

Emptying the Skies of the Mediterranean & the Island of Cyprus



Summary

An empty sky is a genuinely possible scenario for the near future in Cyprus: a sky empty of birds, over a silent land with no birdsong.

Extensive bird trapping is being carried out on international migration flyways, with little opposition from any of the Cyprus authorities whose responsibility is to prevent it. The army of bird trappers is constantly growing in number and also in deadly efficiency, thanks to the increasing use of electronic lure devices. The Cyprus night resounds to massively amplified recorded bird calls, which lure hundreds of thousands of Europe's migratory birds not to the rest and safety they need, but to a cruel slaughter.

The birds are unable to seek protected habitats and resting places, since the electronic decoys attract them to deliberately watered scrub land with fresh bushes and water ponds. Once there, they are chased from their roosts with stones and into a lethal array of illegal traps, mainly mist nets and lime sticks. Escape is almost impossible. As many as a thousand birds can be killed at such sites in a single morning.

The trappers are aggressive in defence of their criminal activities. Volunteers on wildlife protection duties, seeking to fill the gap created by the inertia of the Cyprus government, have been subjected to verbal abuse, physical assault and dangerous attacks on road vehicles.

There are some signs of a change in attitude on the part of the Cypriot authorities, thanks to the strong pressure from foreign organisations, the media and the engagement of Bird Life Cyprus. But so far, it is a case of too little, too late. Large-scale wildlife crime is rampant on the island, with the criminal interest of poachers prevailing over public concern for nature and the environment. The Cyprus government must act now, while there is still time.

Cyprus Report 2010

A recent report published in *The New Yorker* under the title 'Emptying the Skies' offers a devastating picture of the illegal bird trapping on Mediterranean islands, portraying them as places where the skies may soon be as empty of migratory birds as the Mediterranean itself is already empty of fish.

Nowhere is that scenario more terrifyingly probable than in Cyprus. The island's desolate fields give a sad impression of rapid progress towards the complete destruction of local wildlife: there are no birds to be seen and no birdsong to be heard in spring and late autumn. In Paralimni and Cape Greco in South-East Cyprus, where until a few years ago hundreds of birds could be seen in good habitats, now the whole land lies empty and silent. It seems that none of the birds which still arrive during the night along Cyprus' southern coasts can make it past the many amplified devices which lure them to a cruel death at the hands of criminal gangs of poachers. Natural resting places for birds are already scarce, because much of the South Coast is now a built up area for tourism. The few suitable habitats which remain – patches of scrub land with some pools and orchards – have become death traps, with hundreds of amplified lures. The poachers work at dawn, killing birds that have survived the torment of nets and lime sticks, and collecting the corpses for sale to local restaurants. Throughout the long migratory season, hardly a bird is left alive.

So the skies may indeed be empty one day in Cyprus, perhaps sooner than we think. After all, fish used to be plentiful in the waters around the island. Now, after disastrous over-fishing a decade ago, there are almost none. The same fate may well befall some of Europe's rarest and most endangered species of birds. Some of these have disappeared from Western Europe because of destruction of habitats and intensive agriculture, and now survive only in Eastern Europe. But their migration routes take them through Cyprus – and that fact alone threatens their very survival. On Cyprus, no wild creature that flies is safe.

The EU Directive on birds is a dead letter on the island, but observers are frustrated to see that European authorities seem content to ignore any disaster in the field, however severe, so long as a paper trail of inadequate and unapplied local legislation has been laid. How long will the EU continue to swallow incomplete government reports on the state of wildlife conservation in Cyprus, without questioning their accuracy or checking their truthfulness on the ground?

The Game Fund

The Game Fund, a government body, serves the interests of the island's hunters and in theory is also responsible for the prevention of bird trapping throughout Cyprus. Its base in Larnaca covers the most intensive bird trapping areas on the South Coast in Larnaca and Famagusta districts. The Game Fund suffers from chronic staff shortages and structural and procedural inadequacies. Its inefficiency has effectively guaranteed and promoted the steady growth in illegal bird trapping since 2004.

