



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2022-23 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus

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Contents

Περίληψη.....	3
Summary.....	4
1. Overview of bird trapping in Cyprus.....	5
2. BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme.....	7
3. Results	9
4. Conclusions.....	12
Bibliography.....	13
Appendix 1.....	14
Appendix 2.....	15
Appendix 3.....	16

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα αναφορά παρουσιάζει τα τελευταία ευρήματα του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του BirdLife Cyprus, για τη χειμερινή περίοδο 2022-23. 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 2022-23, ελέγχθηκαν 90 σημεία, εκ των οποίων τρία καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε επτά ενεργές διαδρομές για δίκτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλέωνες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίκτυα ή ευρήματα ότι γίνεται παγίδευση), με συνολικό μήκος 126 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 δίκτυα μειώθηκε σε σύγκριση με την περσινή χειμερινή περίοδο (2021-22). Σημειώνουμε ότι τα επίπεδα χειμερινής παγίδευσης επηρεάζονται επίσης πολύ από τους αριθμούς τζίκλων που διαχειμάζουν στο νησί καθώς και από τις καιρικές συνθήκες, επομένως δεν εξαρτώνται αποκλειστικά από την αποτελεσματικότητα της επιβολής του νόμου.

Κοιτάζοντας το 2022 συνολικά, και με βάση τις καταγραφές του BirdLife Cyprus για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα, εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι για το 2022, μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν συνολικά γύρω στα 460.000 πουλιά εξαιτίας της παράνομης παγίδευσης σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, σε σύγκριση με τα 814.000 χιλιάδες πουλιά που εκτιμούμε ότι μπορεί να σκοτώθηκαν το 2021. Αυτή η μείωση οφείλεται στην μείωση των επιπέδων παγίδευσης με δίκτυα που καταγράφηκε το φθινόπωρο του 2022, σε όλες τις δικαιοδοσίες. Ενώ τα πρόστιμα για την παγίδευση με δίκτυα είναι αποτελεσματικά στη μείωση των επιπέδων παγίδευσης, τα πολύ χαμηλά πρόστιμα για την χρήση ξόβεργων δεν έχουν το ίδιο αποτέλεσμα, όπως είχε προειδοποιήσει το BirdLife Cyprus όταν ψηφίστηκαν οι χαλαρώσεις τον Δεκέμβριο 2020 στην σχετική νομοθεσία «Περί Προστασίας και Διαχείρισης Αγρίων Πτηνών και Θηραμάτων Νόμο». Θεωρούμε ότι αυτό έχει μεταφέρει ένα μήνυμα «αποποινικοποίησης» και ανοχής όσον αφορά την παγίδευση με ξόβεργα. Αυτό πιθανώς εξηγεί γιατί η παγίδευση με ξόβεργα παρέμεινε σε υψηλή επίπεδα - πάνω από 1500 ξόβεργα κατασχέθηκαν από την Υπηρεσία Θήρας και Πανίδας το φθινόπωρο του 2022.

Το κόστος της χειμερινής έρευνας 2022-23 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 2022-23 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 survey is undertaken, whereby a sample of previously recorded trapping sites is checked for bird trapping activity.

Overall, 90 locations were checked during the winter 2022-23 season and out of these, three sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded seven 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 126 metres.

Although it is not possible to draw reliable 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 a reduction in trapping levels compared to the 2021-22 season. Note that winter trapping levels are also much affected by the numbers of Song Thrush migrating and wintering on the island as well as weather conditions, and so are not solely dependent on enforcement effectiveness.

Looking at 2022 as a whole, and based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons, it is estimated that around 460,000 birds could have been killed across the whole island, in comparison to the 2021 estimate of 814,000 birds. This overall decrease is due to a significant decrease in mist-netting levels recorded in Autumn 2022 across all jurisdictions. Fines for mist-net trapping are effective in decreasing levels of mist-netting. However, the very low fines for limestick use have the opposite effect, as BirdLife Cyprus had warned when a series of relaxations were passed in December 2020 to the “Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species” law. We believe this has conveyed a message of “decriminalization” and tolerance regarding trapping with limesticks. This likely explains why limestick trapping remained high, over 1500 confiscated by the Game and Fauna Service in Autumn 2022.

