

Zero tolerance of illegal killing of wild birds

Cyprus annual report 2013



CYPRUS 2013

Malice and Human Cruelty

M B C C

Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus

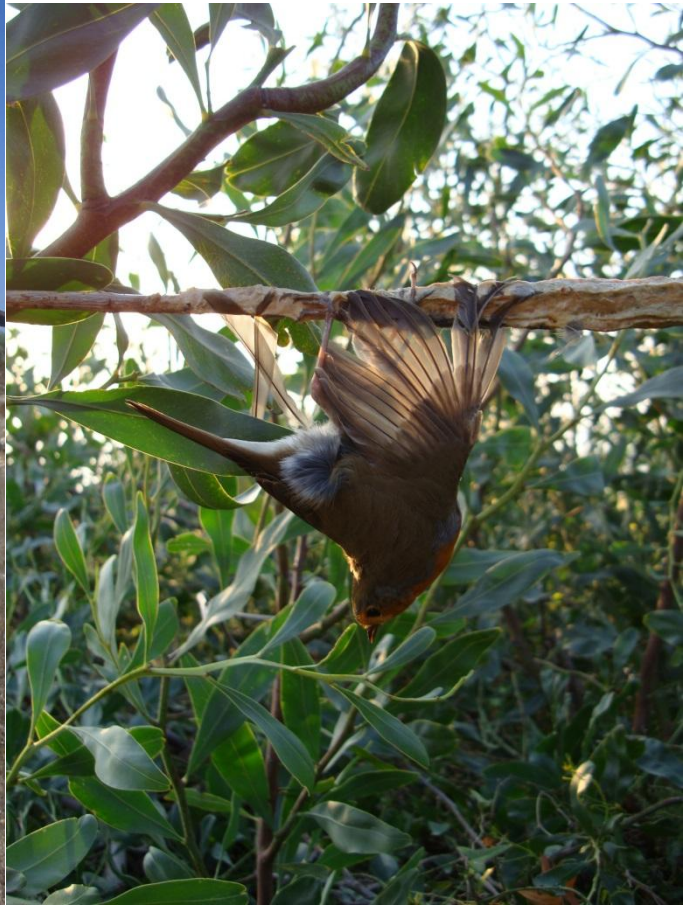
Lime sticks in Cyprus

Lime sticks are the most cruel form imaginable of illegal, non-selective trapping, used to capture migratory birds. The small birds are not killed, but suffer for up to eight hours as they struggle hopelessly to get free, with each movement only getting them more caught up, until wings, tail and beak are all smeared with the deadly, sticky glue. Only when the tiny creatures are brutally ripped from the sticks by the trapper, and dispatched with a knife or by wringing the neck brought to an end.

This is the fate that hundreds of thousands of birds meet with on Cyprus.

The shocking accounts and pictures of the cruelty of illegal trapping have caused grief and outrage around the world.

Who could be proud of such a tradition?





Cruel and inhumane practices

The dramatic spread of organized wildlife crime in trapping areas on Cyprus' southern coast

Autumn 2013 saw illegal killing of wild birds in Cyprus on a colossal scale, not seen since the late 1990s. Indeed this scale of trapping had become a thing of the past since Cyprus joined the EU. Illegal decoy devices could be heard sounding bird calls at all times of the day and night. In one small area we heard 31 loudspeaker decoys, including in places where for some years trapping had no longer been carried out. Most decoy devices were active at night, while others were activated around 5.00 – 6.00 am, when many poachers were putting out sticks in preparation for large-scale daytime killing.

One reason for the surge in wildlife crime from autumn 2013 was that poachers were sure of the support of the newly-elected Cypriot government, which they were confident would not interfere with their illegal activities.

Since spring 2013 a mafia-style movement has developed in the poaching stronghold of Paralimni, with close links to the self-styled 'Friends of the Lime Stick' association. The latter seeks the legalisation of trapping with lime sticks, which are illegal under Community and therefore also Cypriot law.

