

Cyprus Report autumn 2006

Summary

Subsequent to the pressure applied by the EU accession commission in 2001 and the near cessation of widespread bird catching activities and consumption of protected birds in 2002, the bird catching lobby (mostly hunters) is making concerted efforts to return to its previous strength. In 2006 catching were radically changed methods, with the result that the numbers of nets and lime sticks confiscated may give only a vague or even a completely inaccurate picture of the current scale of poaching.

A more accurate benchmark for the real scale of bird killing with mist nets and lime sticks is given by the numbers of decoy birdcall machines (for attracting birds) heard during nights of migration. The estimated number of such machines heard operating at night in the Larnaca and Famagusta districts was at least 448 (for details of the projection see p.2). These records included up to 70% of the bird killing sites and varied from night to night, meaning that machines were moved, replaced and/or supplemented by new ones. Many of the loudspeakers used can cover a radius of over a kilometer. Considering that many bird catchers work in pairs or groups, the figure of 448 machines suggests that at least 500 poachers were involved in the catching activities. A further 30 % of active sites may be estimated to be worked without sound machines by poachers on their own home territory. Extended family groups are often involved in such cases, so in this instance, too, the estimated number of persons involved is high, probably far more than 100 poachers.

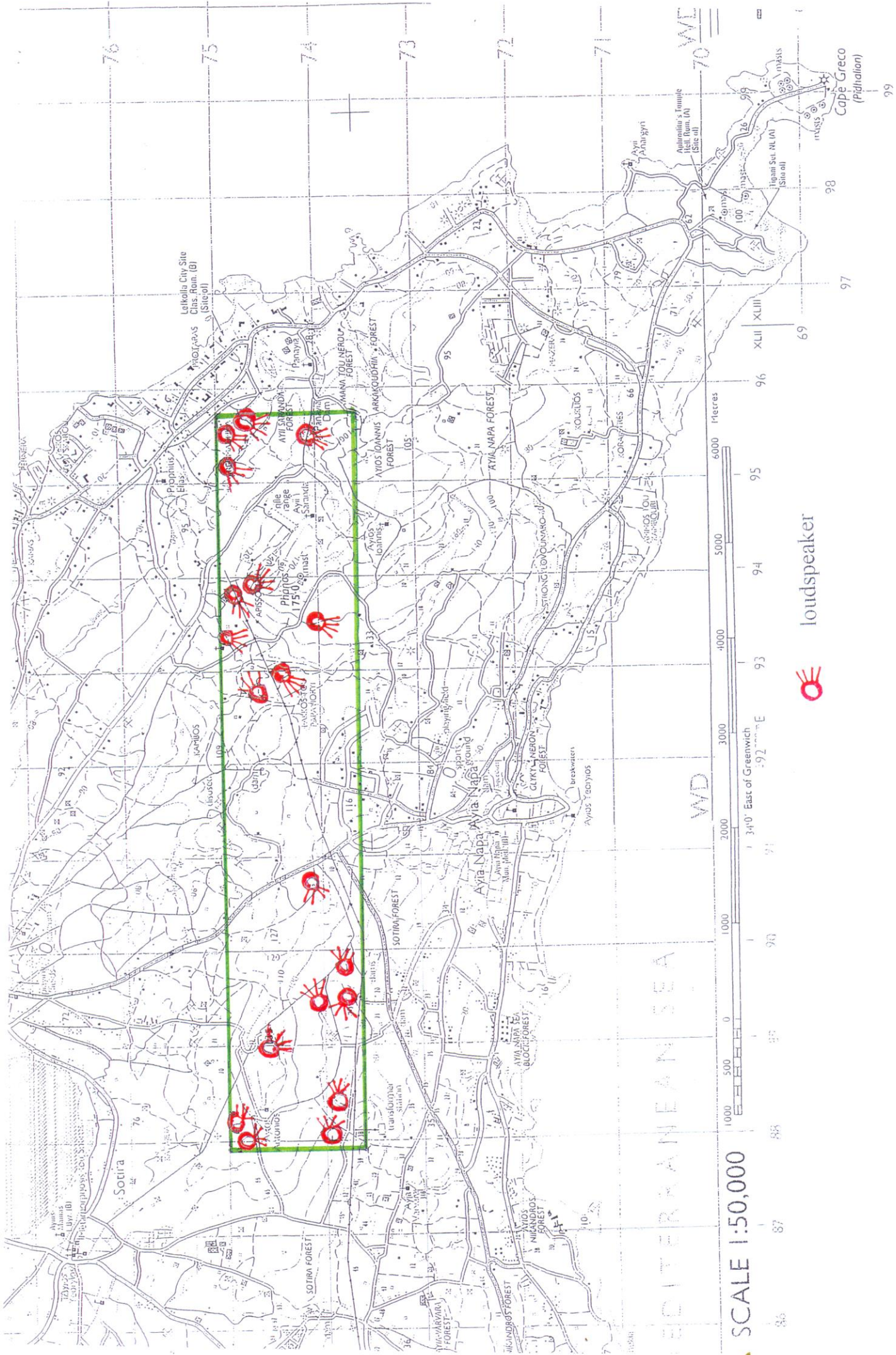
The above estimates suggest that on their daily dawn patrols the 6 -7 game wardens on duty are expected to deal with a veritable army of over 600 poachers.

