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Convention on the Conservation of European
Wildlife and Natural Habitats

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

September/October 2008

Concerning the Recommendation No 90(2001) on the catching, killing
or trading of protected birds in Cyprus (T-PVS/Files (2002) 9
revised)

N G O

Migration Bird Conservation in Cyprus
International Monitoring Organisation

Summary

Poaching and related wild bird crime in Cyprus was expanding in 2008, becoming rampant even at the last remaining relatively quiet sites, such as the National Park of Cape Greco, which had been free of poaching since 2002 (the critical period of the EU accession process).

The 17,000 bee-eaters on passage in the migration bottle neck of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco are an especially vulnerable species. Hunters deliberately frequent localities with bee-hives, so as to shoot as many of these protected birds as possible. Within a 150-metre radius of the largest bee-keeping site we counted 1,725 brand new cartridges, used to kill bee-eaters in September 2008. At a second site we found 1,478 new cartridges. At all seven bee-keeping sites, the total number of cartridges fired at bee-eaters was between 9,000 and 10,000. During the three weeks of passage, the protected bee-eaters were certainly killed on a massive scale.

However, the primary cause of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of migratory birds in Cyprus is the **uncontrolled use of tape-recorded lures**. These deadly traps are rapidly increasing – although by their very nature they should be easy for the police to locate – and they are lethally effective. The entire flow of bird migration is controlled by a huge network of amplified lures with taped bird calls, placed by bird trappers and hunters at most trapping sites in open areas and in fenced gardens. While 35 tape lures were noted in 2007, this year there were 48 between Aya Napa and Paralimni. These figures do not include the many loudspeakers with low calls and chirping, used to deadly effect within a more limited radius; the use of these is harder to document, but probably represents at least double the number of 48 amplified lures given above. Bird trapping sites increased **their activities by 70% in 2008**. The thousands of liming trappers continue their traditional way of bird killing with lime sticks and tape lures and so demonstrate the effectiveness of this most cruel kind of bird torture. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Game Fund and Police prefer to concentrate on show actions against the use of mist nets and a smaller number of commercial poachers, while ignoring the large-scale use of lime sticks by the highly numerous individual poachers. The use of tape lures at trapping sites is emblematic of the growing sense of impunity among poachers. In South East Cyprus in 2008, the level of wildlife law enforcement has been reduced to zero.

To redress this disgraceful situation, which is causing lasting damage to the natural heritage of Europe, **Cyprus urgently needs a strong, nationally cohesive conservation body with authority to ensure effective policing against wildlife crime. This should be able to provide protection on the ground 24/7, with at least three operational centres, in Nicosia, Larnaca and Paralimni.**

Above all, it should be given the requisite level of funding and political support from national government to enable it to curb illegal bird trapping and poaching offences. These have reached critical levels – any indications to the contrary, **suggesting that poaching has even been reduced, are quite simply mendacious**, as is amply proven by this and previous reports. **It must be combated with a firm hand by a Government determined at last to exert its legal and moral authority.** In carrying out this urgent task, the Government will find ready and willing allies in the shape of the NGOs that have been active in the conservation of protected wild birds on the island for many years.

Introduction

For the past few years the fascinating event of a spectacular fall of thousands of passerines, resting in scrub and bushes before crossing the sea, has not occurred in the South Eastern Peninsula. We began to think that the entire migration had failed to take place, until at last we discovered that the birds were gathering in other, less suitable places, attracted by amplified, tape-recorded lures – to which they are fatally drawn, like moths to the flame. This phenomenon confirms that the network of hundreds of illegal amplified lures now controls the pattern of migration. Many good areas preferred by passerines in former years remain empty of birds. Since the use of amplified lures became widespread, passage birds are now seen in large numbers only where they are massacred.