The illegal 'Friends of the Lime Stick' association, although openly viewed sympathetically by the Justice Minister, did not wait for any legalisation process to begin. Instead, the association built up a service with a telephone network covering all local trapping areas (Paralimni, Protaras, Aya Napa), offering groups of young thugs who could be called upon at any time of the day and night to intervene against visiting patrols of conservationists. These volunteers come mainly from other EU countries, and for years have spent time in work camps helping to protect Europe's migratory birds. The young Cypriot toughs used various forms of physical violence against the conservationists and also vandalised cars by slashing tyres and using heavy motor bikes with no licence plates to damage the bodywork, often attacking cars without any certain idea as to their ownership or why they were there. The older generation of poachers apparently regarded this criminalisation of Cypriot youth as acceptable, frequently calling on their criminal services.

The local police force, poorly trained

The local police force, poorly trained with limited powers, failed completely to contain this new criminal element. The authorities' obstinate insistence that proceedings can be brought only against those caught *in flagrante delicto* in clean results in the young hooligans being able to make a laughing stock of the police. By their own admission the local police officers are powerless to act; they made no attempt to improve the situation, or to come to the aid of victims of attacks. There are no specialists in crime scene evaluation or further investigation at the local police station. Those who suffer crimes are left to count the cost in terms of personal injury and damage to their possessions.

The Cypriot State is drifting into utter lawlessness in respect of wildlife crime

It is not quite ten years since Cyprus joined the European Union, with the widespread support of the population **and the hunters**.

Community law on wildlife protection had still never been properly implemented in 2011, when former Justice Minister Lucas Louca announced at the Larnaca Conference that he would take serious steps to implement the Birds Directive. He did in fact do what lay in his power, supporting and recognising the work of long-time conservationists of wild birds in Cyprus, whether they were Cypriots or other EU citizens. All conservationists were supported by the police, while the Head of Cyprus Police sent a special unit to support conservation work and prevent wildlife crime in 2012 and early 2013.

This was the first time that action against illegal trapping was taken visibly and effectively. Incidentally, it showed that on Cyprus, in respect of wildlife crime, **everything depends on the attitude of the government**.

This improved state of affairs did not last long. Since spring 2013 a new government has shelved any active support for implementation of the Birds Directive, discontinuing all forms of police support and opening the door to lawlessness, corruption, illegal trade in wild birds and widespread severe cruelty to animals. In spring 2013 the new Minister of Justice withdrew the special unit (APU) that had previously accompanied and supported conservationists in the field, leaving volunteers open to violence and revenge attacks by trappers and thugs during the autumn period.

The trapping mafia is clearly aware that they have the tacit support of the present government: the campaign of violence is designed to force volunteers from other European states such as Germany, Italy, the UK and Switzerland to abandon the island because it is no longer safe for conservation work.

It is a known fact that the new President promised to legalise lime sticks during his campaign, and by appointing a new Justice Minister he has openly sided with the illegal trade in wild birds. Mr. Ionas Nikolaou is an advocate of the widespread use of illegal lime sticks, and his appointment signalled a new regime of implicit tolerance of wildlife crime on the part of the Cypriot government, opening the way to the recent months of vandalism and violent revenge attacks against conservationists.

The President's having publicly raised the question, in 2013, of what these 'foreigners' (EU conservationists) were doing in Cyprus sadly confirms his woeful ignorance of the disastrous situation regarding the protection of birds and the environment in his country.

One such group of 'foreigners' is the international monitoring organisation MBCC, Migratory Birds Conservation in Cyprus, which has been active for 20 years, in tandem with partners Bird Life Cyprus, in protecting endangered European migratory birds and the important bird area of Cape Greco. MBCC has carried out extensive field research and reports regularly to the EU and the Berne Convention. As a result of its work, MBCC volunteers have been targeted by the Paralimni mafia. Not only have they failed to receive efficient police protection, but our letters of complaint to the Ministry of Justice on this urgent issue have remained unanswered.

