



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the spring 2023 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus

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Περίληψη

Η παρούσα αναφορά παρουσιάζει τα τελευταία ευρήματα του συνεχιζόμενου προγράμματος παρακολούθησης της παράνομης παγίδευσης πουλιών του BirdLife Cyprus (Πτηνολογικός Σύνδεσμος Κύπρου) για την άνοιξη 2023. 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.

Αυτή είναι η τέταρτη συνεχόμενη χρονιά όπου η ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης περιλάμβανε έρευνα ελέγχου σημείων ('spot checks'). Για την έρευνα πεδίου 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 την παρακολούθηση των επιπέδων παγίδευσης. Αυτό έγινε τόσο λόγω του μειωμένου ανθρώπινου δυναμικού όσο και λόγω της μειωμένης δραστηριότητας παράνομης παγίδευσης κατά τη διάρκεια της ανοιξιάτικης μετανάστευσης τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Συνολικά ελέγχθηκαν 74 σημεία, εκ των οποίων δύο καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε επτά στημένα ξόβεργα στο πρώτο σημείο και τέσσερα στημένα ξόβεργα στο δεύτερο σημείο.

Δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν στατιστικά βέβαια συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τις τάσεις της παγίδευσης για την άνοιξη, δεδομένου ότι το πλήρες πρωτόκολλο παρακολούθησης του BirdLife Cyprus δεν ακολουθήθηκε την Άνοιξη του 2023. Ωστόσο, με βάση αποκλειστικά τα στοιχεία που συλλέχθηκαν στο πεδίο φαίνεται ότι τα επίπεδα παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα είναι σχεδόν μηδενικά, όπως ήταν και πέρσι. Το BirdLife Cyprus πιστεύει ότι αυτά τα πολύ χαμηλά επίπεδα παγίδευσης με ξόβεργα οφείλονται στα εξώδικα πρόστιμα τα οποία είναι πολύ υψηλά την περίοδο της άνοιξης και ξεκινούν από 8000 ευρώ για την παράνομη παγίδευση και θανάτωση πουλιών σε κλειστή περίοδο κυνηγίου. Τα τελευταία χρόνια την άνοιξη εκδόθηκαν πολλαπλά υψηλά πρόστιμα, τα οποία έχουν στείλει ένα ξεκάθαρο μήνυμα μηδενικής ανοχής κατά της ανοιξιάτικης παγίδευσης αποδημητικών πουλιών. Για πέμπτη συνεχή χρονιά το BirdLife Cyprus κατέγραψε μηδενική δραστηριότητα παγίδευσης με δίχτυα την Άνοιξη.

Τα πολύ χαμηλά επίπεδα παγίδευσης που καταγράφηκαν αυτή την άνοιξη είναι ένα βήμα προς τη σωστή κατεύθυνση για να σταματήσει εντελώς η παράνομη παγίδευση με ξόβεργα κατά τη διάρκεια της Άνοιξης. Ωστόσο, ενώ τα πρόστιμα για την παράνομη παγίδευση κατά τη διάρκεια της άνοιξης είναι υψηλά και αποτρεπτικά, τα πρόστιμα για την παράνομη παγίδευση κατά τη διάρκεια του φθινοπώρου δεν είναι ούτε αποτρεπτικά ούτε τιμωρητικά. Τα πολύ χαμηλά πρόστιμα που έχουν καθοριστεί της τάξης των 200 ευρώ για έως και 72 ξόβεργα έχουν στείλει ένα μήνυμα αποποινικοποίησης και ανοχής στους παγιδευτές που δραστηριοποιούνται το φθινόπωρο. Αυτό επιβεβαιώνεται και από την έρευνα του φθινοπώρου του 2022 όπου καταγράψαμε εξίσου υψηλά επίπεδα για τη χρήση ξόβεργων με το φθινόπωρο του 2021. Το BirdLife Cyprus ελπίζει να δει τη συνέχιση αυτών των πολύ χαμηλών επιπέδων παγίδευσης για την άνοιξη του 2024 και μετά, με στόχο τη μηδενική παράνομη παγίδευση στο άμεσο μέλλον. Παράλληλα καλούμε τις κυπριακές αρχές να αυξήσουν τα πρόστιμα για την παγίδευση με

ξόβεργα το φθινόπωρο, να καταργήσουν τη λίστα των 14 *‘λιγότερο προστατευόμενων’* μεταναστευτικών ειδών και να αυξήσουν τα πρόστιμα για τη θανάτωση όλων των ειδών πτηνών σε 2000 ευρώ ανά πτηνό, όπως ήταν προηγουμένως.

Την ανοιξιάτικη έρευνα παρακολούθησης για το 2023 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 2023 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.

For the fourth consecutive year, our Spring survey 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 due to limited resources and because of reduced spring trapping in recent years.

Overall, 74 locations were checked and out of these, two sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping activity taking place. Our field team recorded 7 set limesticks at one site, and 4 set limesticks at the other site.

