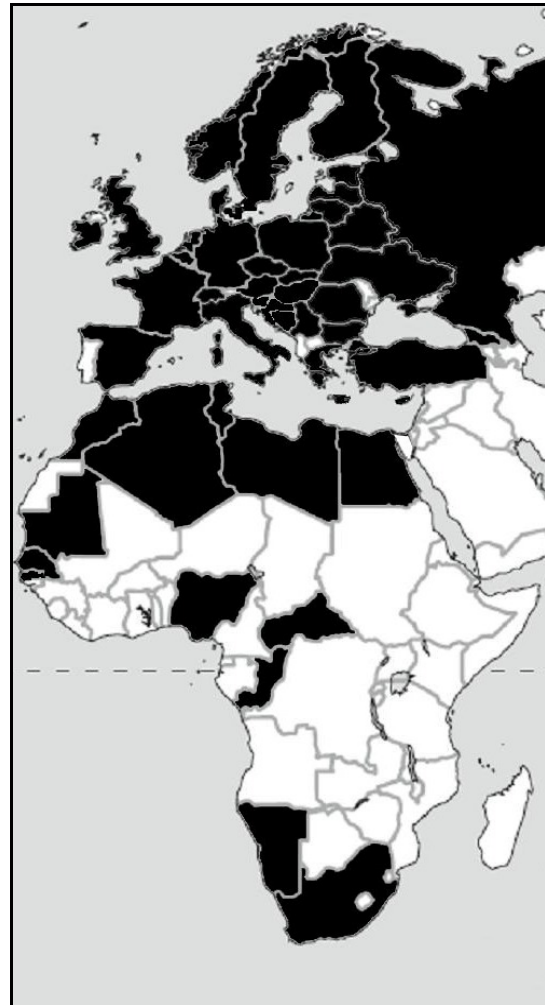


## Illegal hunting and trapping of wild birds in the Maltese islands

### Introduction

Although only a small country, the Maltese archipelago has a disproportionate importance to migratory birds as the islands are situated on the central European-African migratory flyway. Every spring and autumn, Malta becomes a vital stepping stone for birds using this migratory route to move between European breeding and African wintering grounds and the islands act as a place to rest and regain fat supplies before continuing on these long and taxing journeys. Due to its strategic location on this key migration route, Malta has a long and impressive species list, totalling **389 species** that have been recorded. Of these, **over 170 occur with regularity on migration**, in many cases in significant numbers. Scientific ringing studies carried out by BirdLife Malta since the 1960s have shown<sup>1</sup> that birds from at least **48 countries (36 in Europe and 12 in Africa)** use Malta during migration. Ring recoveries were also obtained from the islands of Crete, Sardinia, Corsica and Sicily.



*Map showing countries (filled in black) linked to Malta through bird migration either from birds ringed in Malta and recovered overseas, or foreign-ringed birds recovered in Malta.*

### Illegal hunting and trapping

Malta also has an exceptionally high density of hunters and per square kilometre has the densest population of hunters in the European Union. According to the latest official figures Malta had 11,929 registered hunters

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<sup>1</sup> The international impact of hunting and trapping in the Maltese islands, Dr André F. Raine, May 2007

and 4,616 licensed trappers. This gives a density of around 47 hunters and trappers per square kilometre, which is significantly higher when compared to a density of 2.5 hunters per square kilometre in Italy - another country in the Mediterranean with large numbers of registered hunters.



A Honey-buzzard, one of the most common migratory birds of prey in Malta. Photo by C. Cachia-Zammit 2009.

Perhaps due to this very high density of hunters, combined with a lack of law enforcement and environmental education, illegal hunting is a widespread and serious problem, with poachers specifically targeting raptors (birds of prey) and Herons as well as rare migratory birds such as Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*, Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* and Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* among others. This persecution reaches its peak during migration periods, when large numbers of raptors, herons and other protected species are killed by poachers.

Furthermore, illegal hunting continues throughout the year and it is primarily due to this intense persecution that Malta has the dubious distinction of being the only country in Europe and the Mediterranean with no regularly breeding birds of prey. Species such as the Peregrine Falcon *Falco*

*peregrinus*, once a widespread breeder along the cliffs of Malta, have become locally extinct along with the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* and the Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*. In the case of all three species, the last breeding pairs are known to have been shot by hunters.

Since 2007, BirdLife Malta has been keeping a centralised database on illegal hunting and trapping incidents witnessed by BirdLife Malta staff, ornithologists, volunteers and members of the public known to the organisation. Other reports from unknown individuals and hearsay reports are not included in this database. An analysis of the database is published annually.



