



Committee Against
Bird Slaughter - CABS
Komitee gegen den Vogelmord e.V.

FIELD REPORT: CABS SPRING 2023 BIRD PROTECTION CAMP IN ZAKYNTHOS, GREECE



Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS)
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CONTENT

- 1 INTRODUCTION 3
- 2 SPRING HUNTING OF TURTLE DOVES IN THE IONIAN ISLANDS 3
- 3 CABS FIRST BIRD PROTECTION CAMP IN ZAKYNTHOS 4
- 4 WORKING METHODS 5
- 5 OVERALL RESULTS OF THE CAMP 6
- 6 FIELD INVESTIGATIONS 7
 - 6.1 EXTENT AND DISTRIBUTION OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS 7
 - 6.2 RESULTS OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS 8
- 7 ANTI-POACHING ACTIONS 11
 - 7.1 COOPERATION WITH ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES 11
 - 7.2 HUNTERS REPORTED DIRECTLY BY CABS ACTIVISTS 14
- 8 CONCLUSIONS 15

1 INTRODUCTION

The European turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) is a migratory species that overwinters in sub-Saharan Africa, migrating to Europe each spring to breed. Over the past four decades, turtle dove populations have declined by as much as 79% (Sauser et al., 2022) leading IUCN to downgrade its status in 2015 to 'Vulnerable' (BirdLife International, 2015).

A major threat to the species is illegal killing (poaching) during its spring migration through the Mediterranean coasts of Europe. Spring hunting has a devastating impact on bird populations as it removes individuals of the highest fitness from the breeding stock (i.e., survivors of post-breeding migration and overwintering), affecting the population recruitment process). Due to its destructive nature, spring hunting during hunting is strictly forbidden by EU legislation.

The Ionian Islands off the west coast of Greece lie on the eastern flyway and are a well-known turtle dove poaching hotspot during the spring migration. A recently published study revealed that tens of thousands turtle doves are killed each spring during their passage across the Ionian Islands (Astaras et al., 2023).

The large-scale killing of turtle doves during their spring migration over the Ionian Islands and rapid decline of the turtle dove population throughout Europe has convinced Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) to start conducting anti-poaching operations on the islands. In April and May 2023, they organised their first bird protection camp on the island of Zakynthos.

2 SPRING HUNTING OF TURTLE DOVES IN THE IONIAN ISLANDS

The Ionian Islands are a known historical hotspot of spring turtle dove hunting and the problem has already been the focus of two different EU LIFE projects, managed by BirdLife partners: "Safe Haven for Wild Birds LIFE11 INF/IT/000253 (2012-2015) and "Awareness and Capacity Building against Bird Crime in Priority Flyway Countries" LIFE17 GIE/NL/000599 (2018-2022). Nevertheless, the extent of poaching was not systematically researched and quantified until recently, when, at the beginning of 2022 a study was published titled "Acoustic Monitoring Confirms Significant Poaching Pressure of European Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia turtur*) during spring migration across the Ionian Islands, Greece" (Astaras et al., 2023). The study revealed the massive scale of unchallenged illegal killing of turtle doves in the Ionian Islands.

The authors of the study installed acoustic sensors at 10 sites across five Ionian Islands and these sensors recorded 54,014 gunshots during turtle dove spring migration seasons in the period 2019-2022. Authors of the study estimate that up to 57,095 turtle doves were killed or injured in spring 2021 alone across five monitored Ionian Islands (Zakynthos, Paxi, Antipaxi, Othoni and Mathraki).



Figure 1: Map of the Ionian Islands (Othoni, Mathraki, Corfu, Paxi, Antipaxi, Lefkada Kefalonia and Zakynthos)

Although spring hunting was banned in Greece in 1985 and turtle dove is threatened with extinction, the local hunters on Ionian Islands continue to relentlessly kill tens of thousands turtle doves each spring. They consider the spring hunting of turtle doves to be a local custom which they do not want to give up.

Originally, the main motivation for poaching turtle doves was self-consumption and gifting surplus birds to friends and family, but it has progressively turned into a leisure activity.

3 CABS FIRST BIRD PROTECTION CAMP IN ZAKYNTHOS

The Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) is a non-governmental organisation established in 1975 in Germany to protect migratory birds from illegal poaching and over exploitation. The organisation is specialised in anti-poaching field operations. It is the only European organisation with such specialisation and active across most hot spots of migratory bird hunting in the Mediterranean basin.

