



UPDATE on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus

Covering the winter 2025-26 findings of BirdLife Cyprus' continuing monitoring programme for illegal bird trapping in Cyprus

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Date: July 2026

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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 2025-26. Επισημαίνεται ότι η αναφορά αυτή απευθύνεται στους υπεύθυνους στα κέντρα λήψης αποφάσεων, 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, σαν αυτή που διενεργεί το φθινόπωρο με βάση το 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 2025-26 ελέγχθηκαν 101 σημεία, εκ των οποίων οχτώ καταγράφηκαν ως ενεργά για παράνομη παγίδευση πουλιών. Η ομάδα πεδίου κατέγραψε 12 ενεργές διαδρομές για δίκτυα (διαδρομές σε περιοχές με ακακίες ή άλλη βλάστηση π.χ. πορτοκαλεύρες, ελαιώνες, όπου βρέθηκαν δίκτυα ή ευρήματα που υποδεικνύουν παγίδευση), με συνολικό μήκος 240 μέτρα.

Παρόλο που δεν είναι δυνατόν να εξαχθούν στατιστικά βάσιμες τάσεις για τα χειμερινά επίπεδα παγίδευσης πουλιών, αφού δεν διενεργείται πλήρης έρευνα πεδίου βάσει του πρωτόκολλου του προγράμματος παρακολούθησης του BirdLife Cyprus, εντούτοις, τα ευρήματα αυτής της χειμερινής περιόδου υποδεικνύουν ότι η παράνομη παγίδευση με δίκτυα μειώθηκε σε σύγκριση με την περσινή χειμερινή περίοδο (2024-25). Ανεξάρτητα από την αποτελεσματικότητα επιβολής του νόμου από τις αρμόδιες αρχές, είναι επίσης σημαντικό να επισημάνουμε ότι τα επίπεδα χειμερινής παγίδευσης επηρεάζονται σημαντικά από τους αριθμούς τσιχλών που διαχειμάζουν στο νησί καθώς και από τις καιρικές συνθήκες. Τον χειμώνα 2025-2026, σύμφωνα με τα αρχεία πτηνοπαρατήρησής μας, και την έρευνα κυνηγετικής κάρπωσης της Υπηρεσίας Θήρας και Πανίδας, διαχείμασαν χαμηλοί αριθμοί τσιχλών στην Κύπρο.

Αναλύοντας τα δεδομένα του 2025 συνολικά για όλες τις εποχές, και με βάση τις καταγραφές του BirdLife Cyprus για την άνοιξη, φθινόπωρο και χειμώνα, εκτιμάται, συντηρητικά, ότι για το 2025, μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν συνολικά γύρω στα 970 000 πουλιά εξαιτίας της παράνομης παγίδευσης σε ολόκληρη την Κύπρο, σε σύγκριση με τα 833 000 χιλιάδες πουλιά που εκτιμούμε ότι μπορεί να θανατώθηκαν το 2024. Αυτή η συνολική αύξηση είναι πολύ ανησυχητική. Ενώ σημειώθηκε μια μείωση στην παγίδευση με δίκτυα το φθινόπωρο του 2025 στις περιοχές της Κυπριακής Δημοκρατίας, τα επίπεδα παγίδευσης με δίκτυα στις Βρετανικές Βάσεις σημείωσαν αύξηση. Θεωρούμε ότι αυτή η αύξηση οφείλεται σε μεγάλο βαθμό στην αναδιοργάνωση της ομάδας πάταξης λαθροθηρίας της Αστυνομίας των Βρετανικών Βάσεων και των επιχειρησιακών καθηκόντων της. Η συγκεκριμένη ομάδα πάταξης άλλαξε τη στρατηγική προληπτικής δράσης με νυχτερινές περιπολίες για όλη την περίοδο της παγίδευσης σε μια πιο κατασταλτική προσέγγιση, επικεντρωμένη στη διοργάνωση ενεδρών σε συγκεκριμένες τοποθεσίες μετά από τη συλλογή πληροφοριών.