In the period 2001-2007 two organisations, Bird Life Cyprus and the international Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus (MBCC), both working under Cypriot law, cooperated successfully with the Game Fund, and arrests of bird trappers were regularly made. In 2010, any cooperation on the part of the Game Fund with other organisations, including Bird Life and MBCC, was unexpectedly terminated without prior notice. The leader of MBCC was even treated with great rudeness by the Chief of the Larnaca Game Fund.

With the Game Fund increasingly unable to meet its responsibilities to reduce illegal bird trapping and face the ever-growing army of poachers and their increasingly sophisticated technical resources, it is to be wondered that this government body should behave brutally and insensibly towards NGOs that have cooperated for years in the fight against wildlife crime. The Game Fund's current approach gives the unfortunate impression of a government willing to allow criminal activities to prosper at the expense of the public interest.

One positive sign is the renewed good will on the part of police chiefs in the Paralimni and Aya Napa police stations, who have agreed to support our field work with police staff. **Such cooperative efforts are not easy, since the officers have no special training in the field work required and tend not to consider it as a natural part of their duties. In particular, the all-important night shift officers have refused to offer help. Some police officers are apparently not sufficiently well informed about orders coming from Ministries and the Cyprus Chief of Police. A clearer chain of command and improved training could alter the whole situation, placing responsibilities on the ground with local police forces, which are closer to the killing fields in Paralimni, Aya Napa and Xylophagou and therefore in a better position to act effectively.** Certainly such a prospect could only be an improvement on the inertia of the Game fund in Larnaca, pending the long-awaited setting up of an Anti-Poaching Unit or Game Fund base in Paralimni itself.

The situation on the ground and our work in the field have changed little, except in terms of the increasing scale of the problems faced. **The illegal trappers are constantly growing in number, as are the thousands of electronic decoys used to lure birds to the killing sites.** In Paralimni and Aya Napa, lime sticks are still the most commonly used form of traps. Mist nets are also used, but covertly since they are expensive and could be detected by police, game wardens or volunteer activists. However, sockets for poles at trapping sites offer clear evidence of illegal use of nets. The criminal activities of the trappers are rarely disturbed, since the existing force of game wardens is woefully undermanned to cover the entire intensive killing zone of some 160 square kilometres between Paralimni and Ayos Theodorus. Police officers have not been known to patrol the area on their own initiative.

You find a big variety of bird decoys



A new product. Origin unknown.
The entire decoy is in a small box.

Lime sticks and lures are hidden in bushes and trees in scrub, orchards and gardens, and can be found at any time of the day or night.

Large-scale bird trapping mainly takes place between 2 and 8 a.m., and is especially intensive at weekends. Birds can no longer reach resting areas in the extensive appropriate habitats in the hinterland of the South Coast, as they are lured from the sky to their deaths by the immense array of amplified lures on coastal sites.

Encouraged by the lack of effective government action against their illegal activities, the trappers have become more organised and aggressive in their approach, forming what is to all intents and purposes a poaching Mafia. Collusion with the authorities, contempt for the police and intimidation of the public are the classic hallmarks of a dangerous Mafia, determined to protect its illegal income from wildlife crime at any cost. As with all Mafia-style criminal gangs, opposition from civil society is met with violence and abuse: cars are called out by the trappers, with crews of aggressive men intent on intimidating volunteers or activists.



Lime sticks in a tree





Caught in the glue



Slaughter places



Lime sticks kill hundred thousands of protected birds





The bushes of the catching areas are often watered, and small water basins wait for the birds.





