



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the spring 2022 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

Date: December 2022

Contents

Περίληψη.....	3
Summary.....	5
1. Overview of bird trapping in Cyprus.....	6
2. BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme.....	8
3. Results	10
4. Conclusions.....	12
Bibliography.....	13
Appendix 1.....	14
Appendix 2.....	15

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 2022. 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 2021, η ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης το 2022 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 τρία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε ένα ενεργό σημείο το οποίο είχε ενδείξεις παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα, και δυο σημεία στα οποία βρέθηκαν στημένα ξόβεργα.

Δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν στατιστικά βásiμα συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τις τάσεις της παγίδευσης για την άνοιξη, δεδομένου ότι το πλήρες πρωτόκολλο παρακολούθησης του BirdLife Cyprus δεν ακολουθήθηκε την Άνοιξη του 2022. Ωστόσο, με βάση αποκλειστικά τα στοιχεία που συλλέχθηκαν στο πεδίο φαίνεται ότι υπάρχει μια ενδεικτική μείωση της παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα σε σύγκριση με την Άνοιξη του 2021. Το BirdLife Cyprus πιστεύει ότι αυτή η ενδεικτική μείωση στην παγίδευση με ξόβεργα την άνοιξη οφείλεται στον μεγάλο αριθμό μεγάλων πρόστιμων που επιβλήθηκαν την Άνοιξη 2021. Πολλαπλοί παγιδευτές έλαβαν πρόστιμα 8000 ευρώ και άνω, γεγονός το οποίο φαίνεται να λειτούργησε αποτρεπτικά για άλλους παγιδευτές κατά την περίοδο παγίδευσης της Άνοιξης του 2022. Για τέταρτη συνεχή χρονιά το BirdLife Cyprus κατέγραψε μηδενική δραστηριότητα παγίδευσης με δίχτυα την Άνοιξη.

Η ενδεικτική μείωση που καταγράφηκε αυτή τη σεζόν είναι ένα βήμα προς τη σωστή κατεύθυνση για να σταματήσει εντελώς η παράνομη παγίδευση με ξόβεργα την Άνοιξη. Το BirdLife Cyprus πιστεύει ότι αυτή η ενδεικτική μείωση συνδέεται και με τα ψηλά, αποτρεπτικά πρόστιμα που προβλέπονται μέσω της νομοθεσίας – το αδίκημα της παράνομης παγίδευσης / θανάτωσης αποδημητικών πουλιών την περίοδο της άνοιξης τιμωρείται με 8000 ευρώ εξώδικο πρόστιμο. Αντίθετα, οι τελευταίες φθινοπωρινές περιόδους καταγραφών παρουσίασαν μια ενδεικτική αύξηση της παράνομης παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα αλλά και του παράνομου πυροβολισμού προστατευόμενων ειδών. Το BirdLife Cyprus πιστεύει ότι αυτή η ενδεικτική αύξηση συνδέεται με τα πολύ χαμηλά πρόστιμα που επιβάλλονται για αυτά τα αδικήματα κατά την φθινοπωρινή περίοδο. Το εξώδικο πρόστιμο είναι μόνον 200 ευρώ για την παράνομη θανάτωση (πυροβολισμό ή με τη χρήση ξόβεργων) για μέχρι και 50 πουλιά, κάτι που δεν είναι ούτε αποτρεπτικό ούτε τιμωρητικό. Το BirdLife Cyprus ελπίζει ότι θα συνεχίσουν να επιβάλλονται βαριά πρόστιμα στους παγιδευτές την άνοιξη και πιστεύει ότι θα πρέπει να

υιοθετηθούν εξίσου ψηλά και αποτρεπτικά εξώδικα για τα αδικήματα της παράνομης παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα και τον παράνομο πυροβολισμό αποδημητικών πουλιών για την φθινοπωρινή σεζόν.

Την ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης για το 2022 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 2022 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.

Similar to spring 2021, our Spring survey in 2022 consisted of a 'spot check' survey, 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, three sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping activity taking place. The field team recorded one site that showed evidence of trapping with limesticks, while two sites were found with limesticks set out.

It is not possible to draw statistically robust conclusions about the trends for spring trapping activity, since the standard monitoring protocol of BirdLife Cyprus was not followed for spring 2022. However, based solely on the data collected it appears that there is an indicative decrease in trapping with limesticks compared to Spring 2021. BirdLife Cyprus believes that this indicative decrease in springtime limestick trapping is due to a large number of hefty fines handed out over the 2021 spring trapping season. Multiple trappers received fines of 8000 euro or more, which seems to have acted as a deterrent to other trappers during the 2022 Spring trapping season. For the fourth year in a row BirdLife Cyprus recorded zero trapping activity with mistnets in spring.