Η χειμερινή έρευνα 2025-26 υλοποιήθηκε με την οικονομική στήριξη της NABU (BirdLife στη Γερμανία) και της RSPB (BirdLife στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο). Το BirdLife Cyprus είναι ευγνώμων για τη συνεχή, μακροχρόνια υποστήριξη των δύο αυτών εταίρων καθώς και του BirdLife Europe που επιτυγχάνεται τόσο μέσω προγραμμάτων χρηματοδότησης όσο και μέσω της ευαισθητοποίησης του κοινού σε διεθνές επίπεδο.

Summary

This report presents the latest findings of the on-going BirdLife Cyprus surveillance programme on illegal bird trapping, relating to the winter 2025-26 season. This report is an advocacy tool, mainly aimed at top decision makers, 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 Cyprus has not undertaken a complete survey based on the standard survey protocol used in Autumn surveys. 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, 101 locations were checked during the winter 2025-26 season and out of these, eight sites were found to be active with illegal bird trapping. The field team recorded 12 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 240 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 decrease in trapping levels compared to the 2024-25 season. Regardless of the effectiveness of law enforcement by the relevant authorities, it is also important to point out that winter trapping levels are also heavily 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. In winter 2025-26, according to our birdwatching records and the Game and Fauna Service hunting bag statistics, there were low numbers of wintering thrushes in Cyprus.

Looking at 2025 as a whole, and based on BirdLife Cyprus field data gathered for spring, autumn and winter seasons, it is estimated that around 970,000 birds could have been killed across the whole island, in comparison to the 2024 estimate of 833,000 birds. This overall increase is very concerning. While there was a reduction in mist-netting recorded in Autumn 2025 in the Cyprus Republic areas, mist-net trapping levels in the Eastern Sovereign Base Areas saw an increase. We believe this increase is largely due to the reorganization of the Sovereign Base Area Police (SBA) anti-poaching unit and its operational duties. In particular, this unit shifted from a proactive strategy of night patrols throughout the trapping season to a more reactive approach focused on carrying out ambushes at specific locations following intelligence gathering.

The Winter 2025–26 survey has been funded by NABU (BirdLife in Germany) and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK). Together with BirdLife Europe, these partners have provided long-standing support to BirdLife Cyprus in its efforts to combat illegal bird trapping, both through financial contributions and by raising international awareness of the issue. BirdLife Cyprus acknowledges and greatly appreciates their continued and sustained support.

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 158 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 and Fauna Service have 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, 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 conservation concern*'. These calling devices can often be heard from hundreds of metres

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.

⁴ The study can be found [here](#).

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 2025-26 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 (BirdLife 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).