Meanwhile the millions of wild birds illegally killed on Cyprus continue to have a gradual, but devastating impact on the continental status of European bird populations.

Change and loss of Cypriot tradition

The origin of the ‘tradition’ of trapping wild birds on Cyprus was that the small-scale capture of small songbirds and warblers provided an extra source of food for the poor families of earlier generations.

Today’s Cypriot families are not so under-nourished as to need that supplement to their diet; on the contrary, as in most affluent Western nations, widespread obesity has become an important public health issue, including among children. In such a context, the original justification for trapping wild birds is no longer valid.

The equipment used to kill wild birds has also changed utterly, meaning that no one can refer in good faith to the continuance of a tradition. Today’s wildlife criminals use all-terrain vehicles, sophisticated mist nets, digital decoys and high-powered rifles, none of which were even available to earlier generations, let alone part of a tradition.

Poachers try to present lime sticks as an element of popular culture, but it should be clear that today’s lime stick industry has nothing to do with the small-scale use practised by poor families in previous decades. Today, hundreds of thousands of lime sticks are set by organised wildlife criminals, and their purpose has nothing to do with a subsistence diet and everything to do with a lucrative and illegal trade.

Similarly, the detail of the practice, like the scale on which it is undertaken, has changed utterly as compared to traditional trapping. The traditional ‘lime’ used to coat sticks was made from a mixture of honey and plum juice, whose scent attracted the birds that were then caught in the sticky natural glue. Today’s ‘lime’ is a powerful chemical adhesive capable of securing birds in agony for up to eight hours before poachers may do their killing rounds.

Trapping with lime sticks is intrinsically non-selective, but the industrial scale on which it is now being practised in Cyprus means that large numbers of other species are affected, as well as small birds: birds of prey, owls, shrikes, endangered birds of any size and description, small mammals, snakes and other reptiles.

What was once a small-scale family tradition has died out, to be replaced by a brutal illegal trade, worth millions of euros to the criminal interests engaged in it.

From the Action Plan (Tunis August 2013), p. 5:

The species are the beneficiary of wildlife conservation legislation and thus (...) changes in human behaviour towards wildlife may have to occur.

This is a positive orientation, suggesting that animal species must not necessarily be subject to cruel human traditions, but that human interests should have to comply with the dignity and protection of animals.

In Cyprus, however, such a positive balance is very far from being achieved. Nature only seems to have value if it can be exploited as a resource. The building mania of recent years has led to the island’s coastal areas being ruined by thousands of uninhabited homes, which have destroyed the environment and devastated the national economy.

The large-scale unemployment which has ensued following the economic crisis has led some of the island's jobless to turn to poaching for an income. It should be noted, however, that it is not poor Cypriots who are the main beneficiaries of wildlife crime, but the landowners who allow or practise trapping on their property, typically in (enclosed) groves and orchards.

Meanwhile, the killing goes on unchecked. Birds and wildlife in general have no powerful advocate on Cyprus. If Community law is not to remain a dead letter on the island, threatening biodiversity at continental level, something must finally be done to implement the Birds Directive.

Hunting on Cyprus is not and never has been sustainable

18th September 2013

The telephone rang in the early hours of the morning. It was a man from Cyprus, asking excitedly: are you already over here? We need you: the hunters are shooting hundreds of bee-eaters every day. They've put out 5-6 digital decoys on a nearby hill, and the artificial bird calls are sounding day and night. It's been going on a long time. They have dragged over 45 bee hives to places where bees have never been kept before, so as to attract the bee-eaters. There are about half a dozen hunters shooting almost all day, every day. We're witnessing a terrible massacre. They cut the heads and tails off the bee-eaters and pluck the bodies. It's ghastly. They sell the birds as thrushes. We can't stand listening to it all any more.