A Grey Heron with severe gunshot wounds, found by police on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2009. Photo by A Raine

In 2007, a total of 741 illegal hunting and trapping incidents were recorded by BirdLife Malta alone, with **illegal hunting recorded in 84 locations**. In 2008, this increased to **2,401 illegal hunting and trapping incidents** (the increase largely due to hunters hunting illegally during the first closed spring hunting season) spread over **128 locations**. As well as recording illegal incidents, BirdLife Malta also regularly receives shot protected birds from members of the public and the police. During the period 2007 till October 2009, BirdLife Malta alone has received

**246 shot protected birds** (excluding the remains of over 200 protected birds found concealed in the Mizieb woodland), the vast majority of which were birds of prey.

The most common shot protected birds received by the organisation include Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus*, as well as Red-listed species such as the Pallid Harrier (IUCN Red List: Endangered) and Annex 1 species including Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* and Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*.



A Cory's Shearwater with extensive gunshot injuries to its wing, found at sea off Gnejna (Gozo) on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2009. Photo by J. Sultana 2009

It should be noted that the protected birds received by BirdLife Malta represent only the tip of the iceberg, as the birds first have to escape the poacher who shot them, then be found by someone who would be willing to handle the bird and collect it, and then be passed on to BirdLife Malta. To illustrate this point, between the beginning of 2007 and the first two months of 2008 the National Museum of Natural History of Malta received a **further 338 shot protected birds** that were confiscated from poachers by the Administrative Law Enforcement

(ALE) unit and the local police. Since the police force has very limited resources to deal with illegal hunting activities, this high number of confiscated protected birds demonstrates the seriousness of the situation in Malta. Most of the protected birds that are killed or trapped by poachers are never found and the total numbers are not therefore known.

### Attacks and Vandalism

BirdLife Malta staff and volunteers are regularly subjected to threats, intimidation and serious attacks while out in the countryside. The BirdLife Malta Foresta 2000 ranger was **shot twice** in the last three years (in 2007 and 2009), and had his family farm burnt down in June 2008. Both of the BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves have been burnt and oiled on multiple occasions and rare birds have occasionally been shot from within the Reserves after poachers break in through the boundary fence. The Foresta 2000 re-afforestation site was subjected to the worst incident of environmental vandalism in Maltese history, when approximately 3000 trees and shrubs were cut down overnight in May 2007. In April 2008, three cars belonging to BirdLife Malta bird ringers were torched in the middle of Buskett Bird Sanctuary. Raptor Camp and Spring Watch teams regularly find glass, nails, manure, the body parts of animals and, in one instance, the bodies of three birds of prey, at their watch points. In all of the incidents outlined above, nobody has ever been brought to justice by the police.

### Case Study: Mizieb

During Raptor Camp 2009, BirdLife Malta and Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS, a Germany based

organisation that runs a separate camp than BirdLife's Raptor Camp) volunteers found the largest single incident of wild bird crime in Malta in the recent history. On the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of September, **the remains of over 200 protected birds were found hidden in an area of the Mizieb woodland**, which the FKNK claims to manage this public land as a hunting reserve for some of its members.



*A freshly shot Marsh Harrier found hidden under a stone in Mizieb woodland on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009. Photo by A Raine*

The bodies, which ranged from freshly killed Marsh Harriers to bones that appeared to be several months and maybe years old, were located in stashes under rocks, in crevices and under rubbish. The remains included Marsh Harriers, Honey-buzzards, unidentified birds of prey, Night Herons among others.

Only a third of the woodland area was searched, and it is highly probable that many more remains are left to be discovered. Despite this, the police have failed to

undertake a proper investigation of the area, did not secure the crime scene, continued to allow hunters to actively hunt in the woods before the area was fully searched and allowed the FKNK to hold a mass meeting in the woods a few days after the bodies were discovered. A detailed report of this incident can be obtained from BirdLife Malta.

### **International Impact**

According to the analysis of the international ring recoveries **a total of 75 species, representing 35 countries, were found to have been killed in Malta.** Illegal hunting is therefore an international issue that affects the breeding birds of almost all countries in Europe. In particular, a high proportion of recoveries of illegally shot birds come from birds of prey and herons. As these birds are often rare or declining species, have small numbers of young and take several years to reach sexual maturity, the impact of illegal hunting pressures on their populations can have serious repercussions on their conservation status.

