

Zero tolerance of illegal killing of wild birds

Cyprus annual report 2014



bee-eaters need help

M B C C

Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus

Victims



Slaughter of Bee-eaters

Shooting on Cyprus is anything but sustainable

As in the previous autumn season, this year saw Cypriot gunmen set out 42 beehives in a good position to attract birds, on a broad, scrub-covered slope never previously used for bee-keeping. From early September 2014, as the autumn migration got under way, shooters arrived with half a dozen decoy devices for both quail and bee-eaters. It was the bee-eaters, however, which were shot in the greatest numbers, lured by the bees from the decoy hives. Despite our urgent reports to several organisations, including BirdLife Cyprus, the Game Service and the Anti-Poaching Unit, the slaughter of these threatened and protected birds was allowed to continue undisturbed, with no intervention from State authorities. Once again, in 2014, the Cypriot government apparently finds it acceptable that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of protected bee-eaters should be shot down after being lured to beehives deliberately set out for the purpose. The gunmen were active in large groups.

It is perfectly obvious to any observer that the beekeepers are in league with the shooters and are presumably also paid for their services: the hives are set out in inappropriate locations where the bees can find no food and will produce no honey, but serve only as lures for the protected bee-eaters. This deceitful practice by the shooters is deadly for both the bees and the protected migratory birds. In a blatant confirmation of the scheme, the beekeeper removed his bees from 42 hives set out above the Panagia church in Protaras (Paralimni) on the very last day of the hunting season in September!

Important populations of non-threatened species (Roth et al. 2005)

Autumn Bird migration at the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco, Cyprus. Diurnal bird migration and Transect Counts from 28 August to 29 October 2005, Roth.T. & E.Loosli (2005), Thun Switzerland.

The 2005 bird count highlighted the fact that the number of bee-eaters migrating over the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco must exceed 1% of the European breeding population. Following the important Bird Area criteria system (Waliczky,2000), the “C3” criterion is met when a site is known to regularly hold at least 1% of the flyway of migratory species not considered threatened at the EU level. In Iezekiel et.al.(2004) the threshold for European Bee-eater to fulfil this criteria is stated as 13,000 individuals. In our case, this threshold is complied with by the number of counted birds alone – 17,145 – even without being complemented by an estimation of the amount of birds overlooked and without those migrating at night.

The crucial importance of the flyway over the South Eastern Peninsula and Cape Greco is still not being given sufficient consideration. The flyway should be protected during the months of April and September and the slaughter of bee-eaters prevented, so that this species be not significantly damaged – over 1% of the migrating European population – by shooting on Cyprus. The species is now being targeted by Cypriot gunmen precisely because they have already exterminated or severely reduced the numbers of other migratory birds.



