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Report on the Illegal Killing and Trading of Protected Birds in Cyprus

September and October 2009



**Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus
International Monitoring Organisation**

1 This is a report on the horror going on in Cyprus right now.

The EU environment commission seems to stand by and watch, doing little to combat illegal bird poaching and trapping. Perhaps the intention is to wait for better times when there will be no migratory birds left in Cyprus.

The numbers of the protected migratory birds stopping in the important hinterland of the south coast in Cyprus are clearly declining.

For some years the great flocks of birds that could still be seen in 2003 have been completely absent, whatever the Cyprus bird conservation institutions may say on the subject. We are the people who are in the field day and night for observation and conservation and we have a pretty good overview of what happens on the many severe bird trapping sites. We are genuinely horrified at what is happening there (on the Eastern South Coast with the most important migratory flyways of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco, Paralimni, and Xylophagou – outside the SBA).

This year we saw remarkably few birds stopping inland from the south coast, despite the good, clear weather in September and October. This is a clear sign of the dramatic rate of mortality over recent decades for species which older people can still remember seeing in their millions in the same habitats. Even bird trappers are now warning of a time without bird migration in these habitats, if the use of recorded tape lures continues to increase unchecked. It is not the nets or lime sticks themselves that are responsible for the terrible rate of killing, but the thousands of devices which attract the birds to be massacred.

2 The Cyprus government apparently does not have the conservation of protected wild birds on its agenda

The government itself paralyses the good will of the institutions responsible. Instead of being bound to fight illegal activities, officials and immoral staff are encouraged to behave corruptly.

A. The government has made cuts in staff, ensuring that personnel levels are inadequate for the fight against illegal bird trapping during autumn migration.

How can the ministry concerned accept that Paralimni police staff were ordered to the Police Academy for training during the autumn migration, denying the police inspector any possibility to support the fight against the criminal killing of birds? This officer had a very small squad at his disposal, barely enough for ordinary tasks during the autumn tourist season and certainly not enough to fight bird crime in this epicenter of trapping.

B. For years the Larnaca Game Fund has been managed with unqualified and insufficient staff, just able to fulfill hunting assignments in autumn but not to fight bird poaching effectively, as the few auxiliary wardens have no powers of arrest. The continued inefficiency of structures within this institution has been connived at, with the Ministers of the Interior and Justice failing to fulfill promises made.

Nothing has been done to reopen a Game Fund base in Paralimni with police structures, patrol cars and qualified staff which could support the police, nor have the police officers been trained for service against bird crime as promised by the Ministry of Justice early in 2009. There are no visible signs of improvement in the field.

3 Twelve small birds for the Cypriot dish *ambelopoulia* cost € 78.

Bird trapping has gained enormous impetus during autumn 2009

Everybody is in the fields or in the gardens to trap birds. Those who do business in Cyprus, in this case the bird poachers, the restaurateurs and business people who provide the mist nets and the devices for recorded lures are always one step ahead of the badly organized, understaffed and untrained authorities who ought to be fighting wildlife crime. In this domain, the rule of law in Cyprus is effectively suspended.

Corruption is rife among institutions authorized to fight bird crime.

Business and greed are far more financially attractive in Cyprus than nature and wildlife, which are set at little or no value.

The very young hunters who go out at night to trap protected birds with lime sticks and nets prove that there is no change of prevailing opinion in the thousands of young hunters. Against this damaging background of destruction, little or nothing is done by the authorities to promote awareness of the value of nature and wildlife.

4 New illegal technology used by poachers, trappers and hunters

There are thousands of devices in operation to attract arriving birds. Last year we counted 40 devices in the area of the South Eastern Peninsula and Cape Greco. In 2009 we counted more quail lures than ever placed in the fields by hunters in September and October, even after the end of the season. Whenever we collected them, they were soon replaced because the police had no time to wait for the poachers to arrest them and the Game Fund, with inadequate or unqualified staff, seems unable to search for criminals everywhere in the extensive districts of Larnaca and Famagusta, which cover an area of 260 sq. km.

