



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2021-22 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 προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του BirdLife Cyprus, για τη χειμερινή περίοδο 2021-22. Επισημαίνεται ότι η αναφορά αυτή αποτείνεται στους υπεύθυνους στα κέντρα λήψης αποφάσεων και τους πολιτικούς, με σκοπό την ενημέρωση, την ευαισθητοποίηση και την κινητοποίηση για πιο αποτελεσματική πάταξη αυτού του χρόνιου οικολογικού προβλήματος.

Σημειώνεται ότι από τη χειμερινή περίοδο παγίδευσης του 2014, το BirdLife Cyprus δεν διενεργεί πλήρη έρευνα πεδίου όπως περιγράφεται στο πρωτόκολλο του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών. Αντί αυτού, για να έχει μια ξεκάθαρη εικόνα της κατάστασης της χειμερινής παγίδευσης, διενεργεί έλεγχο σε δείγμα σημείων (spot checks) όπου καταγράφηκε παγίδευση σε προηγούμενα χρόνια.

Συνολικά κατά τη χειμερινή περίοδο 2021-22, ελέγχθηκαν 136 σημεία, εκ των οποίων 12 καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε 16 ενεργές διαδρομές με δίχτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλεώνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίχτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση), με συνολικό μήκος 276 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 BirdLife Cyprus, τα ευρήματα αυτής της χειμερινής περιόδου υποδεικνύουν ότι η παράνομη παγίδευση με δίχτυα ήταν σε παρόμοια επίπεδα με αυτά της περσινής χειμερινής περιόδου (2020-21), όπου καταγράφηκε μειωμένη παγίδευση σε σύγκριση με την χειμερινή περίοδο 2018-19. Σημειώνουμε ότι τα επίπεδα χειμερινής παγίδευσης επηρεάζονται επίσης πολύ από τους αριθμούς τζίκλων που διαχειμάζουν στο νησί καθώς και από τις καιρικές συνθήκες, και επομένως δεν εξαρτώνται αποκλειστικά από την αποτελεσματικότητα της επιβολής του νόμου.

Κοιτάζοντας το 2021 συνολικά, και με βάση τις καταγραφές του BirdLife Cyprus για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα, εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι για το 2021, μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν συνολικά γύρω στα 814.000 πουλιά εξαιτίας της παράνομης παγίδευσης σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, σε σύγκριση με τα 406.000 χιλιάδες πουλιά που εκτιμούμε ότι μπορεί να σκοτώθηκαν το 2020. Αυτή η αύξηση οφείλεται στην αύξηση των επιπέδων παγίδευσης με δίχτυα που καταγράφηκε το φθινόπωρο του 2021 στις, ιδιαίτερα εντός της Κυπριακής Δημοκρατίας. Αυτό μπορεί να αποδοθεί σε μια σειρά χαλαρώσεων στον «Περί Προστασίας και Διαχείρισης Αγρίων Πτηνών και Θηραμάτων Νόμος» τις οποίες ψήφισε η Κυπριακή Βουλή τον Δεκέμβριο 2020, οι οποίες πιστεύουμε ότι πέρασαν ένα μήνυμα αποποινικοποίησης και ανοχής σχετικά με την παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών.

Το κόστος της χειμερινής έρευνας 2021-22 καλύφθηκε από τη NABU (BirdLife στη Γερμανία) και την 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 winter 2021-22 season. 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 since the 2014 winter trapping season, BirdLife has not undertaken a complete survey following its standard survey protocol. Instead, in order to have a reliable 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, 136 locations were checked during the winter 2021-22 season and out of these, 12 sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded 16 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 276 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 suggest similar levels as the 2020-21 winter season where reduced trapping was recorded compared to the 2018-19 season. Note that winter trapping levels are also much affected by the levels of Song Thrush to the island as well as weather conditions, and so are not solely dependent on enforcement effectiveness.

Looking at 2021 as a whole, and based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons, it is estimated that around 814,000 birds could have been killed across the whole island, in comparison to the 2020 estimate of 406,000 birds. This overall increase is due to an increase in mist-netting levels recorded in Autumn 2021 across all jurisdictions, particularly within the Cyprus Republic. This can be attributed to a series of relaxations to the “Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species” that were passed by the Cyprus Parliament in December 2020, which we believe has conveyed a message of “decriminalization” and tolerance regarding bird trapping.

The costs for this winter’s survey were covered by NABU (the BirdLife International Partner 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 Management 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, whereas in winter the main target species is the Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*). With Cyprus joining the EU in 2004, the 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 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'.

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 winter 2021-22 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 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), and NABU (the BirdLife International Partner in Germany), 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).