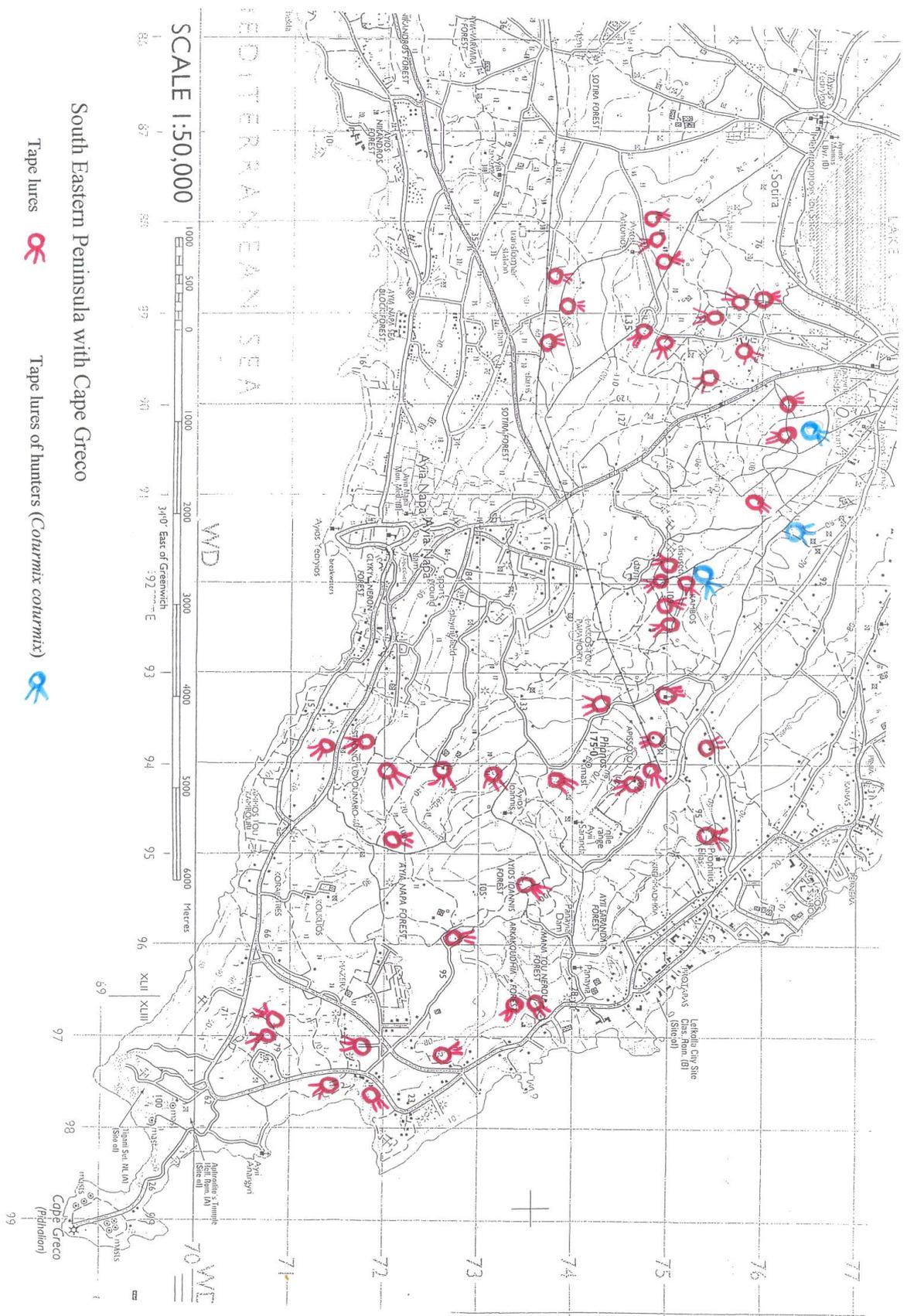
The No. 1 enemy for birds: amplified lures

The taped lures channel all arriving migrants into the confined area around the loudspeakers, where mist nets and lime sticks have been positioned. The trappers have only a very limited period of time at their disposal each day, between 3 and 7 am, to set lime sticks and nets in open areas and trap protected birds, since for the rest of the day the risk of being discovered by conservation activists is much greater. Without the use of amplified lures during night hours, the poachers would be able to do far less damage.

