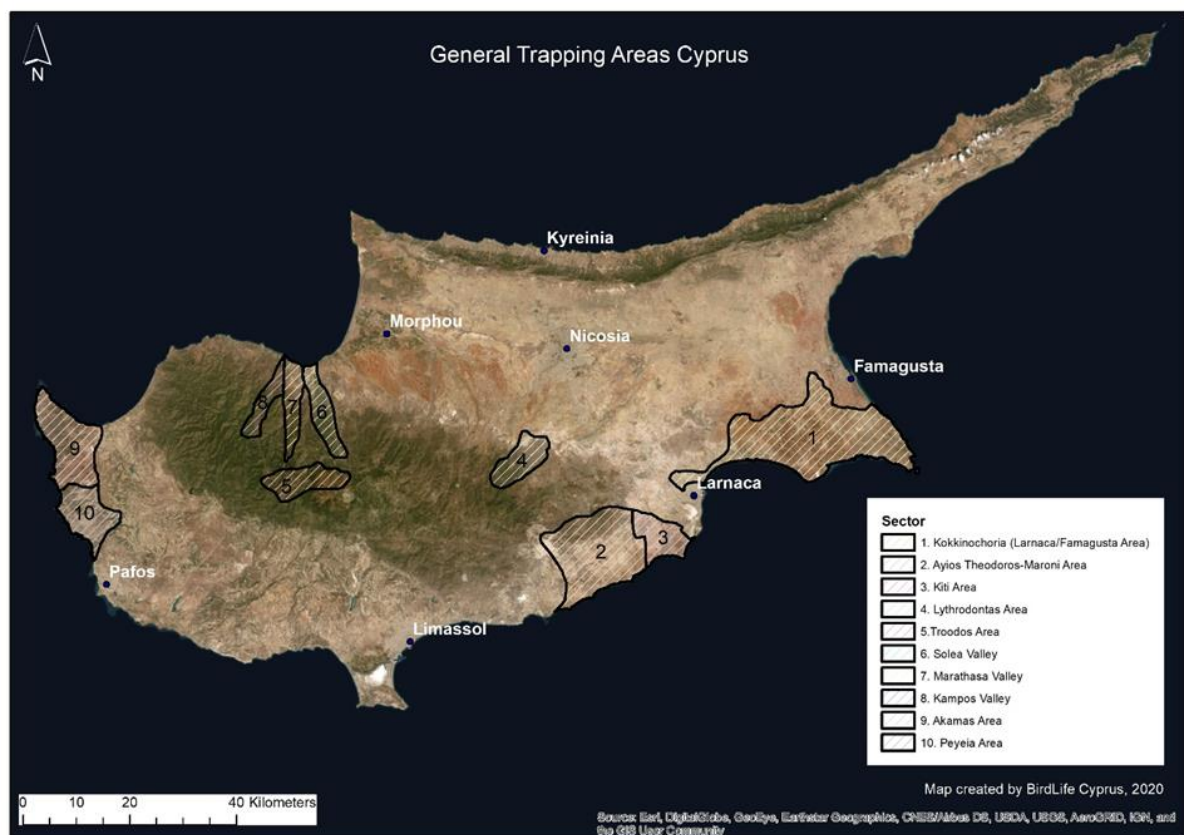


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 spring 2021 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁴, but rather a 'spot check' exercise. A similar 'spot check' exercise has been carried out during winter for the past 7 seasons. This is the second year that BirdLife Cyprus has used this simpler survey method for the spring season, primarily because trapping levels with mistnets in spring have been reducing year on year - during the 2019 spring trapping season no active nettrides 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 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 2021.

⁴ For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2020 trapping report [here](#).

3. Results

- Field survey: the spring 2021 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during the month of April, with seven days of fieldwork 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 95% 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 also interesting to see if people would risk trapping in spring, as during the whole month of April, there were movement restrictions enforced by the government in an attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19. 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. All active 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, 74 locations were checked, 55 within the Republic of Cyprus and 19 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – **Ten active limestick trapping sites were detected, all within the Republic of Cyprus**. Seven of the sites showed evidence of trapping with limesticks whereas at four sites limesticks were found set out – in total 57 limesticks were detected.