These cartridges shot bee-eaters

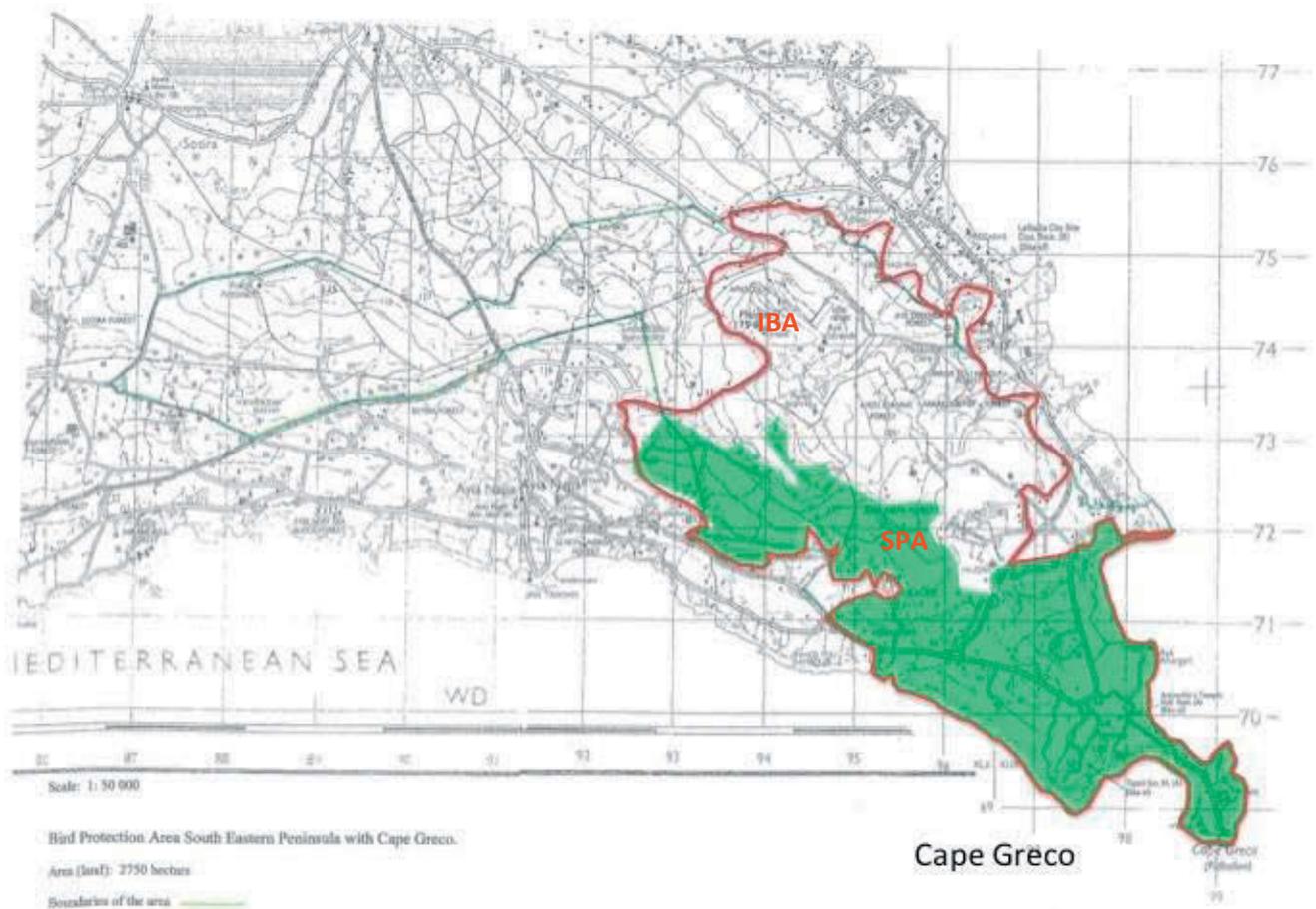


The plan by MBCC Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus to supervise the proposed Natura 2000 SPA/IBA Cape Greco- South-Eastern Peninsula is of vital importance.

September and October of this year saw countless decoy devices for quail in operation on the site, revealing that this species, too, is in danger: large numbers of birds are killed after being lured by the electronic decoys.

Years ago, shooting was not allowed in September in South Eastern Cyprus. Now, even the month of October – with migration in full swing – seems gradually to be regarded as open season. Shooting has recently become widespread in many parts of South Eastern Cyprus in October, despite the declarations of the Game Service that no extensions to hunting areas have been authorised. On the ground, however, there is absolutely no official supervision of the extensive shooting taking place on the Kambos (plain) in Paralimni. As a result, in mid-October 2014, as the quail migration came to an end, decoy devices were set out for skylarks, robins and other protected species in the fields of the Kambos. The shooters were allowed to carry on their deadly work without any interference from the authorities. This kind of hunting is anything but sustainable.

Map of proposed Natura 2000 Bird site South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco



Significant decline in numbers of migrating birds

Over the past year (2013-2014) we have been puzzled by the huge overall decline in the numbers of migrating birds.

In recent years the absence of migrating cranes over Cape Greco has been very striking; previously, up to 7,000 birds could be counted annually.

Experience has shown that the spring passage over Cape Greco is always lighter than in autumn; however, in 2014, numbers of passerines were unexpectedly low: apart from Blackcaps, very few species at all were recorded.

The simple fact is that for decades the numbers of migrating birds have been declining. However, the autumn of 2014 brought lower numbers of passerines than even the most pessimistic forecast. The migrating birds were so scarce that even bird catchers began to speculate as to the reasons for the collapse in numbers. Among the possible causes mentioned was the massive increase in light pollution along the whole of Cyprus' southern coast, due to the huge artificial lighting clusters created by tourist resorts and street lighting throughout the region. Years ago, Peter Flint, ornithologist and author of *The Birds of Cyprus*, was among the first to point to the risk that migration flows could decline because of the overbuilding of both the coast itself and resting areas for birds.

On the 4th of November 2014 an article appeared in several European papers under the heading

In 30 Years, 421 Million Fewer Birds in Europe

On Cyprus, this negative trend has been painfully obvious over recent decades. The thousands-strong flocks of passerines which once passed through the island are no longer to be seen. Many resting areas that once teemed with birds were deserted this autumn.

Migratory birds are not an unlimited resource. Gunmen on Cyprus kill anything that flies, aided by illegal electronic lures, while illegal trapping of birds has continued unchecked. The results of the slaughter – two million birds fewer, every single year – are grimly self-evident. The failure to take any interest in nature or living things, so prevalent in many strata of Cypriot society, is wreaking its terrible consequences.

Cypriot politicians have pandered only to the killer instinct of their electorate. Now, the price must be paid.