On 26th September I arrived on the island. The hunting season was coming to an end and the hunters had cleared away the piles of feathers. But the digital decoys were still operating and there were still people shooting bee-eaters.

Years before, an exception was made for beekeepers, who were allowed to shoot bee-eaters as pests. The hunters immediately took advantage and shot huge quantities of bee-eaters.

Although the official exception has lapsed, hunters have continued to shoot bee-eaters, but never on so massive a scale as occurred this autumn 2013.

The numbers of bee-eaters shot for illegal sale must have been in the thousands.

It sends out the message that rule of law is a negotiable principle and that the authorities are willing to turn a blind eye to some forms of law-breaking. (Cyprus Mail, 2 August 2013)

This season has seen the breaking down of all barriers to wildlife crime in Cyprus. There is no supervision of hunting, in fact at all levels there is more or less open collusion with poaching. The result is widespread anarchy. Only one year ago I was officially invited by the Game Service to report incidents of poaching. This autumn no one took any interest at all. The killing is totally indiscriminate. Anything that flies will be shot or trapped. There is no selection and no compliance with the rules on permitted game species.



Masses of killed bee-eaters

Autumn 2013 – facts and figures

Despite the highly intensive trapping season this autumn, we collected only a relatively low quantity of traps and equipment, which is not in itself representative of the extent of our activities or the level of wildlife crime. The reason for this is that the same area was patrolled by other conservationists shortly before MBCC were on the scene.

The strict supervision of trapping areas that we undertook from 26th September to 25th October also acted as a deterrent and helped to reduce the numbers of birds killed.

Decoys 7

Mist nets 4

Lime sticks 464

Live birds 49 (incl. owl, redstart, willow warbler, mistle thrush, song thrush, lesser whitethroat, blackcap)

Inaction on the part of the EU prevents any change for the better

It would have been an easy matter for Cyprus to eradicate permanently the illegal killing of birds in the period 2002-2005 if pressure to comply with Community law had been forthcoming, but instead the EU chose to be lenient. The firm guiding hand of the EU and of the law has been lacking ever since.

We oppose human malice and cruelty with belief in existence and the whole community of Nature.

Cyprus Spring report 2013 by MBCC

Spring camp 25.3. – 8.10.

This spring camp was distinguished by the lowest levels of trapping seen in many years. This was apparently **a consequence of the first ever effective policing effort by the APU, in the framework of dedicated government support.**

Finds in the protected areas were statistically adequate and relevant.

Finds:

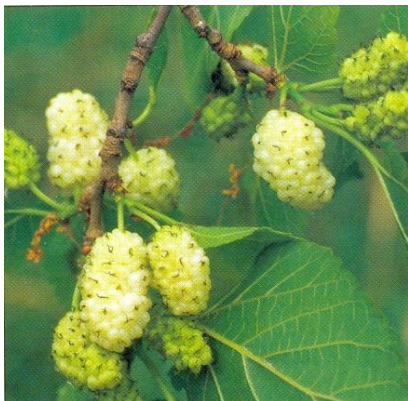
Decoys 4
Mist Nets 1
Net poles (and ground poles) 75
Lime sticks 751
Live Birds 57
Dead birds 13
Trappers 13
Arrested trapper 1

The trappers kept a low profile, with only very few decoys being heard in the protected area. Only in early May did we receive significant reports of large quantities of lime sticks in mulberry and loquat trees. The ripe fruits of both kinds of tree seemed highly attractive to birds, allowing trappers to dispense with loudspeaker decoys and rely on the highly fragrant fruit to lure the birds onto the many lime sticks placed in the trees. Thus early May saw a resurgence in trapping activity, until the period around 10 May when the loquat fruits began to rot and drop from the trees as none had been picked.

A new variation: lime stick trapping in mulberry and loquat bushes.



Loquat (engl). Mespina (Greek)



Mulberry



Mulberry

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Gwatt, 22 November 2013