The majority of ringed raptors and herons that have been shot over Malta are of juvenile birds and birds ringed in the nest. Although it is to be expected that for these species higher numbers of birds will be ringed as nestlings as opposed to adults, it is still important to realise that these are birds which have been born and fledged in foreign countries, often as a result of concerted conservation effort. After fledging, these birds subsequently commence their migration and pass over Malta, where they may then fall victim to illegal persecution by Maltese hunters.

Furthermore, as it takes several years for the young of many of these species to reach sexual maturity, they have to survive several migrations before they are of a sufficient age to successfully breed. The chances of survival to breeding age of those birds having to pass repeatedly over Malta are therefore affected by the high levels of illegal hunting pressure. Ring recoveries of birds ringed as nestlings and killed in Malta include Pallid Harrier (Globally Near Threatened, Endangered in Europe with a breeding population of 5-51pairs), Osprey (Unfavourable Conservation Status, Rare), Lesser Kestrel (Global Status Vulnerable), Saker Falcon (Globally Endangered, entire European population 360-540 pairs) and Purple Heron (Unfavourable Conservation Status, Declining)<sup>2</sup>.



*A shot Honey Buzzard received during autumn 2009. Photo BirdLife Malta*

These results clearly demonstrate the key importance of Malta on one of the main European-African migratory flyways and the

international impact of hunting and trapping activities in the country.

## Law Enforcement

In Malta, wildlife crime is dealt with as one of several responsibilities of the Administrative Law Enforcement unit (ALE). The ALE are severely under-resourced and under-staffed for dealing with such a widespread and serious problem while carrying out other duties. There are less than 30 officers to deal with incidents in Malta and Gozo, and in summer these officers are restricted mainly to beach patrols. During peak migration periods, ALE have between 2 and 5 cars to cover the entire Maltese archipelago.

In 2008 and 2009, the Police Commissioner sent out an order for district police to also deal with illegal hunting incidents. While this move is welcome, the majority of the district police are not sufficiently trained to deal with this type of crime and in many cases do not know what is or isn't illegal, nor how to deal with wildlife crime scenes. They are neither given proper training nor education on the importance of protecting wild life and Malta's EU obligations in this regard. In certain areas where poaching is rampant, the district police either do not respond to calls or poachers are seen to leave the area shortly after the incidence is reported to the police.

Furthermore, the BirdLife Malta office receives numerous reports of illegal hunting and trapping from members of the public and law-abiding hunters who are reluctant to pass the information on to the police. The reasons given are either that the police will not respond to their reports, or that they know that there are many hunters within the police

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<sup>2</sup> European or Global conservation status is shown from BirdLife International (2004)

force and that they do not feel that the police will arrest these individuals. In some cases, members of the public claim that the poachers themselves are police or are relatives of the police. While this cannot normally be verified, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2008, a BirdLife Malta Spring Watch team in Gozo filmed two poachers hunting in the closed season and wearing balaclavas to conceal their identity. When the poachers were apprehended, one was identified as a policeman from Malta. The case is on-going.



*Two poachers, one of whom was later identified as a policeman, shooting out of season in Gozo on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 2008. Both individuals were wearing balaclavas to conceal their identity. Screen grab by BirdLife Malta 2009*

## **Judiciary**

As well as the issues identified in this briefing document regarding the lack of adequate law enforcement, another area where improvement is critical is at the level of the judiciary. BirdLife Malta carried out an analysis of the outcome of 388 court cases dealing with wild bird crime between the years 2006 to 2008. These cases involved offences committed in 77 locations in Malta and Gozo.

In 36.6% of cases, the minimum fine was given to individuals convicted of illegal hunting or trapping offences and in a further 29.6% of the cases, fines were allocated which were actually below the minimum fine

outlined in the Legal Notices. Furthermore, very few cases (3.6%) resulted in the convicted hunter having his license suspended, despite this being a legal requirement for repeat offenders. The fact that there is no centralised digital database within the courts to keep a record of repeat offenders further hampers the ability of Magistrates to adequately deal with those individuals who consistently break the law.

## **Conclusion**

As a member of the European Union, Malta has an obligation to protect migratory birds under the Birds Directive. At an international level, Malta is also a signatory of the Convention on Migratory Species which also includes a Memoranda of Understanding regarding 'Birds of Prey of African and Eurasia'. This Memoranda explicitly includes an agreement to protect migratory raptors and control the illegal shooting of these protected species. Malta also has a responsibility to those countries that invest significant amounts of money protecting these birds in their breeding grounds, only to have them illegally killed in Malta during migration.