Gastronomic dishes using protected birds are once again being openly sold in restaurants. **This indication as to a resistant market, together with the sharp increase in the use of sound machines, points to rising numbers of bird catchers and consumers, which in turn leads to the certain conclusion that a steadily growing number of migratory birds are being killed.**

Bird catching practices

The tactics of bird catchers in Famagusta District have changed greatly. Instead of putting out lime sticks and setting mist nets after sunset, most poachers no longer carry on their activities at dusk. The remaining 20% who are still active in the evenings are those who believe in the safety of their catching territories in (fenced) gardens or on hidden private ground. There you may still discover lime stick fields of 50- 200 sticks and nets. Many of these poachers avoid using sound machines.

From midnight to 5 am sound machines can be heard chirping all over the South Coast's many trapping places. From a single point in the fields one may hear 4 to 5 loudspeakers simultaneously at various distances. Whether decoy chirping can be heard only locally or for miles around is down to the brazenness of the poacher concerned. By shifting location, other loudspeakers from different directions will be heard. **The decoy coverage ranges uninterrupted from Deryneia to Mari** (Famagusta and Larnaca Districts), and there is no more effective death trap for birds than these chirping sound machines. Hundreds of migratory birds are attracted and killed, as traps are in place wherever there is scrub or



loudspeaker

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(fenced) gardens. Around 5 am the calls from the machines cease and before dawn the trappers arrive to begin their macabre round of killing with nets and limesticks, throwing stones into the trees where the tired migrants are roosting, so as to disturb the birds and force them into the traps. In a matter of hours, by 7 am, the murderous business is over.

Projection base (see map)

A projection base of 10,75 km², containing scrub and woodland as well as cultivated and industrial areas, was selected at random to represent the green belt of the Famagusta and Larnaca Districts (South Coast). The 10,75 km² territory, which was found to contain 19 active sound machines with decoy bird chirping played mostly at night, served as the projection base for the green belt from Deryneia / Paralimni to Mari (end of Larnaca district), an area of approximately 260 km². The projection results in a total number of 448 sound machines for the area.



Decoy

Towards the end of October the poachers expect larger birds and so put very long, strong lime sticks in tall trees and *Juniperus* bushes.

Hunters and trappers are often the same individuals, using guns, lime sticks, mist nets and sound machines in a lethal mix of bird-killing activities from the beginning of hunting to the end of the season.

Ambelopoulia

This Cypriot delicacy of birds has returned to open sale in Cyprus restaurants. Unfortunately, the efforts of restaurateurs seem to be more successful than those of environmentalists in this field. Protected birds can be eaten in restaurants throughout Paralimni.

The prices paid to bird catchers are 18 to 24 CY£ (€ 30,6 – 40,8) a dozen birds. The restaurants charge 25-30 CY£ (€ 42,5 – 51) per dozen.

Ambelopoulia has once again become a common place item on menus.

Reacting to a tip-off that a group of diners would be eating the illegal dish in a Paralimni restaurant, a high-ranking police officer reacted with the words: “We don’t want to panic people. We will search the cold store later”. However, the police surely know that a clever Cypriot restaurant owner will never store birds but only serve them to special order. **The gastronomic use of illegally killed birds must have reached new heights, since there are almost no impediments to the trade and establishments.**

Information about investigations into the obscure channels of the burgeoning **illegal bird trade** is scarce. **This area of illegal activities is apparently one to which the Cypriot judiciary and the police turn a blind eye, so that hundreds of offenders are neither detected nor prosecuted.** Huge numbers of migratory birds are killed for the black market which prospers as a result.

Import of illegal goods

Mist nets are used in vast numbers, some of enormous length and considerable height. Although hundreds have been confiscated, a far greater number must remain in the hands of poachers, **who are clearly able to access a supply of these illegal items which finds a way through Cyprus customs controls.**

It is notorious that dead protected birds are illegally imported across the border from Northern Cyprus.

An organized trade in dead protected birds from Syria also exists. Syrian frontiers were closed this autumn because of the Lebanese conflict, so birds there were not caught and killed this year. There is no local market for small birds as food in Syria, **but Cypriot traders can generate illegal killing of protected birds in Syria by providing a market for them.**

Devastation of habitat for construction of hides and raised wooden platforms

After 2002 the destruction of woodland trees for bird catching purposes had come to a temporary halt.

