

# Bird Killing in Cyprus

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Situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Cyprus has long held the unenviable reputation as the worst place in Europe for the illegal trapping and shooting of migrant birds. With an area of 9,250 km<sup>2</sup> Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean after Sicily and Sardinia. Its wildlife is of international importance, being a mixture of European, Middle Eastern and Asiatic species, and contributes importantly to the large-scale tourist industry on the island. A number of important migration flyways converge over Cyprus, and every year an estimated 150 million migrant birds use the island as a crucial stopover for feeding and resting. It is also the winter home for a large number of European birds such as robins and thrushes. There are around 80 breeding species on Cyprus, including the endemic Cyprus warbler and Cyprus pied wheatear, and several species threatened at a European or global level.

The trapping of migrant birds, known as 'ambelopoulia', for culinary use is a practice that has taken place for hundreds of years on Cyprus. Bird trapping is concentrated in the south-east part of the island, in particular around Paralimni, Cape Pyla, and Ayios Theodoros, and directly related to bird migration routes. It is the reserve of body fat accumulated by migrant birds that makes them so highly sought after as a speciality dish. Traditionally birds were caught by the use of limesticks, made from extracts of Syrian Plums and honey. The resulting brownish sticky substance is typically applied to a pomegranate stick about 70 cm long then set in a bush to catch foraging birds. Whilst this practice continues, the use of modern mist-nets often in conjunction with tape lures, has become the favoured method to illegally catch huge numbers of migrant birds. The mist-nets, believed imported primarily from Italy, are usually 3 – 5m in height and 8 – 20m in length and set in 'rides' cut in vegetated areas. Birds may be driven into the nets by throwing stones, beating the vegetation or shouting. The problem of illegal mist-net use has been exacerbated in recent years by the increased use of tape lures of bird song to attract migrant birds. Audio tapes and electronic bird calling devices, often set up with timer switches, will play for extended periods typically during the night.

Whilst mist-nets are often set in established plantations of olives, citrus fruits etc., in some areas such as Cape Pyla, trappers have gone to extraordinary lengths to provide the necessary vegetation by planting and irrigating large areas with non-native acacia. This effort is an indication of just how lucrative the bird trapping business has become. The acacia is an aggressive species that denudes botanical diversity by excluding native species. Acacia requires plenty of water to grow and

in many places groundwater, a precious limited resource on Cyprus, is illegally abstracted by diesel pumps and distributed in a comprehensive network of black plastic irrigation pipes. Some of these pipes form part of a legitimate agricultural practise, making it difficult for the enforcement agencies to take action.

The demand for this speciality food item has fuelled what is effectively organised crime intent on trapping, killing and supplying the outlet restaurants and shops. Despite the fact that the taking of migrant birds has been contrary to Cypriot legislation since 1974, the sale of these birds to restaurants and food outlets has become a lucrative business. A single blackcap, the *favoured* bird of the trappers, is worth *over* £1 GYP, and hundreds of birds can be caught in a good morning. Anecdotal figures supplied in 2000/2001 suggested some of the professional trappers were earning in excess of £40,000 GYP per annum.

More than 150 species of birds have been recorded as trapped, many classified as threatened within Europe, and more than 130 of them are included in Appendix II (Strictly protected fauna species) of the Bern Convention. Of particular concern are the trans-Saharan small migrants that breed in Cyprus and Europe. Many of the birds illegally trapped are also included by the European Commission in Annex I (Europe's most threatened birds) of the EU Birds Directive.

In 2000 the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB - the UK Partner of Birdlife International) investigated reports of large scale trapping taking place at Cape Pyla. This is part of the Eastern Sovereign Base Area (ESSA), one of two such areas in Cyprus governed by the UK Ministry of Defence. Outside the ESBA substantial trapping activity was found throughout the south-eastern part of Cyprus. In Paralimni, limesticks were found being prepared on open view on a street corner, indicating how little concern there was about any action by the authorities. Complaints had been made by local and visiting birdwatchers that reports of illegal trapping were being ignored by the Cypriot authorities. Where trappers had been prosecuted, it appeared that the resulting fines imposed by the courts were low and of little or no deterrent to trappers who were able to make substantial profits.

The Game Fund Service, a department of the Cypriot Ministry of the Interior, is responsible for wildlife protection. However, they do not have the manpower or resources to tackle this huge problem. Game Fund Service officers who try to enforce the law are often faced with violence or threats from the poachers. When trapping equipment is seized the trappers will continue to place new nets, limesticks etc., frequently at the same sites.

In the UK, there has been a Police Wildlife Liaison Officer (WLO) Network for *over* fifteen years. This involves police officers having responsibilities to deal with

wildlife crime issues. The SBA authorities adopted this system and two police officers were allocated the role of WLO for the Eastern and Western SSAs. In 2001, an experienced UK WLO visited the SBA authorities to provide guidance on future police action. Encouragingly, the SBA authorities have made a significant effort with a number of high profile operations resulting in a substantial seizure of mist nets and other trapping equipment. All restaurants inside the SBA were visited to ensure birds were not being sold.

