

Emptying the Skies of the Mediterranean & the Island of Cyprus



Cyprus Spring migration 2011

The ugly spectacle in every field and orchard along the south coast of Cyprus



The accompanying photographs of birds trapped on lime sticks show how brutal this kind of killing is. Stuck in the viscous lime, the birds struggle desperately until they are exhausted and almost stripped of their feathers. They may hang upside down from the sticks for as long as 8 to 12 hours, until released from their agony by death. Trapping with lime sticks is one of the most cruel ways of capturing and killing birds ever devised by man.

On ethical grounds alone, the use of lime sticks is completely unacceptable, quite apart from the fact that the method is intrinsically non-selective: any bird unlucky enough to alight on lime sticks will be trapped and killed, including raptors, owls, shrikes and protected passerines.





Spring migration observations, 30 March - 16 May 2011

Bird Conservation in Ayia Napa, Cape Greco and Paralimni areas about 2800 ha by MBCC Migratory Birds Conservation Cyprus, NGO, with 7 Volunteers from 6 EU countries and Switzerland

We discovered over 1,000 lime sticks.

We collected 759 lime sticks, mostly with the police and the Game Fund.

We collected 2 large mist nets.

We saved 124 wild birds.

We found 8 dead birds.

We arrested 6 bird catchers with the help of the authorities.

Each lime stick left in the field for a protracted period may trap and kill 5 to 6 birds. A thousand lime sticks in the field therefore represent a possible kill of approx. 5,500 wild birds. Taking into account the many bird trappers who are currently reluctant to put out lime sticks because of our year-round monitoring activities, this means that our actions in the field must have ensured the safe passage of at least double that number of migrants: some 11,000 wild birds were saved by the engagement of volunteer bird protectionists.

The intensity of bird catching has not declined since the previous year. In spring 2010 we collected 941 lime sticks (as opposed to 759 during the same period this year). The poor weather in spring 2011 was certainly advantageous from the wild birds' point of view: April was cold and wet, with Central European climatic conditions, while a steady north wind brought frequent rain and kept migratory birds away from Cyprus on other flyways towards the north-east for several weeks. The uncertain weather and resulting scarcity of birds led the increasingly numerous bird trappers to desist from putting out lime sticks. Peak passage arrived in end-April with several large falls of birds, whose survivors left the island rapidly. During this period the killing was certainly intense, but the concentration of passage into a relatively short time certainly reduced the overall mortality rate of migrant birds this year.



Cooperation with the Larnaca Game Fund and local police forces in Paralimni and Ayia Napa

The level of cooperation showed a fundamental change for the better in spring 2011.

There were several reasons for this improved cooperation:

1. Several bird protection organisations have made an intensive and enduring contribution in terms of communicating their advice, complaints and requirements to the Cypriot authorities.
2. Friendly relations with local policemen and their officers have created a favourable climate for cooperation. This year, in 2011, it appeared to have become natural for the police to intervene in case of illegal bird trapping.
3. The Justice Minister and Cyprus Chief of Police gave strict orders that the law against illegal bird trapping must be applied by police.
4. The Minister of the Interior for the first time gave strict instructions to the Larnaca Game Fund to cooperate with NGOs actively protecting birds in the field. The positive results of this attitude could be seen clearly during the spring migration.
5. The forthcoming conference on 6-8 July 2011 has certainly put positive pressure on the Cypriot authorities, spurring them into greater efforts to apply national and EU bird protection legislation and towards implementing these laws in the field.

It is greatly to be hoped that this new positive spirit between national and local authorities and nature and bird protection NGOs can be maintained and extended, in particular by personnel training, adequate staffing levels, improved command structures in the Game Fund and the long overdue establishment of an Anti Poaching Base in the Paralimni/ Famagusta District.

The local Paralimni and Ayia Napa police supported us with 7 patrol cars, day and night. In two instances the Paralimni police even waited for bird catchers to appear, once at the perpetrator's home and once at an enclosed orchard where they eventually entered the premises. The Larnaca Game Fund supported us with 4 patrol cars. Due to the rainy weather we were even able to decline their assistance on several occasions.

Poaching is rife among hunters on Cyprus

The dedicated bird catchers of earlier years are an ageing population and are gradually dying out. Unfortunately, however, the behaviour of hunters on Cyprus destroys any hope that the level of illegal bird killing might therefore be slowly but steadily reduced. The indiscipline and criminal behaviour of many so-called hunters is subject to no public or moral sanction, including by hunting associations. Young hunters seem addicted to the pursuit of killing, using illegal lures, nets and lime sticks in search of easy money to spend on expensive cars, motor bikes, quads and other luxury goods. In the absence of any decent moral code, their activities are increasingly close to the modality of organised crime, with systematic aggression towards outsiders. Often they confront European wildlife protectionists, demanding to know why they should come to 'their' country of Cyprus to interfere with 'their' birds. The extent of ignorance among Cypriot hunters is apparently so great that they are unable to recognise the obvious fact that the migratory birds are not 'theirs', but short-term guests from Europe and Russia, where they are regarded as a valuable part of continental biodiversity and therefore protected at great expense.