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 2023. However, based solely on the data collected, it appears that trapping with limesticks in spring 2023 has reached very low levels, similarly to last year. BirdLife Cyprus believes that these very low levels of springtime limestick trapping are due to the large fines for Spring trapping which start at 8,000 Euros for the illegal killing of birds during a closed hunting season. The handing out of multiple large fines over the last few spring seasons, has sent a clear message to would be springtime trappers. For the fifth year in a row, BirdLife Cyprus recorded zero trapping activity with mistnets in spring.

The very low trapping levels recorded this season are a step in the right direction towards ending trapping with limesticks in Spring. However, while fines for trapping in spring are high and deterrent, fines for Autumn limestick trapping are neither deterrent nor punitive. The very low fines that have been set, at only 200 Euros for up to 72 limesticks, have sent a message of decriminalization and tolerance to the autumn trappers. This is supported by the autumn 2022 survey findings, which showed that limestick trapping remained at similarly high levels as for autumn 2021. BirdLife Cyprus hopes to see the continuation of these very low trapping levels for Spring in 2024 and onwards, aiming to have zero bird trapping in the near future. Moreover, we call upon the Cyprus authorities to increase the fines for limestick trapping in Autumn, to abolish the list of 14 'less protected' migratory species and to increase fines for the killing of all birds to 2,000 Euros per bird, as it was previously.

The costs for the 2023 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 trapped 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 have recently estimated this illegal business to be valued in the order of 10 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 concern'*. Calling devices can often be heard easily from hundreds of metres away from 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 Data source: Game and Fauna Service Facebook post (12th July 2023) regarding the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Game and Fauna Service and the Cyprus Police.

sites at night, highlighting the extensive use of calling devices and their intensity within the trapping areas.

This report presents the results for spring 2023 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).

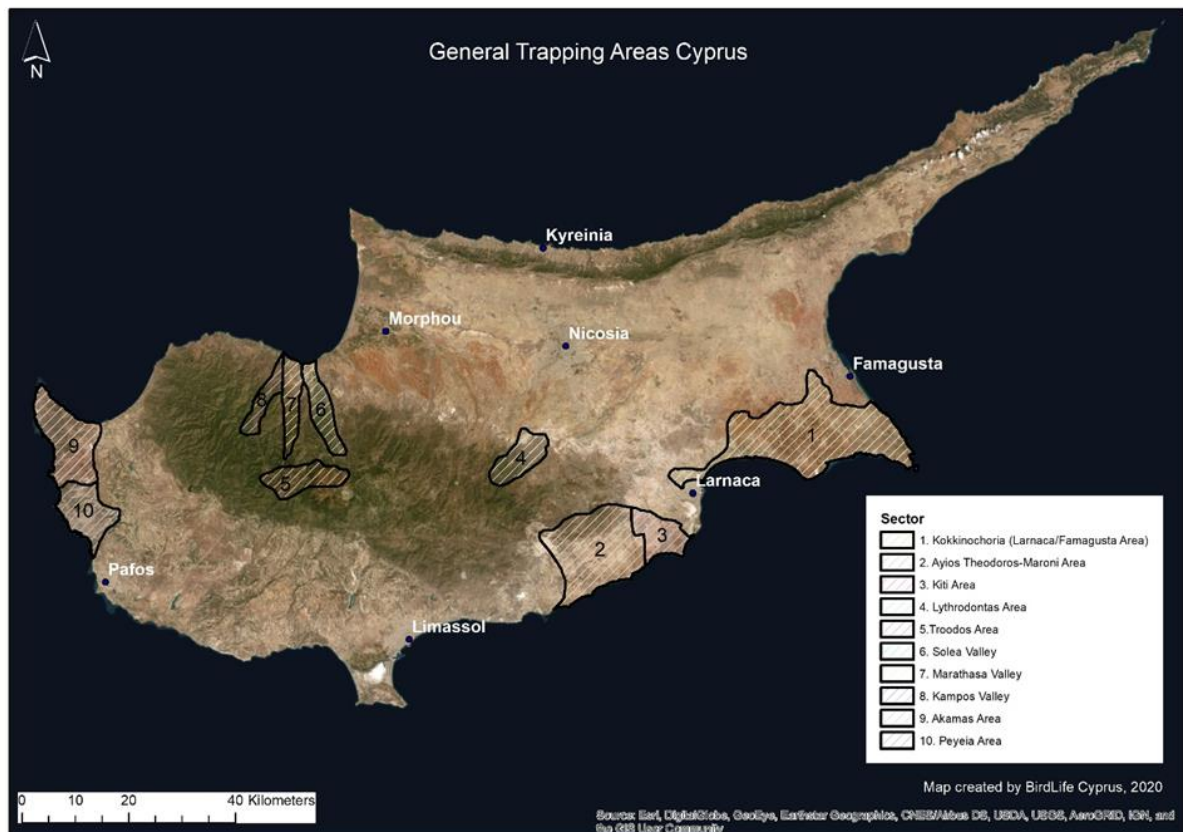


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 2023 season as described in its monitoring protocol⁴, but rather a 'spot check' survey. Hence the results 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 ten seasons. This is the fourth year that BirdLife Cyprus has used this simpler survey method for the spring anti-trapping field season, primarily because trapping levels with mistnets in spring have been reducing year on year to the point where it there has been zero trapping with mistnets recorded since the 2019 season. 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 (2020, 2021, 2022). 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 in recent years.