Field anti-poaching operations that run for more than few days are called 'bird protection camps' and are organised by CABS across several major flyways and

therefore poaching hot-spots in the Mediterranean. Bird protection camps usually run for several weeks and are attended by CABS staff and bird loving volunteers from all over Europe. Participants of the camps carry out field investigations every day to detect poaching activity. Active poaching cases located during field investigations are immediately reported to the enforcement agencies to stop the illegal killing of birds and to apprehend the poachers.

Upon finding about the huge scale of illegal spring hunting of turtle doves in the Ionian Islands, CABS decided to open another battlefront in their fight against bird poaching in Mediterranean. In April and May 2023, they organised their first bird protection camp on the island of Zakynthos. The main goal of the camp was to prevent illegal killing of turtle doves during their migration over the island.

The island of Zakynthos was selected for the location of the camp because it is the island with the highest numbers of gunshots recorded during the acoustic monitoring of spring hunting in the Ionian Islands during period 2019-2022.

The camp started on the 10th of April and ended on the 3rd of May 2023, running for a total of 24 days, covering the whole period of spring migration of turtle doves over the island. Three CABS staff members and two bird protection volunteers participated at the camp.

4 WORKING METHODS

Work at the bird protection camp in Zakynthos included field investigations to detect bird poaching activity and direct anti-poaching actions to stop poaching activity detected during the investigations.

Field investigations of illegal hunting were carried throughout the whole day in the areas known to be the hotspots of illegal hunting.

Poaching activity was detected by listening for gunshots, by observing hunting activity from selected observation points and by searching for signs of recent hunting activity on hunting sites. Hunting areas were easily recognised even from main roads and towns due to the presence of high numbers of elevated hunting hides, which are built higher than the surrounding vegetation to give hunters a good view on birds passing overhead.



Picture 1: Typical hunting hide used for hunting turtle doves in Zakynthos (Photo: CABS)

When the ongoing illegal hunting activity (that is when hunters were seen shooting at birds) was confirmed during the field investigations, direct actions were taken by the participants of the camp to stop it.

The ongoing hunting activity was either reported immediately by phone to the relevant enforcement agencies or, when the enforcement patrols were not available, the participants of the camp collected evidence of the crime they were witnessing and submitted the gathered evidence (videos, screenshots of offenders, number plates) to the relevant enforcement agencies and reported the offenders for illegal spring shooting.

5 OVERALL RESULTS OF THE CAMP

The overall results of field investigations and actions taken during the CABS Spring 2023 Bird Protection Camp in Zakynthos are as follows:

- 54 active hunting sites confirmed
- 73 hunters were observed hunting birds
- 3 hunters were caught and prosecuted for spring hunting
- 18 hunters were reported to the authorities for spring hunting
- 3 hunting rifles were seized
- 2 electronic callers for hunting were seized
- 3 freshly shot birds (all golden orioles) were seized

The main finding of the first CABS bird protection camp in Zakynthos is surely the discovery of massive and practically undisturbed spring hunting activity all across the island. Participants of the camp were shocked to see how rampant and blatant spring hunting on the island was. Gunshots could be heard all day long in all parts of the island and hunters were easily spotted inside prominent hunting hides that were visible even from main roads and other public places.



Picture 2: 'Hunter' on the photo was hunting openly this spring in a hide visible from main roads in Zakynthos (Photo: CABS)

6 FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

6.1 EXTENT AND DISTRIBUTION OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

As a CABS team was on the island of Zakynthos for the first time, it had limited knowledge about the extent and the distribution of illegal hunting on the island. According to the study focusing on acoustic monitoring of hunting, there are three main spring hunting hotspots on the island: peninsulas Vasilikos and Keri on the southern side of the island and the hills along the northern coast between towns Alikanas and Zakynthos.

Because of the exploratory nature of the operation and therefore the presence of only one CABS team, it was no possible to investigate extensively all three hotspots. Most of the working time was dedicated to monitoring in Vasilikos, where about 50% of the area was checked. The residual time was dedicated to the other two hotspots, where about 25% of the area was checked. The rest of the island was not monitored and therefore the situation is unknown.