In 2006, however, any fear of law enforcement has apparently disappeared. The extent of damage to trees has become severe. Acacias are cut back or chopped down altogether in order to construct bird catching hides with ladders, bars, ropes and wooden platforms: veritable miniature fortresses for extensive placing of lime sticks. At such sites, the metal poles and old car wheels used for rapid setting of mist nets are often left standing or lying in place; this year we found were more signs of such regular netting positions than ever before. It would appear that installations of this kind are used by poachers during the winter and spring migrations to kill as many winter visitors and migrants as possible, in what is an illegal but highly lucrative business.



Devastation



Devastation

Cyprus Authorities and the responsibility of the Game Fund

The Cypriot ministries have commissioned the Game Fund to carry out the actions needed to comply with the Birds Directive.

The Game Fund performed this function during accession negotiations and is still responsible for the task in 2006.

The Larnaca Game Fund is a very important branch which has to control the areas where large-scale bird catching is rife. In its territory lie the most important migration corridors on the South Coast, from Paralimni (South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco) through Xylophagou (excluding the British Sovereign Base) to Agios Theodoros.

The Fund must supervise the vast green belt of woods and scrub of the Famagusta and Larnaca District. It is not therefore surprising that the question of recruitment levels has been on the agenda year after year. Less than 20 game wardens are working in shifts throughout the major migration seasons. In practical terms this means that the Fund can put around 6 operational staff in the field at any time, clearly a totally inadequate force for patrolling the whole South Coast green belt of 260 km². Over the past two years news was received that the game warden staff would be expanded by 20 new employees, obviously a welcome development. In practice, however, these additional operatives have been entrusted with fire prevention and other game supervision duties.

In October 2006 the Cyprus parliament called on the government to take concrete action on behalf of wild birds. There must be some awareness among politicians of how little real protection is given to migratory birds in Cyprus, and of how little progress has been made towards compliance with the EU Birds Directive. The renewed increase of open consumption of *ambelopoulia* in Cypriot restaurants provides flagrant evidence of the problem. Yet at present the vast territory involved is devastated by hundreds of bird poachers, but patrolled by only a handful of wardens – less than twenty-strong and obliged to work in 3 shifts.

Certain crucial areas for poaching such as the Paralimni district, 50 km from Larnaca, are increasingly neglected, with fewer and fewer game patrols finding their way to far-flung localities. **The cause of this neglect is the critical understaffing of the game service; the result is, sadly, the constant increase in the scale and intensity of bird catching since 2003.**

Despite the firm commitment to cooperation on the part of the police and the Game Fund, following talks in autumn 2004, efforts to eliminate differences and improve liaison have unfortunately proved inadequate. The local police force, although well staffed, is restricted in its actions to each municipality, and its brief involves mainly citizens' concerns. The Game Fund, on the other hand, has considerable flexibility of action and extensive territorial competence, but is chronically understaffed. The level of trust and goodwill between the two bodies is in any case very low, which means that **no ongoing joint effort is being created to improve protection of wildlife.**

Sadly, this situation is in effect an invitation to lucrative criminality: Cypriot poachers are able to kill animals and birds without danger of being caught or punished. Local poachers have even begun to catch birds with nets set from boats at sea.

A sad instance of myopic game policy: bird killing at the expense of bee-keeping

The plateau above Mazera in the Aya Napa municipality has been a favored roosting place for bee-eaters on their migration route for years. Bee-eaters like to perch on telephone wires and, interestingly, tend to sit on the same wires year after year. The edge of the plateau above Mazera is one such favored perching and roosting place. From September 2005 we noticed that 30 bee-hives had been moved exactly under this gathering place for large flocks of migrating bee-eaters. A barrel and a large open basin of water attracted hundreds of bees to drink. Despite their name, bee-eaters eat many different big insects besides bees. Indeed, they are not normally especially drawn to bee-hives under normal circumstances.

In September 2006 we noted that the bee-hives had once again been moved under the gathering place. We were then horrified to see that the valuable bees were being cynically used as decoys, backed up by sound machines to play back bird calls. On a daily basis, from 5 pm till dusk and in the first light of dawn, swarms of the resting bee-eaters were shot by a group of hunters.

Bee-eaters are protected birds under the Birds Directive. More importantly, the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco (including Mazera) is one of the most important bottle neck sites in Cyprus. The migration of over 17,000 bee-eaters through this area fulfils the EU criteria for an Important Bird Area (in lit. Roth T. and Loosli E. (2005) *Autumn Migration on the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco, Cyprus*). Under no circumstances should this important species for Cyprus (and Europe) be degraded to a game bird and consigned to shooters **licensed by the ministry**.

The shooting of bee-eaters at Mazera is a lamentable instance of permitted killing for leisure being carried out at the expense of wildlife.

Monitoring team in cooperation with the Game Fund



Information

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