The costs for the winter 2022-23 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 – 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 in the past 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, trappers nowadays use illegal electronic calling devices that imitate the calls of migratory birds (song playback). 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 is highly effective in luring birds towards trapping sites (Sebastianelli M. *et al* 2020)⁴. 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*

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

⁴ The study can be found [here](#).

conservation concern'. These calling devices can often be heard 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 2022-23 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 'delicacies' in local restaurants or 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. 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).

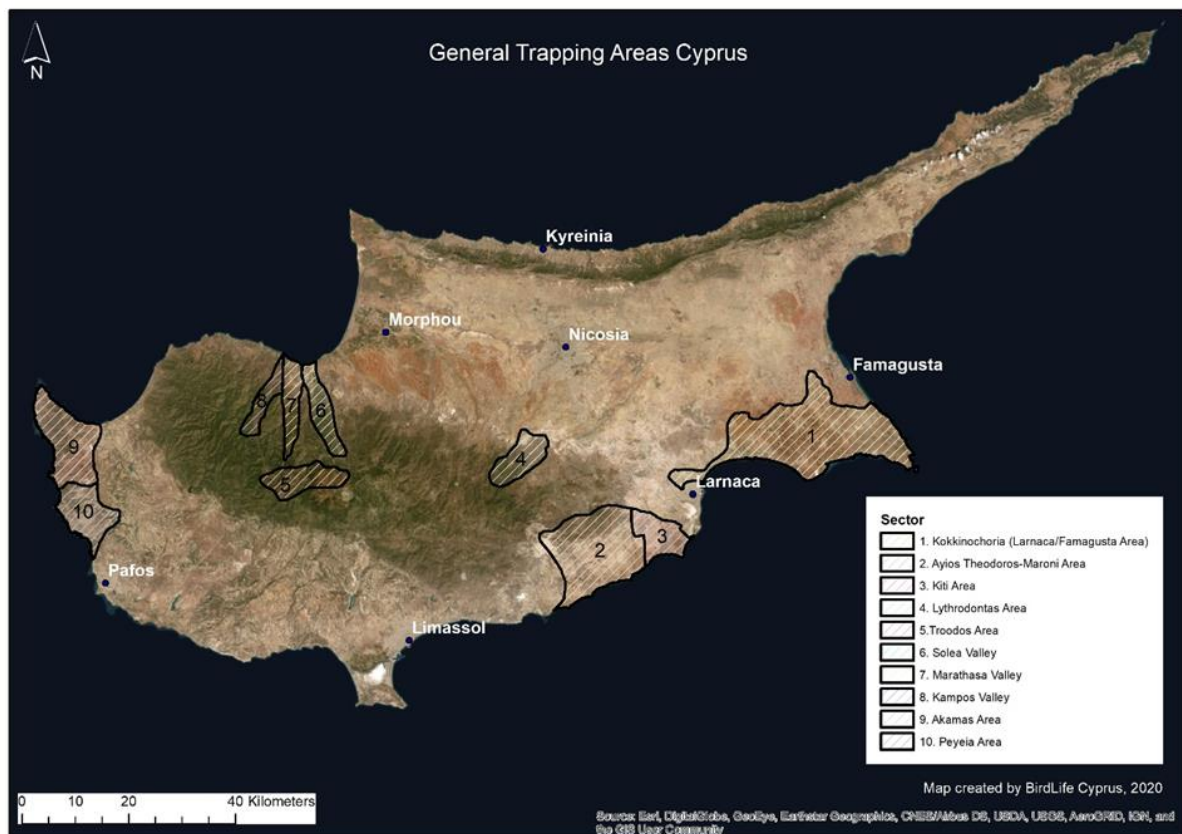


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 2022-23 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁵, but rather a 'spot check' survey. This is the tenth 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. Finally, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank the volunteer that helped in the monitoring survey and the gathering of the field data.

⁵ For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2021 trapping report [here](#).

3. Results

- Field survey: the winter 2022-23 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out from the middle of January until the end of January, with nine days of field work in total. As already stated, a spot check survey was undertaken, checking a percentage of trapping sites where mist-netting activity had been detected in the past⁶, 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. A very low number of wintering song thrushes were observed on the island in December 2022, and knowing that winter trapping is linked to the thrush migration, the survey effort for the 2022-23 season was reduced in order to utilise our resources more efficiently. However, in order to maintain an overall picture of the winter trapping status, locations which have been found active year on year were selected and surveyed, while also making sure that there was representative coverage of locations across both jurisdictions. 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, 90 locations were checked, 64 within the Republic of Cyprus and 26 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA). **Three active mist-netting sites** were detected. Within these active sites, the field team recorded **seven 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 126 metres** (all seven of the active netrides were classified as ‘Prepared’⁷). Looking at the previous survey records for these three specific locations and the evidence found there (short grass in the netrides, poles and pole bases on site), it would be safe to assume that trapping took place at these sites for some period during the winter season, however when the sites were checked, no feathers or blood were found, and so were classified as ‘Prepared’.
- 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 ten winter seasons i.e. since 2013) – the field data suggest a reduced level of trapping activity recorded this winter season compared to the previous winter.