The concept of the inestimable value of nature, including in economic terms, has not yet penetrated sufficiently into the popular consciousness in Cyprus. The island could so easily be a natural paradise, especially for bird watching, enabling the development of a lucrative and sustainable niche of wildlife tourism.

Older, wiser men give grounds for hope

Some Cypriots can still remember how, years ago, migratory birds would descend on the island, sometimes in flocks of millions. They cannot but notice how miserably low the passage of birds has become in recent decades. They have a genuine fear that the skies over Cyprus may soon be empty of birds in spring and autumn.



George, from Ayia Napa, is 89. He makes every effort to secure his sizeable plot of land in Phanos as a haven for wildlife, protecting it from shooting and trapping, littering and every other kind of misdeed against nature.

This modest elderly man has planted young and valuable trees on his land. **He is profoundly convinced that all forms of life have a right to exist and that we humans have no right to destroy their valuable lives.** He is proudly supported in these convictions by his sons. MBCC is proud to be able to include George and his land as part of its proposed Natura 2000 SPA.

What needs to change in Cyprus?

1. There is above all an urgent need to curb the indiscriminate shooting of all species of birds. Many hunters completely ignore the restrictions on permissible species and numbers of kills.
2. The involvement of hunters in trapping with lime sticks and nets during the winter open season leads young hunters to become involved in illegal trapping with lime sticks and nets also during migration periods.

The presence of very young trappers in the field is a recent and disturbing development. These young men are extremely aggressive in defence of their 'right' to engage in wildlife crime in pursuit of easy money. The rapid growth of a young criminal class on the island is a dangerous development for Cypriot society as a whole: who knows what other criminal activities these men will turn their attention to, when the income from wildlife crime inevitably declines as a result of their massacres? Intense efforts should be made to inform the population, through the media and by legitimate hunting organisations, about the fundamentals of bird protection in Europe and the status of European bird populations. Cypriots often seem to have little knowledge of the threatened status and rarity, on a continental scale, of some of the birds which pass through the island: a detailed information campaign on this aspect is urgently required, not just to lay to rest some of the myths which circulate among hunters, but to raise awareness about the prospects for sustainable, high-income forms of wildlife and nature tourism – for the island's population as a whole, instead of a criminal minority – which are currently being destroyed by shooting and trapping.



Saved *Otus scops*, breeding bird on Cyprus

Hunting Season Winter 2010/ 2011

Hunting in Cyprus

The Cypriot Government has published statistics which report 55,000 licensed hunters (in a total population of over 600,000). Local observation suggests that figure for the total number of hunters should be increased by several thousand unlicensed poachers.

The only legitimate game animals and birds present on the island in any numbers are the hare and the Chukar partridge. Thousands of these are bred for release as game, but almost all are shot in the first days of the open season in November. All that is left to shoot and trap are migratory birds.

The European Birds Directive and Hunting in Cyprus

Already in its preamble (Article 235), the Birds Directive requires that migratory birds be protected on passage from excessive hunting and illegal capture. European law calls for strict scientific research to clarify the extent to which hunting is detrimental to species and their populations.

Does the EU monitor whether its legal requirements are being complied with in each member State?

In Cyprus, almost the entire population of birds present on the island is illegally killed each winter. Because most of the birds which make up that population are short-haul migrants, they are replaced each year by new individuals which come to Cyprus as winter residents and in turn fall victim to local shooters and trappers.

Since 2003 Cyprus has been a member of the European Union. So far not one single officially recognised investigation into the numbers of birds killed and the damaging consequences for migratory species has been carried out, nor have any long-term observations of bird numbers and movements been made, which would have highlighted the serious and lasting negative impact, as required by Art. 235 of the Directive.

There is indeed some level of self-regulation by licensed hunters, who notify their legitimate kills voluntarily to the Game Fund. Legal hunting is therefore properly reported in the statistics. Because, however, in Cyprus during the hunting season every single bird, including every single protected bird, is shot at, there is an urgent need for a scientifically conducted record of the almost limitless extent of illegal hunting on the island. Any statistics on hunting in Cyprus which do not take into account the impact of illegal shooting and trapping are, quite simply, completely worthless.

Illegal hunting on the island is responsible for the killing of hundred of thousands of birds, including passerines, thrushes and a significant number of raptors, every year. Illegal shooting and trapping is carried on undisturbed on a daily basis, without the slightest intervention by the authorities. Anything which flies is killed, including Chukar partridges in February (long into the close season), raptors such as kestrels and goshawks, etc.

There is no independent authority in Cyprus to compile and process scientific records of illegal hunting. Yet on Cyprus hunters are very likely the most significant grouping in terms of impact on wild birds from both illegal shooting and illegal trapping.

Winter 2010/11

Reports showed that a relatively small number of thrushes arrived on Cyprus. Even cranes were first sighted only in December on southerly migration over Protaras and Cape Greco. Southward migration over the island was probably deterred by prevailing south-easterly winds in late autumn and winter. Unless these were the first signs that the sky over Cyprus is now finally empty?