For this reason, tape recorders and amplifiers are an obvious top priority target for any conservation authority determined to ensure effective protection of migratory birds.

Unfortunately, the Cypriot Game Fund and Police appear not to share this view, ignoring the increasing and flagrant abuse of illegal audio equipment in the field and preferring instead to mount costly and time-consuming operations against the use of mist nets by a smaller number of commercial poachers.

This autumn we discovered 48 acoustic lures. These were certainly only the tip of an iceberg, with many others, using low volume or playing at unusual times, being missed. Amplified lures were 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.



South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco

Tape lures  Tape lures of hunters (*Columix columix*) 

Tape lures the enemy No 1



Tape lure with loudspeakers, device with a tape and a battery



Mini tape lure equipment with device of tape and loudspeaker and a battery for a few hours

70% more highly active sites than last year

The everyday bird trapping was unusually strong frequented in 2008.

In 2007 we found 50 active trapping places, this year 80 highly active killing sites were found. Like the use of amplified lures, the number and extent of trapping places is expanding at an alarming rate. The 80 sites were checked repeatedly, while other sites such as fenced gardens could not be monitored for activity. Acoustic lures and trapping sites were newly installed in areas which had been free of bird trapping since 2002, including the Cape Greco National Park.

The use of nets has remained at previous levels, with about 60 mist nets in place, some very large (15-16 meters in length).

As a result, the use of illegal audio equipment has become increasingly blatant. On week-end mornings, around 10,000 lime sticks were still in place in the South Eastern Peninsula and Paralimni area when daylight came; some trappers were working continuously from 2 am to as late as 10 am, using audio equipment.

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.**

With the support of the police we were able to destroy large-scale netting installations put in place at night. One mist net trapper had created 11 deep sockets, half of which were brand new, for the placing of high mist net poles at his two poaching sites. This particular poacher was not caught in the act.

We did make sure that lime sticks not destroyed with the support of the police were removed by the trappers themselves immediately.

Unfortunately, we were unable to intervene in the early morning hours when the criminal activity was at its height, as we could not obtain the police support needed to arrest the culprits.

Ridicule the damage of lime sticks.....

The exclusive concentration on mist nets by the Game Fund and Police has effectively put in place a regime of impunity for lime stick trappers. Although poachers do use mist nets, most bird killing still takes place in the form of liming. Restaurant owners prefer the constant use of lime sticks in hidden places, day and night, to ensure a steady supply of illegally caught birds. They also irrigate the surroundings to keep the acacias fresh and attractive for migrants. These localities are often offered free for use by other bird trappers, meaning that the restaurateurs themselves do not personally run the risk of prosecution for poaching and the use of illegal equipment. Several institutional bodies in Cyprus have some kind of brief to deal with illegal bird trapping with lime sticks and mist nets. None of these seems to regard wildlife crime as a priority, however, tending to neglect it in favour of other issues: worse, their approach is often dominated by petty local politics, leading to a total lack of cohesion and preventing them from appreciating the extreme importance of the migratory avifauna.

The inefficiency of wildlife conservation in Cyprus compares most unfavourably with the logistical deployment achieved for hunting interests. The public sector organization seems perfect. Game birds and animals are there where and whenever needed at the hunting grounds for the hunting season. 30,000 specially bred Chukar partridges and a similar number of hares are released into the wild. In the case of hunting, year after year, there seems to be the political will on the part of the authorities to overcome all those problems which for some mysterious reason make tackling wildlife crime insuperably difficult. Where poaching is concerned, the public sector finds itself with woefully inadequate bases and equipment and a lack of trained personnel. The gap in performance and efficiency between provisions for hunting and measures for conservation show that only a lack of political will on the part of the Cypriot government prevent its so far empty promises to the EU from becoming reality. The poaching of protected wildlife in Cyprus is an environmental disaster which requires immediate action, not only speeches on television.

Sadly, the urgency of the conservation threat from illegal trapping and shooting does not appear to have registered with the Cypriot government.