⁶ Because limestick use during the autumn 2022 season remained high, 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 mainly happens during the autumn and spring seasons.

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 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 levels for the 2022-23 season are lower compared to the 2021-22 season and are the lowest recorded since the start of the winter monitoring

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	2022-23
Total locations/points checked	87	90	73	108	100	126	180	150	136	90
Total active net rides (m)	1067	1415	627	765	183	617	302	280	276	126
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	53	48	15	15	0	5	1	0	0	0

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2022-23:
 - For Republic areas, four prepared net rides for mist-netting were detected after checking 64 locations, summing up to a length of 66 meters.
 - For the SBA areas, three prepared net rides for mist-netting were detected after checking 26 locations, summing up to a length of 60 meters⁸.
- Enforcement:

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

 - SBA Police anti-poaching unit feedback:
 - The site was placed under observation; however, nothing further was detected by the SBA police.
 - Game & Fauna Service:
 - No official feedback was received from the Game and Fauna Service.

⁸ Joint monitoring was carried out on 27/1/2023 with the SBA police checking all 26 locations.

Death toll estimate for the whole of 2022:

- During spring 2022, from the limesticks that were found during the survey, it was estimated that **30** birds could have been killed. 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, December 2022 [report](#)).
- During autumn 2022, it was estimated that just under **460,080** birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, February 2022 [report](#)).
- The levels of winter 2022-23 mist-netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see above) suggest that trapping was reduced 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. As well as this, all sites found during this winter season were recorded as prepared, and so it is not possible to include them in the death estimate.
- **Therefore, it is conservatively estimated that during the whole of 2022, just over 460,100 birds could have been illegally trapped and killed across Cyprus.**

While a reduction in mist-net trapping was recorded in autumn 2022, limestick trapping levels remained high compared to autumn 2021. While fines for mist net trapping are high and effective, fines for limestick trapping and shooting of protected species are non-punitive and non-deterrent, which is why we believe that limestick use remained high.

A series of relaxations made to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" law over the years, the last of which was passed by the Cyprus Parliament in December 2020, have sent a message of "decriminalisation" and tolerance with regards to trapping with limesticks and the illegal shooting. Fines for the hunting and trapping with limesticks of birds from a list of 14 specific species has been 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 2022 [here](#).

4. Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a spot check survey in January 2023 for a period of nine days in total, checking 90 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 90 locations, three active mist-netting sites were recorded. The findings included seven active net rides for mist netting, which summed up to a length of 126 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 reduced compared to the 2021-22 winter season, the lowest levels of trapping activity since the winter monitoring started in Winter 2013-14. It should be noted that survey effort this winter was reduced compared to last winter.

The intensity of the winter trapping season tends to fluctuate each year depending on the number of Song Thrushes, the target species for winter trapping, which migrate to Cyprus to overwinter. This winter the number of Song Thrushes wintering in Cyprus was much reduced, even more than when compared to the 2021-22 season, as is evident from BirdLife Cyprus birdwatching records for January/February 2023.

Looking at 2022 as a whole, and based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2022, autumn 2022 and the winter 2022-23 seasons, it is conservatively estimated that about 460,000 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2022. This is a large decrease compared to last year's estimate of approximately 814,000 birds; this is due to a significant decrease in mist-net trapping in autumn 2022 (when an apparent decrease of 49% was recorded compared to autumn 2021).

The reduction noted in 2022 is a welcome result, and something which BirdLife Cyprus hopes to see repeated in 2023.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2022 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 considered 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)
= 0/12x20x40 = 0 x 50%
= 0 (see note just above)

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)
= 0 x 0.5 x 40 = 40 x 50%
= 0

Estimated number of birds killed in both nets/netrides and on limesticks found during our winter 2022-23 survey = 0

Appendix 2

Survey data for winter 2022-23

Details of the active trapping sites detected during the winter 2022-23 survey

Confidential Information. Only provided upon approval of request

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