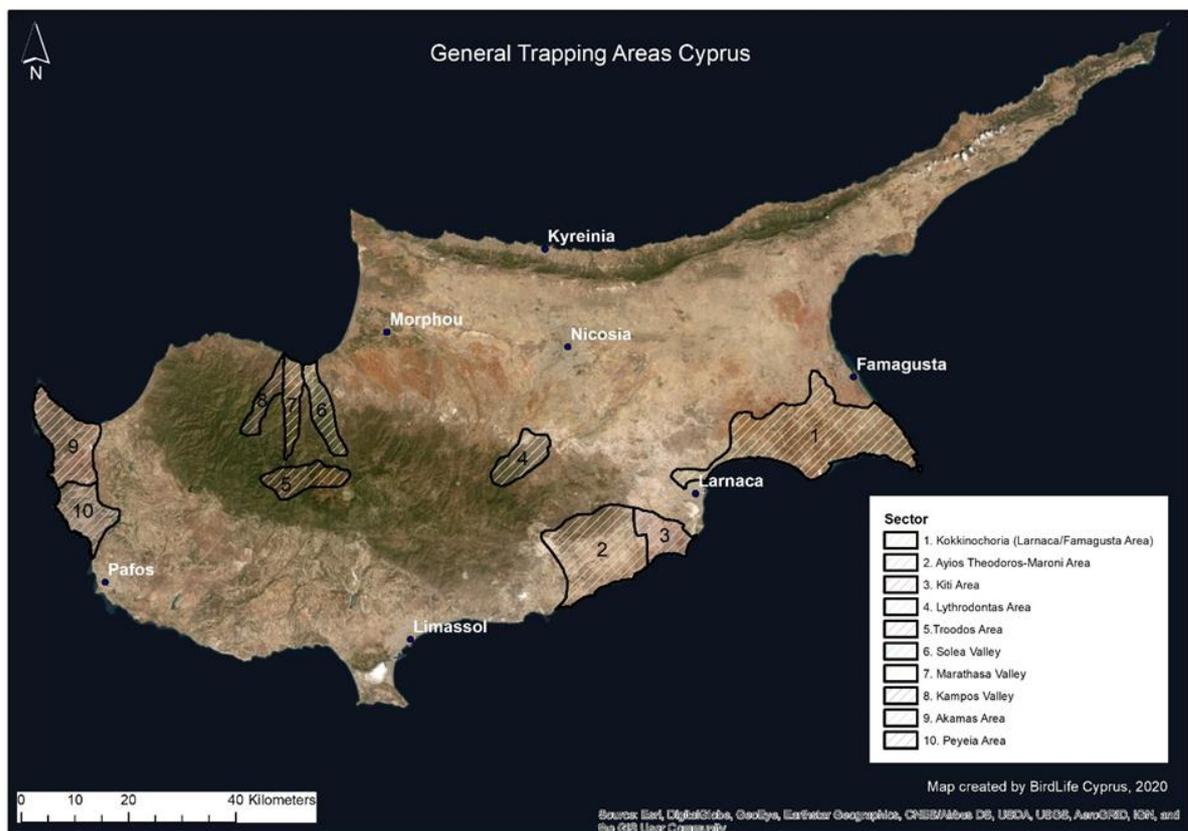


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 2021-

22 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁴, but rather a 'spot check' survey. This is the ninth consecutive winter season that BirdLife Cyprus has used this simpler survey method, primarily due to limited resources (data from prior field surveys are presented in Appendix 3).

This method involves undertaking spot checks at 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 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 RSPB (BirdLife in UK) for supporting the project financially since the beginning in 2002. Furthermore, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank NABU (the BirdLife International partner in Germany) for their financial support since 2013 onwards. BirdLife Cyprus would also like to thank BirdLife Switzerland for their financial support in the purchase of a new vehicle. Finally, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank the volunteers that helped in the monitoring survey and the gathering of the field data.

⁴ For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2021 trapping report [here](#).

3. Results

- Field survey: the winter 2021-22 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out from mid-January till the beginning of February, with 14 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 survey was undertaken, checking a percentage of trapping sites where mist-netting activity had been detected in the past⁵, as well as some sites which the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) had found activity in the previous winter season. The sites were randomly selected for the field survey 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 or the Cyprus Game & Fauna Service, depending on the location of the finds.
- Summary of field findings: In total, 136 locations were checked, 99 within the Republic of Cyprus and 37 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – **nine active mist-netting sites** were detected, as well as **three active limestick sites**. The field team recorded **16 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 276 metres** (11 rides were classified as ‘Active No Net’ rides⁶ and five rides were classified as ‘Prepared’⁷).
- 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 carried out for the last nine winter seasons i.e. since 2013) – the field data suggest a similar level of trapping activity recorded this winter season compared to the previous winter.
- Table 1 summarizes the field data for the winter surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken since 2013-14 when a transition to the spot-check style survey began. For data on Winter trapping activity prior to 2013-14 please see Appendix 3. Trapping level for the 2021-22 season are on similar levels as the 2020-21 season.

⁵ Because of a noted increase in limestick trapping during the autumn 2021 season, we also included several limestick trapping sites in our survey for this winter season. In the past limestick trapping sites were not included in the survey as trapping with limesticks happened mainly during the autumn and spring seasons.

⁶ 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*.