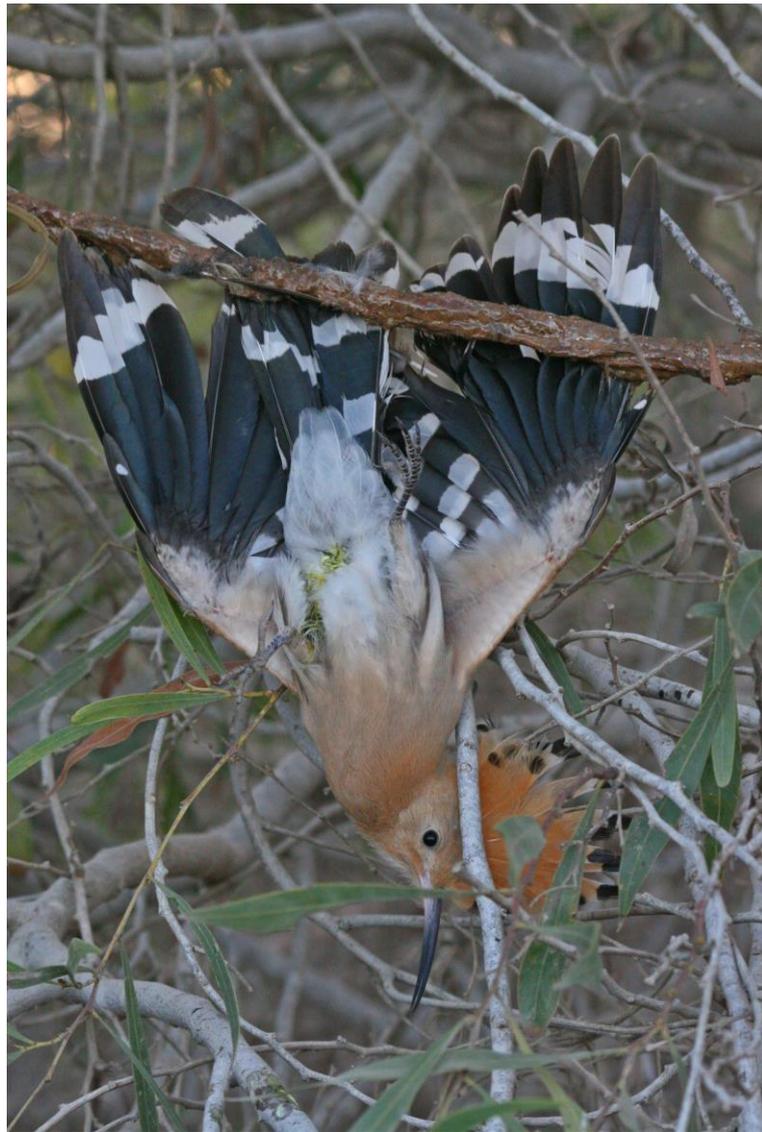
Lime sticks the most cruel killers

Lime sticks all over the South Eastern Peninsula



Red-backed Shrike

Hoopoe on lime stick



Catching Places



Irrigated sites get prepared for bird trapping



Trapping sites



Mist nets and bird victims







9000 to 10 000 lethal gunshots and lime sticks for Bee-eaters in the migration bottle neck of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco in September 2008.

Bee-eaters on Cyprus: when international protection is a dead letter

The South-Eastern Peninsula is an important migration bottle neck for bee-eaters. Some 17,000 birds pass through the peninsula in autumn within the space of three weeks, during the open hunting season. Many of these rest on the SE- peninsula for a few days. This year the bee-eater massacres were especially severe. Shooters deliberately go to places close to bee hives and do not hesitate to kill this protected species. After the September shooting at the largest bee keeping site, with 53 hives, we counted 1,725 brand new spent cartridges. At a smaller site with 47 hives we found 1,478 new spent cartridges. In the whole area there are seven sites with over 30 bee hives. Taking the smaller bee-keeping site as representative of the other five sites with a similar number of bee colonies and adding to these the total from the largest site, the spent cartridges found suggest a total of $6 \times 1478 + 1,725$, i.e. 10,593. In other words, in this one small area alone, **over 10,000 shots were fired deliberately at one protected species of bird on passage through Cyprus.**

At one site, we witnessed a 13-year old child being shown how to fire at the birds. The future of wildlife in Cyprus and Europe is in grave danger, if no steps are taken to alter this cycle of ignorance and deliberate destruction of wildlife.