The number of lure devices placed in gardens or bushes is increasing by thousands. In 2008 we counted those in operation, but in 2009 they are literally innumerable, forming a continuous network, often barely 200 meters apart. Expensive new car batteries were no longer being used, but less valuable parts of old cars, radios, loudspeakers and batteries. Any items collected by bird conservation volunteers, occasionally but rarely with police assistance, were immediately replaced, again in complete contempt of the law.

At the mid point of the migration season we discovered a new kind of device: a sound machine in a small square plastic case with a timer lasting several hours, just long enough for the normal night hours. These devices were in operation from midnight to 4.15 a.m. The new devices are made in China and have flooded the market in Cyprus, leading to unprecedented levels of wildlife crime. The devices are illegal but appear to have no difficulty passing Cypriot customs or being offered for sale in the country. Once again the Cyprus authorities appear to be negligent or, worse, collusive in the spread of wildlife crime

New: Chinese small amplified lure all in one device: loudspeaker, battery and cassette



5 Shooting of protected birds in August and September

Cyprus hunters shot huge numbers of protected birds in these months. The feathers of hoopoes, bee-eaters, cuckoos and protected passerines were visible in many places. There seems in practice to be no distinction between authorized game and protected species: both are killed indiscriminately.

Hunters may well be responsible for the killing of more protected birds than bird trappers operating with lime sticks and nets only. Hunters are often willing to use any means to kill birds.

There is no effective action of any kind by the Cypriot authorities to combat poaching or prosecute offences by hunters.

6 An international wildlife catastrophe for which the Cypriot government and the EU are jointly responsible

The steps necessary to bring bird trapping under control are perfectly clear. The over-complex laws on arrest of poachers must be revised. Poachers and restaurateurs caught perpetrating wildlife crimes should be arrested and forced to pay very high fines, otherwise the massacre of wild birds will continue at the present unprecedented levels or even increase. The value of birds sold on the black market is so great that it is fuelling even more illegal trapping.

The dramatic situation of lawlessness requires massive deployment of qualified personnel, with a police-structured Game Fund backed up by sufficient regular police officers at peak periods, and a reopened Game Fund base with police structures in the intensive trapping area. Spot checks should be made on restaurants, with heavy fines meted out to those caught serving illegal *ambelopoulia*. Shops selling illegal hunting and trapping devices should also be subject to spot checks and fines. Customs processes should be reviewed to ensure a rigorous barrier against the import of illegal items.

None of the above recommendations is new. The urgent necessity of implementing them as soon as possible cannot be doubted if there is the will to reduce wildlife crime in Cyprus. But these recommendations have been urged by protectionists and nature organizations all over Europe, year after year. The result has been worse than nothing: the relaxation of the rule of law and the spread of wildlife crime with impunity.

The inaction of the Cyprus government on wildlife crime, compounded by the apathy of the EU environment commission, is nothing less than an international disgrace. Its results for the wild bird populations of Europe and Africa are already catastrophic. They may be even worse in the future, if nothing is done.

By way of underlining this inaction and apathy, I quote below from our 2008 report. The catastrophic problems – and the clear, perfectly practicable solutions – remain the same. How much longer will the concern of the international community go unheeded in Cyprus and Brussels?

From the 2008 report:

Amplified lures [are] also being used in areas which had been free of bird trapping since 2002, for example in the Cape Greco National Park. The bird trappers are returning, slowly but steadily, to the supposedly protected territories which had been abandoned in the year before accession to the EU.

It is difficult to believe that the Police and Game Fund are unaware of the negative result of their ineffectual tactics in the field, which is that many hundreds of poachers involved in regular and extremely damaging criminal activities go scot-free. As an urgent priority, the Cypriot authorities should intervene to prevent the widespread use of amplified lures, confiscating illegal equipment and prosecuting those who use it. This measure alone would be sufficient to ensure genuine progress and a huge reduction in the killing of protected migratory birds on the island. With the political will to do so, it would be a straightforward matter to put an end to this phenomenon within the space of a single migration season.

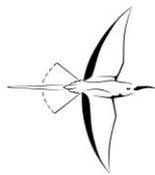


Birds on lime stick

Lime sticks in fields and gardens







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