Bird catcher's water basin in the field





Bird trapper with dead birds in a bag and a quiver with lime sticks



Hunter shooting Bee-eaters

Bee-eaters

The fate of bee-eaters flying across the South-Eastern peninsula is still grim. Many of these protected birds are shot by hunters on the pretext of preserving local bee populations. The innumerable (and toxic) cartridge cases left on the ground close to beehives testify to the enormous numbers of bee-eaters that are shot on the island. Like most passerines killed on the island, these birds may actually be eaten by Cypriots.

The fight to keep the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco free from bird trapping

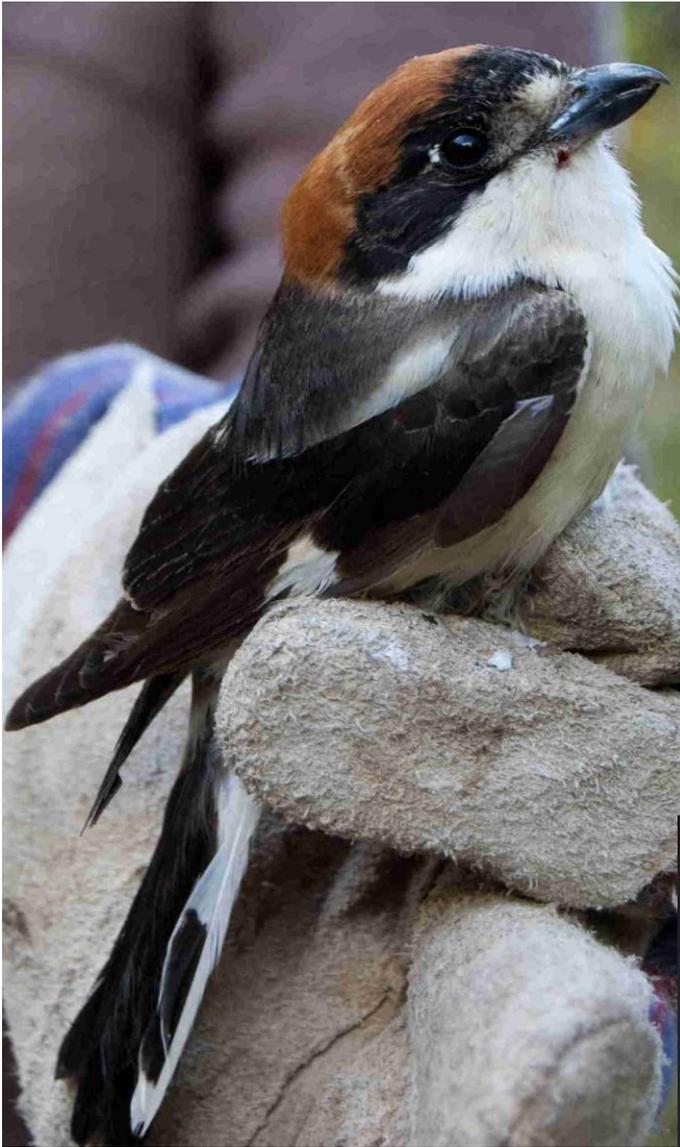
This year our organisation MBCC, Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus, removed 29 luring devices and 1139 lime sticks. It freed 42 birds, found 6 dead birds and 6 sticks for mist netting. These finds were collected in the area of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco, a proposed 2000 Natura SPA. This area was cleared and kept almost free from trapping through our field work in 2010.

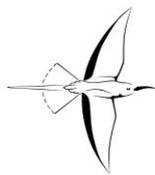
We hope this excellent habitat will become a migratory bird refuge in the near future through its designation as an IBA and SPA. This, hopefully, will lead birds through a safe corridor of scrubland directly to the sea, with few obstacles from built-up areas for tourism. The area is a major international flyway, with nearly 200,000 passage birds counted.

Our next intention and engagement in 2011 will be to clear the disastrous areas bordering the future SPA and some of the areas around Paralimni, where a hundred or more amplified lures are responsible for the deaths of many passerines flying en route to the Cape Greco bottleneck.



By-catch





M B C C

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