The indicative decrease recorded this season is a step in the right direction towards ending trapping with limesticks in Spring. BirdLife Cyprus believes this indicative decrease is linked to the high, deterrent fines provided for through the legislation – the offense of illegal trapping/killing migratory birds in the spring season is punished with an on-the-spot fine of 8,000 euros. In contrast, recent autumn seasons have shown an indicative increase in limestick trapping and illegal shooting of protected species. BirdLife Cyprus believes that this indicative increase is linked to the very low fines imposed for these offenses during the autumn season. The on-the-spot fine for the illegal killing (shooting or using limesticks) of up to 50 birds is only 200 euros, which is neither deterrent nor punitive. BirdLife Cyprus hopes that heavy fines will continue to be imposed on trappers in the spring and believes that equally high and dissuasive fines should be adopted for the offenses of illegal trapping and illegal shooting of migratory birds for the autumn season.

The costs for the 2022 spring 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 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 90 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. An 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 method, they also lead to increased captures of non-target species, which can include species of conservation*

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

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 2022 survey. It should be noted that during spring illegal trappers target mainly Blackcaps (*Sylvia atricapilla*), although other migrating songbirds 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).

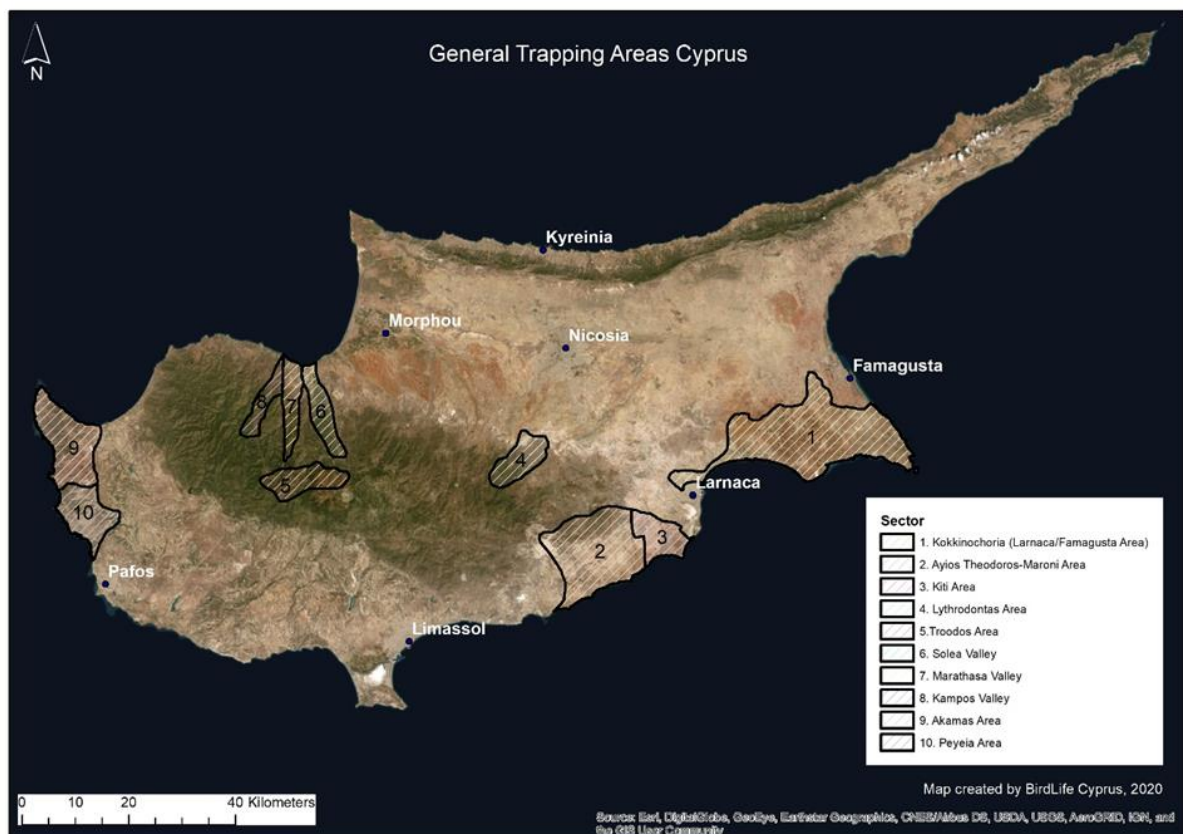


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 2022 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁴, but rather a 'spot check' survey, the results of which are not comparable, and so statistically robust conclusions cannot be drawn. A similar 'spot check' survey has been carried out during winter for the past 9 seasons. This is the third 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 net rides were recorded. Hence, Birdlife Cyprus re-evaluated its resources and methodology and it was decided that 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 (2019, 2020, 2021). As well as this, a greater focus was placed on selecting limestick trapping sites, as trapping with mistnets appears to have stopped altogether in Spring.