The RSPB in association with the Cyprus Conservation Foundation (CCF) and the Cyprus Ornithological Society (COS) set about raising the profile of this issue resulting in items in the media in Cyprus, the UK and other European countries. In addition to the potential negative impact of bird trapping on the tourist industry, the forthcoming accession of Cyprus to the EU was raised as a significant issue in the hope this would bring some pressure to bear on the Cypriot government to take a more pro-active stance.

A BBC film crew visited Cyprus to report on the situation and accompanied the SBA authorities on one of their operations. This programme also included a visit to a restaurant in Ayios Theodoros where hundreds of 'ambelopoulia' were observed being served to diners during a single evening. The presence of local police chatting to diners outside highlighted the attitude taken by some of the authorities.

The most significant event in 2001 was a report prepared by CCF in co-operation with COS and Birdlife International/RSPB on the illegal killing and trading of birds in Cyprus. The report indicated that Cyprus was in breach of the Bern Convention, an agreement it had ratified in 1988 and emphasised that as many as 100 species listed on Annex II of the Bern Convention may be adversely affected by illegal trapping. There were 42 species with an unfavourable conservation status in Europe, including one vulnerable to global extinction (lesser kestrel) and two endemic to Cyprus, the Cyprus warbler and Cyprus pied wheatear. The report estimated that more than 12.6 million migratory birds were being caught each year. In addition, it was estimated that perhaps more than seven million birds were illegally shot.

In response, the Cyprus Government stated there had been a significant increase in enforcement with substantial seizures of trapping equipment and prosecution of trappers. There had been an increase in fines imposed by the courts and more activity was taking place with education and targeting restaurants and shops selling ambelopoulia. In line with Cyprus' pending accession to the EU, they stressed there was great emphasis on work to transpose the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) into Cyprus law. The UK Government highlighted the seizure of over 1000 mist-nets and 450 limesticks in

the ESSA since August 2001. It was reported that work in the spring migration period with the Game Fund Service had led to a significant reduction in the level of trapping.

Following the outcome of the Bern Convention Standing Committee meeting in November 2001, CCF, COS and Birdlife International/ASPS agreed to try and ascertain more accurately the level of trapping on Cyprus and to monitor the response of the Cyprus Government and SBA authorities. During the autumn 2002 trapping period, Birdlife International employed two staff to monitor bird trapping in Cyprus, concentrating on areas around Paralimni, Cape Pyla and Ayios Theodorus. Birdlife staff worked closely with both the SBA Police and the Game Fund Service. Encouragingly, there appeared to have been a significant effort by the Cypriot government to raise the profile of the trapping issue and the problems it may cause for the accession to the EU. The arrival of the Birdlife staff received surprisingly widespread coverage in the Cypriot media. At the very start of the survey, a trapper stated that he was not going to bother 'this year' as there was too much activity by the enforcement agencies. His attitude would appear to have been shared by others as it soon became apparent there was a substantial reduction in trapping activity. The enforcement agencies estimated this reduction in the region of 80-90%. Those that had continued to trap were probably being more cautious with a huge reduction in the use of tape lures and probably more efforts to remove mist-nets shortly after dawn each day.

However, it was clear that trapping was continuing, resulting in the killing of substantial numbers of birds. The Birdlife survey calculated that at least 541,500 birds were caught in mists-nets during the two-month autumn trapping period. Though the use of mist-nets was the main focus of the survey it was also calculated that at least 66,330 birds were caught on limesticks.

The Game Fund Service frequently referred publicly to the Birdlife survey, and the fact that this was prompting them to take a more pro-active stance, during the seizure of trapping equipment and the arrest of trappers. This undoubtedly made their job a little easier and their efforts more productive. However, it understandably caused increased resentment of 'foreigners' laying down the law, and denying them the opportunity to make significant sums of money. The trappers themselves publicly admitted that due to the crackdown they were losing 300-500 Cyprus pounds per day from the sale of ambelopoulia. Bird trapping and shooting is clearly a sensitive issue in Cyprus and with so many people in the south east of the island being involved directly, or indirectly, there is a natural inclination to oppose better enforcement of the law. Certain members of Parliament and other officials support that opinion publicly, having an eye to vote catching. Confident in the feeling that politicians under their influence support their activities, trappers continue their ways

without feeling threatened by the law. This attitude is deeply embedded in the social fabric to the extent that certain police officers in the area prefer to ignore illegal activities.

In addition to the work against the trappers, in 2002 the enforcement agencies in Cyprus, for the first time, undertook action against restaurants with the seizure of over 5000 ambelopoulia and nine arrests. This was widely reported in the local media with mention of birds being taken off diners' plates. These efforts and the huge reduction in illegal trapping are extremely encouragingly and have shown that with the right attitude the situation can be significantly improved. It is to be hoped that with the accession to the EU the Cyprus government will continue to tackle this issue. This will need continued enforcement action, particularly against the retail outlets that create the demand for this trade. More importantly, long-term policies and a programme of educational awareness will be needed to make this practise socially unacceptable. Hopefully, the future will continue to improve for the millions of migrant birds passing over Cyprus.