⁷ 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 from 2013-14 onwards

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Total locations/points checked	87	90	73	108	100	126	180	150	136
Total active net rides (m)	1067	1415	627	765	183	617	302	280	276
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	53	48	15	15	0	5	1	0	0

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2021-22:
 - For Republic areas, eight active net rides for mist-netting were detected after checking 99 locations, summing up to a length of 136 meters. Two locations where limestick trapping was taking place were also detected.
 - For the SBA areas, eight active net rides for mist-netting were detected after checking 37 locations, summing up to a length of 140 meters⁸. One location where limestick trapping was taking place was also detected.

- Enforcement:

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

 - SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback:
 - All sites were placed under observation; however, nothing further was detected by the SBA police. Confiscations of poles and pole bases occurred at two locations.

 - Game & Fauna Service:
 - No official feedback was received from the Game and Fauna Service. However, we have partial feedback from wardens who checked locations that BirdLife reported to them directly. At one location 50 limesticks were confiscated and one man was reported for trapping and received a €2400 fine.

Death toll estimate for the whole of 2021:

⁸ Joint monitoring was carried out on three different occasions with the assistance of SBA police. On the 19/1/22 we checked 14 locations of which two active mist-netting sites were found. On the 27/1/22 we checked 9 locations of which one active mist-netting site was found. On 3/2/22 we checked 14 locations of which three were active, two mist-netting sites and one limestick trapping site.

- During spring 2021, from the limesticks that were found during the survey, it was estimated that **855** birds could have been killed across whole of Cyprus. However this does not accurately represent the number of birds killed, as the majority of sites which our field team located recorded evidence of glue and feathers but did not have set limesticks (BirdLife Cyprus, October 2021 [report](#)).
- During autumn 2021, it was estimated that just under **806,000** birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, February 2022 [report](#)).
- The levels of winter 2020-21 mist-netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see above) suggest that trapping was at a similar level compared to last year. As the method for the winter survey is not the same as autumn, it is not possible to establish an accurate death estimate comparable to that of the autumn. It is however possible to estimate the number of birds killed in nets/net rides that were found active during our spot check survey. This is therefore conservatively estimated to be around **7,000** birds. It is highlighted though that this number would be significantly higher for the whole of Cyprus.
- **Therefore, it is conservatively estimated that during the whole of 2021, just under 814,000 birds could have been illegally trapped and killed across Cyprus.**

4. Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check survey in January and February 2022 for a period of 14 days in total, checking 136 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 during our full survey programme, as well as other locations found by CABS members in previous seasons. Out of these 136 locations, nine active mist-netting sites were recorded, as well as three limestick trapping sites. The findings included 16 active net rides for mist netting, which summed up to a length of 276 metres.

Despite the fact that statistically reliable trends cannot be drawn from the winter survey data, the field data indicate that mist-netting levels for this winter season were at similar levels as the 2020-21 winter season where reduced trapping was recorded compared to the 2018-19 season.

The winter trapping season tends to fluctuate each year according to the number of Song Thrushes, the target species for winter trapping, which come to Cyprus to overwinter. This winter the number of Song Thrushes wintering in Cyprus was much reduced. This is evident from our birdwatching records for January/February 2021.

Looking at 2021 as a whole, and based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2021, autumn 2021 and the winter 2021-22 seasons, it is conservatively estimated that about 814,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2021. **This is a large increase compared to last year's estimate of approximately 406,000 birds; this is due to a significant increase in mist-net trapping in autumn 2021** (when an overall increase in mist-netting of 100% was recorded).

We believe that this increase can be attributed to a series of relaxations to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" law, passed by the Cyprus Parliament in December 2020. These relaxations have sent a message of "decriminalisation" and tolerance of bird trapping to the trappers who on several occasions resorted to violence during the Autumn 2021 season.

The most recent relaxation of the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" law involved the reduction of fines for the hunting and trapping with limesticks of birds from a list of 14 specific species which happen to be the target species for the illegal "Ampelopoulia" songbird dish. The fines were reduced from €2000 for a single bird, to €200 for up to 50 birds from this list of 14 species. For more information on this see our report for Autumn 2021 [here](#).

These relaxations are a serious setback to the protection of migratory species in Cyprus, which the European Commission has already recognised as an issue in a strict letter sent to the Cyprus Government last October 2021, raising concerns for these law changes. We hope the pressure will be maintained and that the Cyprus Government and Parliament will take the necessary steps to 'correct' these disastrous relaxations and make all fines to start from 2000 euros, similar to the other offences.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2021 can be found [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 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 winter:

For nets = [(Total length of ANN+AUN+ASN rides)] / (average length of a net) x (20 birds per net per day) x (length of trapping season in days) x (50% scaling down factor)
= $195/12 \times 20 \times 40 = 11,067 \times 50\%$
= 6,500

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)
= $50 \times 0.5 \times 40 = 40 \times 50\%$
= 500

Estimated number of birds killed in both nets/netrides and on limesticks found during our winter 2021-22 survey = 7000

Appendix 2

Survey data for winter 2021-22

Details of the active trapping sites detected during the winter 2021-22 survey

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Appendix 3

Summary of winter field data of mist-netting activity from 2007-08 to 2012-13.

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Total squares surveyed	44	44	81	53	39	38
Total active net rides (m)	497	804	3830	936	616	384
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	22	3	31	11	34	14