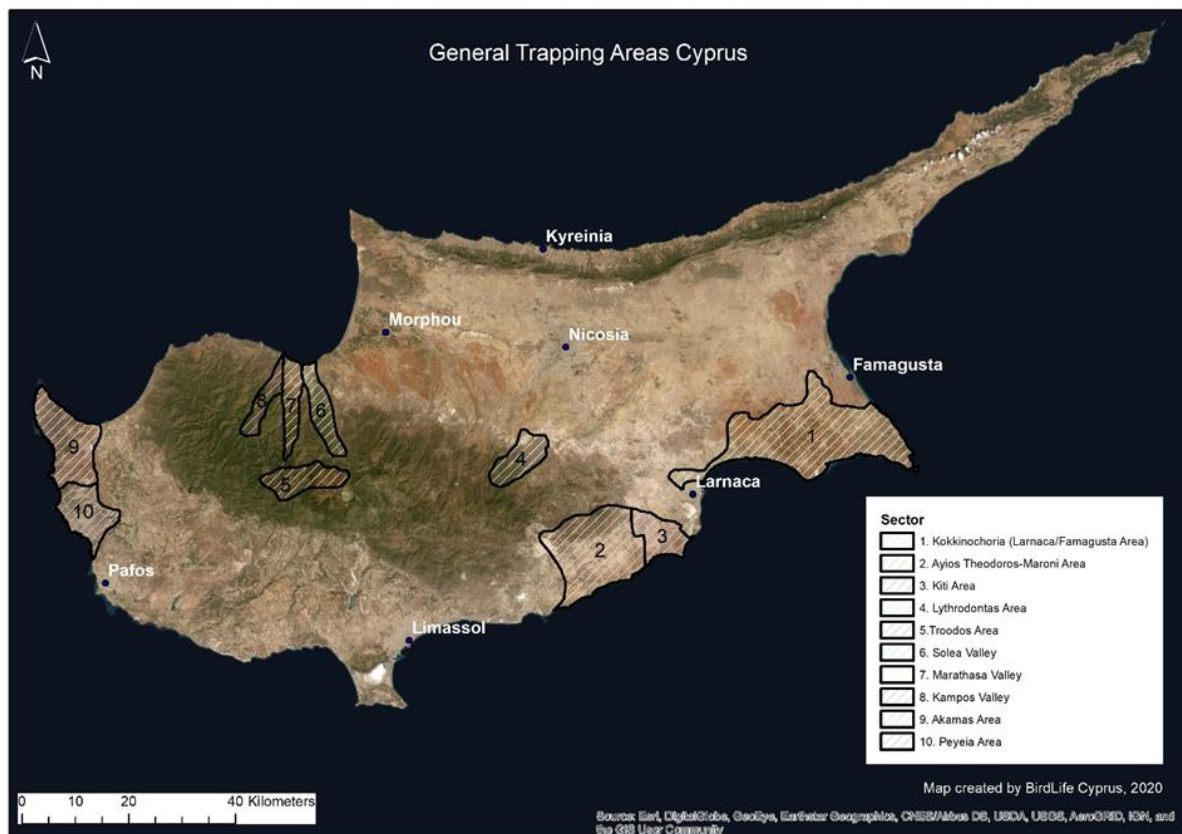


Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the main trapping areas

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 2025-26 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 (BirdLife in Germany) for their financial support since 2013 onwards, as well as BirdLife Europe for their continued support towards our anti-trapping campaign. Finally, BirdLife Cyprus would like to thank the multiple volunteers 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 2025 trapping report [here](#).

3. Results

- Field survey: the winter 2025-26 spot check survey of trapping sites was carried out from the middle to 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 Eastern Sovereign Base Area - SBA. In order to utilise resources more efficiently, the survey effort for the 2025-2026 trapping season was reduced. 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, 101 locations were checked, 76 within the Republic of Cyprus and 25 within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area (SBA). **Seven active mist-netting sites, and one active limestick trapping sites** were detected in total. Within these active sites, the field team recorded **12 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 240 metres** (nine of the active netrides were classified as ‘Prepared’⁷, two netrides were classified as ‘Active No Net’ netrides⁸, and one netride was classified as ‘Active Unset net’⁹). The limestick trapping site did not have limesticks actively set, but rather evidence of limestick trapping was found (fresh glue and feathers in the trees are evidence of limestick trapping).
- 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 decrease of trapping activity recorded during the 2025-26 winter season compared to the previous winter.

⁶ Because limestick use during the autumn 2025 season remained at high levels, 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Active Unset Net: A net ride where the trapper has left the mist net on the poles but it is furled i.e. the mist net is not stretched up for catching birds but lowered down (or the net is placed e.g. under a tree).

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 survey methodology began. For data on Winter trapping activity prior to 2013-14 please see Appendix 3. Trapping levels for the 2025-26 season are lower compared to the 2024-25 season.