It is not possible to estimate the death toll for the entire spring season, because the full Birdlife Cyprus protocol was not followed this season. However, it is possible to estimate how many birds may have died on the limesticks that were found set out during the survey, which is 855 birds.

- Spring trapping activity: It is not possible to use the 2021 field data to draw any statistically reliable long-term trends for spring trapping activity. Firstly, this is the second 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 limestick trapping, rather than the mist netting sites which our survey usually focuses on. This is because our data from previous seasons showed a large decrease in mist netting activity during the spring seasons, which is an encouraging development, while trapping with limesticks is still taking place.

- 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	2021
Total squares checked	41	40	40	40	40	40	38	42	41	69 ¹	74 ¹
Total active net rides (m)	1475	387	669	908	190	120	101	53	0	0	0
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	18	12	5	7	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Limesticks/Limestick sites found active	0/0	142/4	5/1	26/2	0/0	4/1	0/0	0/0	4/1	11/3	57/4

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

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for Spring 2021:
 - For Republic areas, ten limestick trapping sites were found active, at four of them limesticks were set out on site.
 - For the SBA areas, no trapping sites were 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:
 - No Active locations were found.
 - Game & Fauna Service (GFS):
 - Ten locations were reported to the GFS. At one site 13 limesticks were confiscated. No further feedback was provided.

4. Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a 'spot check' exercise in April 2021 for a period of seven days in total, checking 74 locations. These locations were selected from trapping sites where spring trapping activity was recorded in the last three years. Out of these 74 locations, ten active limestick trapping sites were recorded where 57 set limesticks were detected.

This is the second 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. If we are to compare the number of active sites and the number of limesticks detected, we can see that there has been an increase in limestick trapping during spring 2021 compared to spring 2020. This increase is also supported by the field data from the CABS survey.

In an important related development, in December 2020, the Cyprus Parliament voted in various amendments to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" Law (152/2003). One amendment was for the reduction of the fine for the killing of migratory birds on a list of 14 protected, non-game species, either with the use of limesticks or with shooting. The fine for killing birds of these species was previously set at 2000 euros per bird, and has now been reduced to 200 euros for up to 50 birds. This is a clear relaxation of the law, especially as these 14 species are the target species for trappers and poachers for the 'ambelopoulia' dish. For more information on the law amendment please read our report from autumn 2020 [here](#). We believe that the increase in the use of trapping with limesticks noted this spring is linked to this law relaxation, as in practical terms these much lower fines have sent a message of 'decriminalization' for the illegal killing and trapping of migratory birds.

Moreover Birdlife Cyprus believes that this amendment will increase illegal hunting and trapping with limesticks, particularly in the autumn and winter months, since such low fines are non-deterrent for poachers and bird trappers.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2021 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

Survey data for spring 2021

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

Confidential information. Data only provided upon approval of request

Appendix 2

Estimation of numbers of birds caught during spring 2021

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
- 60 days is the duration of the trapping period for spring and autumn seasons
- 50% scaling factor – applied for spring estimates to account for a lower number of migrating birds passing via Cyprus compared to the autumn
- 405 are the possible bird trapping squares within the survey area as identified from the surveillance programme in 2007 (the random sample of squares surveyed by BirdLife Cyprus is taken from these 405 squares)
- 75% of illegal trapping activity for all of Cyprus takes place within the survey area (based on input from enforcement authorities and other experts)
- 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 spring 2021:

For nets = No mistnet rides were detected during the spring 2021 survey

For limesticks = (Total number of limesticks found) x (0.5 birds per limestick per day) x (length of trapping season in days) x (50% scaling factor)

=57 x 0.5 x 60 x 50%

=855 birds caught within the survey area on limesticks

In total 855 birds could have been killed on limesticks found within the survey area during spring 2021.