Reasons for cautious optimism

Looking back to 1993

Compared to 1993, the significant decline in the numbers of bird trappers is also self-evident. On any given morning during the trapping season in the 1990s, countless trappers could be seen at work with lime sticks and giant mist nets, piling dead birds into enormous baskets. The whole of the Cape Greco National Park and the slopes of Phanos were one vast bird killing field, from Aya Napa to Paralimni. Only when Cyprus joined the EU did this criminal slaughter relent, temporarily. In 2003-2005, however, bird killing began again on a massive scale, practised mainly by landowners in their own fenced groves and orchards. This was the signal for a new, completely unchallenged bird massacre throughout Cyprus, which has continued unabated until 2014, given the complete absence of effective measures on the part of the Cypriot government, which has adopted a tolerant, if not collusive, stance towards wildlife crime.

It is thanks to this permissive regime on the part of the Cypriot government that still today, 10 years after 10 EU accession, the same old 'usual suspects' are still free to kill birds. Trapping by the general public has declined, with numbers of trappers down by 45%, but the trapping mafia is alive and well: notorious wildlife criminals, often landowners, continue their activities undisturbed; they have been reported by conservationists for years, but never successfully brought before the courts because of inadequate policing. The illegal killing of wild birds in Cyprus is not carried on by poor peasants or by the unemployed, but by prosperous landowners and organized crime interests in Protoras and Paralimni.

55% fewer bird catching sites since 2001

In the area of the proposed Natura 2000 bird site of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco and Sotria Forest, since 2001 there has been a slow but steady decline in active catching sites, now estimated at a 55% decrease.

The encouraging fact is that, despite the lack of effective policing, bird catching has declined significantly overall in the area of the South Eastern Peninsula with Cape Greco, quite distinctly from the pattern in bird trapping localities elsewhere in Cyprus.

The remarkable results of 20 years of intensive bird conservation

The intensive patrolling during migration periods over the past two decades by the bird protection organisation MBCC, using teams of volunteers on the look-out day and night for illegal catching equipment, has made these areas unattractive to wildlife criminals.

Only certain local landowners, whose groves and orchards are often fenced in as private property, have gone on trapping birds on a regular basis. The reason for their being able to continue their illegal activities unchecked lies in the inadequate training of police and game wardens in respect of wildlife crime. Police procedures have proved ineffective or even counter-productive, as detailed in the Complaint to the European Communities Concerning Failure to Comply with Community Law brought in March 2013 by MBCC and the Foundation for Animals in the Law http://www.tierimrecht.org/en/artikel/MBCC_complaint.php.

Reasons for infinite disappointment

The Tunis Action Plan has as yet had no effect on Cyprus

Police training and support are both lacking. There has been less assistance from police than in previous years. Assistance from the police, which formerly could be taken for granted, has suddenly been denied. This was extremely hard on us, to be able to do no more than stand and watch as landowners went slinking around their fenced orchards in the early morning, setting out lime sticks. The 11th of October was a typical day of this kind. Four different landowners arrived on the scene by car, with lime sticks. We were forced to stand and listen as they committed their crimes; they would only appear before us when accompanied by acquaintances. Birds were killed.

The inadequacy of police training and practice has remained at the same disastrously inadequate levels detailed in our March 2013 complaint to the EU. Criminals face very little risk of prosecution, even if caught in the act. Police procedures are not only inadequate but fundamentally erroneous and apparently based on the objective of protecting, rather than prosecuting, wildlife criminals.

The Berne Convention highlights the crucial importance of national policing and investigation priorities in the context of the Tunis Action Plan. Nowhere is the urgency of putting this approach into action greater than on Cyprus.

The Cyprus Police have a number of well-trained security officers, which they deploy in high-risk scenarios such as international sports events and crisis situations. These officers have proven capabilities of appropriate prior investigation and effective implementation in the field. During the two migration periods of 2014, four of these officers were deployed on a daily basis with another bird conservation NGO, achieving significant successes in the fight against wildlife crime.

This zero tolerance approach, as successfully implemented by the security officers, is the model which should be followed as soon as possible in training and practice against wildlife crime throughout the police and game warden force in Cyprus, replacing the current inadequate procedures still common among regular police officers and wardens. The current level of tolerance of wildlife crime is a disgrace and must be replaced by the rule of law.

To be successful on Cyprus, the Tunis Action Plan must focus in particular on policing and investigation.

MBCC Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus conservation work

We heard 31 decoy devices (including 21 devices used by gunmen)

We confiscated 10 devices

We encountered 12 bird trappers

We arrested 3 trappers

We collected 760 lime sticks from bushes and trees

We saved 43 live birds from lime sticks

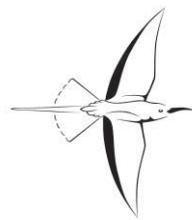
We found 8 dead birds on lime sticks

We disposed of 22 large mist net poles and 17 ground poles

We found 15 trees set up for illegal trapping



Moved by love



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Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus

International Monitoring Organization

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Gwatt, 18 November 2014