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	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Total locations/ points checked	87	90	73	108	100	126	180	150	136	90	99	106	101
Total active net rides (m)	1067	1415	627	765	183	617	302	280	276	126	809	536	240
Mist nets in situ (no)	53	48	15	15	0	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

- Trapping under different jurisdictions for winter 2025-26:
 - For areas under the effective control of the Republic of Cyprus, 8 Prepared net rides for mist-netting, as well as one active limestick trapping site, were detected after checking 76 locations, summing up to a length of 155 meters.
 - For the SBA areas, 3 Active net rides (2 Active No Net rides, and 1 Active Unset Net ride), and 1 prepared net ride for mist-netting were detected after checking 25 locations, summing up to a length of 85 meters¹⁰.
- Enforcement:

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

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

¹⁰ Joint monitoring was carried out on 15/1/2025 with the SBA police checking all 25 locations.

Death toll estimate for the whole of 2025:

- During spring 2025, from the limesticks that were found during the survey, it was estimated that **15** 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, Spring 2025 report).
- During autumn 2025, it was estimated that just under **968,040** birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus (BirdLife Cyprus, Autumn 2025 report).
- The levels of winter 2025-26 mist-netting activity recorded by BirdLife Cyprus (see above) suggest that trapping reduced compared to last year. As the methodology we use for the winter survey is different to that of the Autumn survey we use a slightly different equation to calculate the death estimate. We have estimated, based on a number of assumptions, that **2,167** birds could have been killed at the active sites that were detected during the winter 2025-26 season (see Appendix 100). **Therefore, it is conservatively estimated that 970,222 birds could have been illegally trapped and killed across Cyprus during the whole of 2025.**

4. Conclusions

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 2024-25 winter season. This slight reduction in mist-net trapping is most likely attributed to a lower number of song thrushes wintering in Cyprus compared to the previous winter, rather than effective enforcement action.

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 there were relatively low numbers of migrating song thrushes passing through and wintering in Cyprus, compared to last year, as confirmed from BirdLife Cyprus birdwatching records for January/February 2026 and the Game and Fauna Service hunting bag statistics. Enforcement action, both in the SBA areas and the Cyprus Republic, need to increase and be consistent, particularly with a focus to tackle the large-scale trappers, and to be ready if and when there is a strong song thrush migration, as that will most likely lead to increased levels of trapping for that winter season.

Looking at 2025 as a whole, and based on the field data gathered by BirdLife Cyprus during spring 2025, autumn 2025 and the winter 2025-26 seasons, it is conservatively estimated that just over 970,200 birds could have been killed across the whole of Cyprus in 2025. This is a worrying increase compared to last year's estimate of approximately 833,170 birds.

The overall increase noted in 2025 is worrying, and something we hope will not continue into 2026. **During the autumn 2025 season, mist-net trapping in the Eastern Sovereign Base Area, appeared to increase substantially, compared to Autumn 2024, something which we attribute, mainly, to the change in tactics and strategy by SBA police, in regards to tackling illegal bird trapping. The police moved away from preventative tactics with daily night-time patrols of trapping areas and moved more towards reaction-based tactics, relying on intelligence gathering to organize pre-planned ambushes at active trapping sites. We believe that SBA police need to move back to its previous strategy of preventative patrols which was proven to be so effective in reducing the illegal trapping problem. Equally, the Cyprus Police anti-poaching unit need to continue their active engagement in tackling large-scale trappers. After many years of continued reports against these large-scale trappers by NGO's, the Cyprus police finally decided to act against these large-scale trappers after a campaign by CABS and presenters Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin exposed their inaction.**

Bibliography

- BirdLife Cyprus trapping reports from 2010 -2025 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)
= $65/12 \times 20 \times 40 = 4,333 \times 50\%$
= 2,167 (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)
= $0 \times 0.5 \times 40 = 0 \times 50\%$
= 0

Estimated number of birds killed in both nets/netrides and on limesticks found during our winter 2025-26 survey = 2,167

Appendix 2

Survey data for winter 2025-26

Details of the active trapping sites detected during the winter 2025-26 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