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 volunteers that helped in the monitoring survey and the gathering of the field data in spring 2023.

⁴ For more information regarding the surveillance programme of BirdLife Cyprus, read the latest autumn 2022 trapping report [here](#).

3. Results

- Field survey: the spring 2023 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out during the month of April, with seven days of fieldwork in total. As already mentioned, 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. However, in order to maintain an insight of 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 already. 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 (rather than mistnet setting) and most of them found active over the last three spring seasons (2020, 2021, 2022). 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, 60 within the Republic of Cyprus and 14 within the Dhekelia SBA. **Two active limestick trapping sites were detected, both of which were within the Republic of Cyprus.** At one location 7 limesticks were found set in a mulberry tree, while at the other location 4 limesticks were found set in a loquat tree. For the fifth spring season in a row, zero mistnetting activity was recorded.
- Spring trapping activity: It is not possible to use the 2023 field data to draw any statistically reliable long-term trends for spring trapping activity. Firstly, this is the fourth 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 Spring 2020, focusses on selecting sites where trapping has been detected in the last three spring trapping seasons (2020, 2021, 2022). And thirdly, almost all sites checked this season were associated with limestick trapping, rather than mist netting sites which our survey usually focuses on. Our data from previous spring seasons showed a large decrease in mist netting activity during spring, which is an encouraging development, while trapping with limesticks is still taking place in small numbers.

- Table 1 summarizes the field data for the spring surveys that BirdLife Cyprus has undertaken (Note: Data for the last four years are not strictly comparable to the data from 2011-2019, as explained above).

Table 1. Summary of spring field data of mist netting activity 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total squares checked	41	40	40	40	40	40	38	42	41	69 ¹	74 ¹	74 ¹	74 ¹
Total active net rides (m)	1475	387	669	908	190	120	101	53	0	0	0	0	0
Mist nets <i>in situ</i> (no)	18	12	5	7	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limesticks found set up	0	142	5	26	0	4	0	0	4	11	57	2	11
Sites found active	0	4	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	8	10	3	2

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

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for Spring 2023:
 - For Republic areas, two limestick trapping sites were found active, with a total of eleven limesticks found set at both sites.
 - 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):
 - Two active locations were reported to the GFS. No further feedback was provided.

4. Conclusions

BirdLife Cyprus undertook a 'spot check' survey in April 2023 for a period of seven days in total, checking 74 locations. These locations were selected from a dataset of trapping sites, a majority of which were limestick trapping sites, where spring trapping activity was recorded in the last three years. Out of these 74 locations, two active limestick trapping sites were recorded where eleven limesticks were found set.

This is the fourth season that this survey method is applied by BirdLife Cyprus for the field monitoring of spring trapping. No mist net trapping activity was recorded, for the fifth season in a row, which is a very positive development. While the results from different years are not comparable statistically, data collected this season showed that trapping with limesticks has reached very low levels. This reduction in spring trapping is welcomed, and is likely due to the deterrent fines for spring trapping, which start at 8,000 Euros for the illegal killing of birds during a closed hunting season. However, while spring trapping with limesticks has been reducing over the years, our monitoring data shows this is not the case when it comes to trapping with limesticks in autumn. Limestick trapping levels in autumn 2022 remained at similarly high levels to autumn 2021. We attribute this to the very low fines for limestick trapping offences -only 200 Euros for up to 72 limesticks, as well as to a change to the law in December 2020. This change to the "Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species" law introduced a list of 14 species of birds for which the illegal killing, with limesticks or shooting, carries a very non-punitive, and non-deterrent fine of 200 Euros for up to 50 birds. This has sent a message of decriminalisation to trappers and poachers, with regards to the trapping and killing of migratory songbirds in autumn. Spring is considered a closed hunting season, for the reason that it is the breeding period for almost all birds. Killing birds in spring causes more damage to a species than if they were to die in Autumn, due to the fact that adult birds dying will mean that chicks will be left without food and will also die. This is the reason why fines for illegal killing of birds in Spring are so much higher, and much more deterrent.

BirdLife Cyprus hopes to see a further reduction in limestick use in Spring 2024. Moreover, we call upon the Cyprus authorities to increase the fines for limestick trapping in Autumn, to abolish the list of 14 'less protected' species and to increase fines for the killing of all birds to 2,000 Euros per bird, as it was previously.

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2023 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 2023

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 2023

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 2023:

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)

= 11 x 0.5 x 60 x 50%

= 165 birds caught within the survey area on limesticks

In total 165 birds could have been killed on limesticks found set within the survey area during spring 2023.