Bee-eaters were the target of 1725 gun fired shots in one place of 7 with bee-hives.



1725 brand new cartridges



Care of birds removed from mist nets and lime sticks

Birds found on lime sticks may have damaged plumage or body parts in the adhesive lime, with feathers, legs and beak smeared with glue, and tail and wing feathers, sometimes even a whole fragile limb, being torn away; when entangled in nets, their wings and legs can be damaged, paralysed, or ripped away entirely.

If removed alive from nets or sticks, birds must be cleaned, fed, watered and rested. Some recover, some die from injury and exhaustion.

This year we cared for more than 40 injured birds, while others, caught only very recently in mist nets, could be released immediately.



Tortured Birds in Caring Hands







Trush Nightingale



Wood Warbler

The South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco represents a magnificent international migration bottle neck. Unfortunately, in this part of Cyprus, there is little respect for or harmony with nature. Instead of a becoming a source of pride and pleasure for the local population, the spectacular passage of hundreds of bee-eaters, thousands of white pelicans, cranes and storks, huge flocks of swallows and birds of prey seems to arouse only the base instinct to shoot, trap and even torture these beautiful birds from distant lands.

There seems no other way to explain the shooting of thousands of colourful bee-eaters and rare raptors.

A powerful symbol of this mindless destruction was provided by the body of a migrant Goshawk, wounded by gunfire, then tortured to death by being tightly bound in twine, and finally hung in a tree as a macabre trophy.

Such cruel vandalism is carried out at the expense of Cyprus and of the entire international community, and it must not be allowed to continue.

The important migration bottle neck of the South Eastern Peninsula should be designated as a Natura 2000 Bird site and given the highest level of protection.





Goshawk tortured to death

Cyprus needs a single effective institution to combat wildlife crime.

An effective solution for the current organizational problems could be the expansion and reinforcement of the Anti Poaching Unit **to create a single national institution, with three operational centres in Nicosia, Larnaca and Paralimni, and with a clear brief to curb illegal bird trapping and poaching offences, supported by effective powers of enforcement. The creation of a single, cohesive unit could put an end to the inefficiency and bickering between the Game Fund and the Police; the new body could also draw on the help of NGOs that have been active in wild bird protection for years. Above all it could provide effective 24/7 policing under an officer with decision-making authority. Only with a force of this kind, present on the ground and backed up by the full force of the law, can Cyprus begin to make up for lost ground in its commitments to the EU and the international community, so far as the fight against wildlife crime is concerned.**

In particular, **the important but neglected area of Paralimni** requires attention and, as a matter of the greatest urgency, the restitution of the former Game Fund office, which closed in 2003/2004 and has been sorely missed. It is incomprehensible that this area, notoriously the epicentre of wildlife crime in SE Cyprus, should be without a local force on the ground to prevent the extensive shooting and trapping of protected species. At present, as for the past few years, the nearest base for patrols is a 90-minute drive away in Larnaca or Nicosia; as a result the Paralimni/Protaras, one of the worst hotspots of wildlife crime, is almost completely unprotected by the national authorities.

Rather than lending credence to suggestions that wildlife crime is decreasing, a deliberate fiction discredited by this and all other reports from serious and impartial observers, the Cypriot government should give strong moral and financial support to a new and expanded version of the Anti Poaching Unit, so that we really can believe there is the political will to achieve a radical reduction in all forms of illegal killing of wild birds in the Republic of Cyprus.

At present in SE Cyprus the situation has almost regressed to the disastrous levels of before EU accession. It is unacceptable that this level of blatant wildlife crime should go unpunished anywhere within the European Union, and it is the duty of both national and Community authorities to take real steps to prevent it.



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Gwatt, 15 November 2008