6.2 RESULTS OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

CABS activists located and checked 70 hunting sites during the camp. They confirmed spring hunting activity on 54 individual sites (Table 1).

Table 1: Results of spring hunting field investigations carried out during CABS Spring 2023 Bird Protection camp in Zakynthos

Duration of field investigations (days)	24
No. of hunting sites checked	70
No. of checked hunting sites confirmed as active (ongoing or recent spring hunting activity was confirmed on them)	54
No. of hunters observed hunting on active hunting sites	73

Ongoing spring hunting activity was confirmed by presence of hunters with guns on hunting sites, while recent spring hunting activity was confirmed by finding freshly used gun cartridges, fresh feathers of shot turtle doves and by observing trodden paths on checked hunting sites.



Picture 3: Fresh gun cartridges (without rust) and fresh feathers of turtle doves are indicative of recent hunting activity. Photo was taken during the camp (Photo: CABS)

As CABS activists checked only a small percentage of all areas suitable for hunting on Zakynthos and as they heard many gunshots from areas they were not able to check during the camp, they estimate that several hundred persons were hunting on the island in spring 2023.

6.2.1 BIRD SPECIES TARGETED BY HUNTERS

All hunters, observed during the camp, were targeting turtle doves, which was clearly their main and often the only targeted species. CABS activists observed the following evidence of hunters targeting turtle doves during the camp:

- dead or injured shot turtle doves were found during the checks of hunting sites
- fresh feathers of shot doves were found on ground during the checks of hunting sites
- activists visually identified turtle doves in the air while hunters were shooting at them
- electronic callers with recorded turtle dove calls were heard calling from hunting sites

The position of most of the hunting hides checked during the camp, facing towards south to face birds returning from wintering grounds in Africa and positioned above

the surrounding vegetation, was another clear evidence that they were predominately used for spring hunting.

As presented in Table 3, hunters were observed targeting also other bird species beside turtle doves during the camp. Commonly observed was hunting of Golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) as CABS activists confirmed hunting of this bird species at 4 seperate hunting sites.

Table 3: Targeted bird species and number of hunting sites on which CABS activists collected evidence of hunters targeting these species during CABS Spring 2023 Bird Protection camp in Zakynthos

Bird species	No. of hunting sites
Turtle Dove	53
Golden Oriole	4
Bee-eater	2
Other bird species (Common buzzard, Kestrel, Barn Swallow)	1

Hunters targeting golden orioles commonly used electronic callers, emitting calls of this species to attract these birds in front of the guns. The activists heard electronic callers playing golden oriole calls at 3 out of 4 hunting sites on which evidence of hunters targeting golden orioles was collected during the field investigations.



Picture 4: Three shot golden orioles, electronic caller and gun were seized from a hunter caught hunting illegally during CABS Spring 2023 bird protection camp in Zakynthos (Photo: CABS)

7 ANTI-POACHING ACTIONS

7.1 COOPERATION WITH ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

Anti-poaching actions taken by the activists during CABS Spring 2023 bird protection camp in Zakynthos followed the goal of reporting hunters hunting illegally during spring season. Longstanding experiences from other CABS bird protection camps across Mediterranean have proven that prosecutions, resulting in penalties issued to the offenders, are by far the most effective measure for prevention of illegal bird killings.

To achieve the prosecutions of the poachers, CABS activists sought the cooperation with the enforcement agencies competent for bird protection on the island. As soon as they detected ongoing illegal spring hunting activity, they reported it to the local enforcement officials. If a patrol was available, activists met with the agents to provide them with the exact location of the poacher and with the other evidence collected.