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 (the BirdLife International partner 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 2022.

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

3. Results

- Field survey: the spring 2022 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' survey was undertaken– it should be noted that 'spot check' field surveys have been carried out for winter monitoring for a number of years though. A proportion of the sites selected were from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) database, and it should be noted that a large majority of the sites checked were associated with limestick trapping in the past, most of them found active over the last three spring seasons (2019, 2020, 2021). 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, 63 within the Republic of Cyprus and 11 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA) – **three active limestick trapping sites were detected, all within the Republic of Cyprus**. One of the sites showed evidence of limestick trapping taking place, while two locations had limesticks set out, one at each location (most likely the trappers had forgotten them while collecting their limesticks). For the fourth spring season in a row, zero mistnetting activity was recorded.
- Spring trapping activity: It is not possible to use the 2022 field data to draw any statistically reliable long-term trends for spring trapping activity. Firstly, this is the third year that BirdLife did not follow the standard monitoring protocol for the spring survey, hence our field data are not comparable with the previous survey seasons. Secondly, this new survey method, which was adopted in 2020, focusses on selecting sites where trapping has been detected in the last three spring trapping seasons (2019, 2020, 2021). 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 (Note: Data for the last three years are not strictly comparable to the data from 2011-2019, as detailed above).

Table 1. Summary of spring field data of mist netting activity 2011-2022

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total squares checked	41	40	40	40	40	40	38	42	41	69 ¹	74 ¹	74 ¹
Total active net rides (m)	1475	387	669	908	190	120	101	53	0	0	0	0
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	18	12	5	7	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limesticks found set up	0	142	5	26	0	4	0	0	4	11	57	2
Sites found active	0	4	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	8	10	3

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

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for Spring 2022:
 - For Republic areas, three limestick trapping sites were found active, at two 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):
 - Three active locations were reported to the GFS. No further feedback was provided.

4. Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a 'spot check' survey in April 2022 for a period of seven days in total, checking 74 locations. These locations were selected from a majority of limestick trapping sites where spring trapping activity was recorded in the last three years. Out of these 74 locations, three active limestick trapping sites were recorded.

This is the third season that this survey method is adopted by BirdLife Cyprus for spring field monitoring of trapping. While the results from each season are not comparable statistically, there appears to be an indicative decrease in trapping in Spring 2022 compared to Spring 2021. BirdLife Cyprus believes that this decrease in springtime limestick trapping is due to a large number of hefty fines handed out over the 2021 spring trapping season. According to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" Law 152/200, trapping/hunting in spring carries an automatic 8,000 euro fine, due to the fact that it is the breeding season. Multiple trappers received fines of 8,000 euro or more during the Spring 2021 trapping season, which likely acted as a deterrent to trappers during the Spring 2022 season.⁵ No mist net trapping activity was recorded for the fourth season in a row, a very positive finding.

The indicative decrease recorded this season is a step in the right direction towards ending trapping with limesticks in Spring altogether. BirdLife Cyprus believes this indicative decrease is linked to the high, deterrent fines provided for through the legislation – the offense of illegal trapping/killing migratory birds in the spring season is punished with an on-the-spot fine of 8,000 euros. In contrast, recent autumn seasons have shown an indicative increase in limestick trapping and illegal shooting of protected species. BirdLife Cyprus believes that this indicative increase is linked to the very low fines imposed for these offenses during the autumn season. The on-the-spot fine for the illegal killing (shooting or using limesticks) of up to 50 birds is only 200 euros, which is neither deterrent nor punitive. BirdLife Cyprus hopes that heavy fines will continue to be imposed on trappers in the spring and believes that equally high and dissuasive fines should be adopted for the offenses of illegal trapping and illegal shooting for the autumn season.

⁵ According to the [CABS report](#) from the Spring 2021 trapping season, 17 trappers received fines of 8000 euros or more.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2022 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 (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.
- 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 2022

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

Confidential Information. Only provided upon approval of request.

Appendix 2

Estimation of numbers of birds caught during spring 2022

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 2022:

For nets = No mistnet rides were detected during the spring 2022 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)

= 2 x 0.5 x 60 x 50%

= birds caught within the survey area on limesticks

In total 30 birds could have been killed on limesticks found set within the survey area during spring 2022. It should be noted that this is an underestimate of the death toll, as the two limesticks detected at two separate locations were very likely missed by the trappers, and more limesticks would have been set at each site.