In February game birds were almost entirely absent. Despite this, hunters were active in the field, shooting into bushes in an attempt to flush any living thing. Any birds which did emerge were killed. I was not surprised to come across a Chukar partridge flapping on the ground with a broken wing, in Paralimni. That was on the morning of 9 February, when the open season was long over, but already, on Sunday 6 February, I had observed four hunters in Aya Napa illegally shooting two Chukar partridges. On the following day I discovered a kestrel that had been shot – still alive, but unable to fly. The bodies of dead passerines were strewn on the ground. Despite the lack of game, hunters came every day carrying large bore shot guns, firing at the few small birds left, or simply at nothing at all, in the desolate killing fields. They are obsessed with killing.

Illegal trapping of wild birds goes hand in hand with hunting during the period from November to February, carried out in the same areas by the hunters themselves.

The pictures show the installations in hunting areas which are often used simultaneously for shooting and for trapping with nets and lime sticks. Taped lures could also be heard on Sunday mornings when hunters were present. The photographs were taken in December 2010 and February 2011.



On hunting ground covered with hundreds of cartridges, metal poles are pointing to mist netting and the nearby cut acacias to liming.



Strong clearing and tree nursing with irrigation show the hunters care for illegal bird catching



Metal poles for mist netting in open hunting area on Phanos

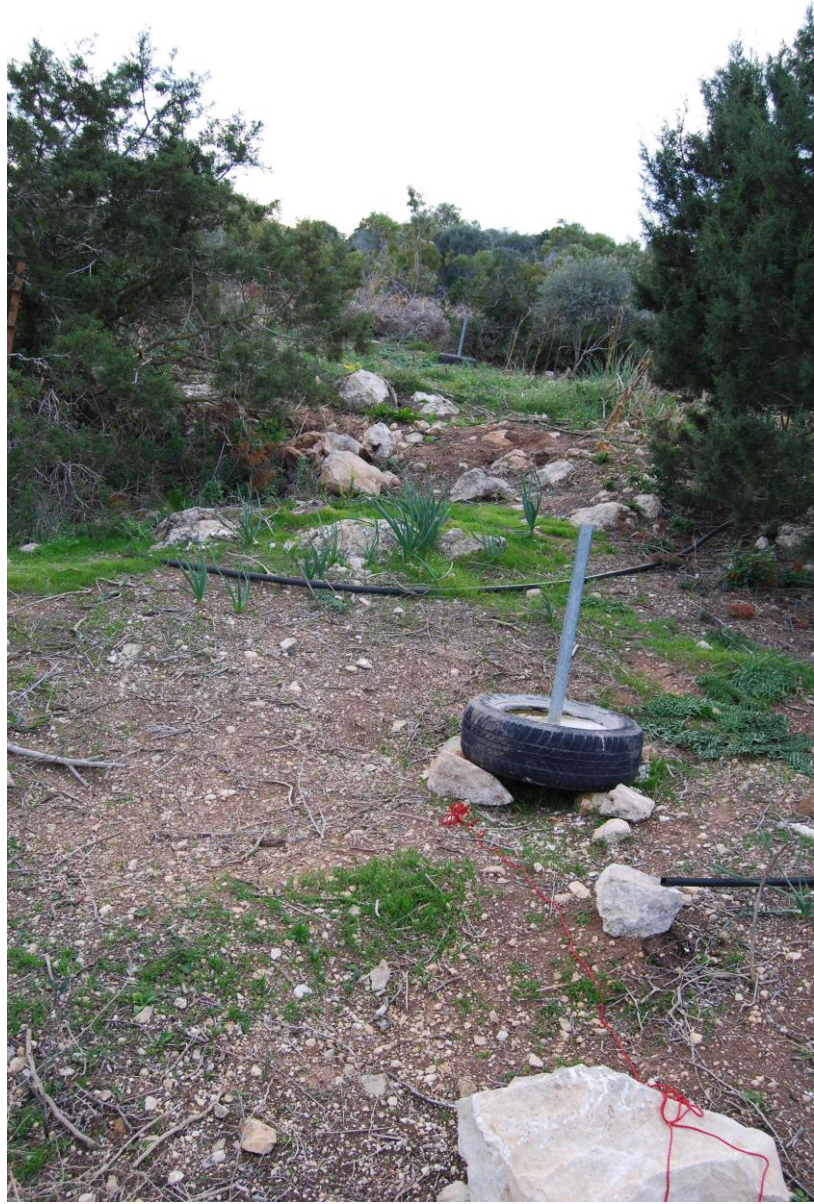




Plastic carpet with metal bases used below a big mist net



Game reserve area . The panels prohibiting shooting are pushed on the ground, covered and hidden behind bushes. The hunters open themselves reserved areas for hunting. Illegal shooting, mist netting and liming go together.



Mist netting, liming and shooting in January and February



Fishnet approx. a hundred meters long surrounds a cliffside with fine trees for bird catching in Mazera (Ayia Napa) to stop all the small animals like snakes, hedgehogs, rats from eating the birds on lime sticks.



Concrete hole for metal pole on upper end



Long net lane

On lower end metallic base pole for a big net



Edith Loosl, Schorenstrasse 33, CH-3645 Gwatt, Switzerland
E-mail: flora.ch@gmx.net

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