7.1.1 COOPERATION WITH FORESTRY SERVICE

The main authority for the protection of wild birds in Zakynthos is the national Forestry Service but the lack of any activity performed by this service against illegal spring hunting is blatant and structural. In April 2015 the Forestry Service sent officers from the mainland to support the understaffed units in an effort to tackle illegal spring hunting, but a large group of a thousand hunters gathered in the harbor and prevented them to disembark on the island, threatening the officers and damaging vehicles. Later the Head of Forests of Zakynthos, Mr. Dyonisis Thomopoulos declared: "Either a solution will be found, or we will resign. I have received threatening messages, I can't go around in fear. I have been trying for two years to set up the service in Zakynthos. Something has to be done." (<https://dasarxeio.com/2015/04/18/21013/>). Nothing was done if we consider that in 2021, the Department of Wildlife and Game Management (Hellenic Ministry of Environment and Energy) requested that the Forest Services of Zakynthos and Corfu took increased measures to combat illegal spring. Specifically, anti-poaching patrols were to be conducted by forest rangers, game guards and park rangers. In this year the Zakynthos Forest Service conducted a total of 48 (9 April to 15 May; 15 locations) patrols, specifically aimed at reducing the illegal poaching of birds during spring migration, but none of the patrols reported any other evidence of poaching, and no arrests, further investigations, or confiscations of killed birds and/or hunting equipment were made. Although 1108 gunshots were detected in the acoustic data during the patrols' dates, the patrols did not report any evidence of poaching activity. In 2023 again the Deputy Environment Minister of Greece Giorgos Amyras instructed the relevant local authorities to adopt urgent protection measures to tackle spring poaching against the turtle dove in the Ionian Islands (Ekatemerini.com, 2023). Our observations prove that this measure was again implemented only on paper, since patrols were clearly avoiding performing any prosecution for spring hunting. In other words, the Forest Service is turning a blind eye to this issue to avoid problems with local hunters and the State authorities restrict their action to empty promises and commitments.

During the various meetings with the representatives of the Forestry Service in their headquarter in Zakynthos as well as in the meetings with the officers in the field, it was explained to CABS members that the anti-poaching activity carried on by the patrols was limited as being only one of the various duties of the patrols as well as consisting in controls from the roads and it did not include approaching, stopping or sanctioning hunters.

In one recorded audio (available) officers clearly state that they will not approach any hunter, because, if they do, they would be forced to prosecute them, which is not an option for them.

The activity was limited also regarding the time schedules as no patrol was on duty on Sundays and during holidays – those days with most hunting activity. No direct number was in place for the public to report illegalities to the patrols.

CABS established a good relationship with the Forestry Service, but the operations remained difficult, mainly due to the unwillingness of the officers in most cases to approach the hunters. CABS activists reported 18 spring hunting cases to the officers of Forestry Service over their patrol phone number during the camp and only 5 out of 18 reported cases were investigated by the officers. Only 1 out of 5 cases were investigated on time and during the investigation they secured enough evidence to apprehend and prosecute the offender. For the majority of cases reported by CABS activists during the camp there was either no response from Forestry Service patrol or the response was inadequate to catch and prosecute the reported offenders.

Table 4: Evaluation of the response by Forestry Service enforcement patrol for spring hunting cases reported by CABS activists during the camp

Response by enforcement patrol	Adequate response	Inadequate response	No response
Patrol caught and prosecuted reported hunter	1		
Patrol arrived too late at reported location*		2	
Patrol didn't check reported hunters for possession of guns or other evidence of illegal hunting		2	
Patrol was available but refused to investigate reported case			3
Patrol was unavailable**			10

* Patrol needed around one hour to arrive at reported location and in both cases hunting activity already ended by the time the patrol arrived

** Patrol was not working on Sundays and during national holidays: the days on which we observed the highest illegal hunting activity

7.1.2 COOPERATION WITH POLICE OFFICERS

When Forestry Service enforcement patrol was not available to investigate hunting cases reported by CABS activists, the activists reported the cases to the police

officers on duty. During meetings at the police headquarter it was explained that the main office responsible for illegal hunting is the Forestry Service but that regular police could also intervene against illegal hunting.

CABS activists reported 7 spring hunting cases to the police officers on duty during the camp and 5 out of 7 reported cases were investigated by the officers (Table 5).

Table 5: Evaluation of response by police patrol for spring hunting cases reported by CABS activists during the camp

Response by police officers	Adequate response	Inadequate response	No response
Patrol caught and prosecuted reported hunter	2		
Patrol pursued the reported offender but failed to catch him	1		
Patrol arrived too late at reported location		1	
Patrol didn't check the reported hunters as they were inside private property		1	
Patrol was not available			2

Overall, the response from police officers was better as the response from Forestry Service patrol for the cases reported by CABS as the police officers responded for 5 out of 7 reported cases and managed to catch 2 reported offenders.

7.2 HUNTERS REPORTED DIRECTLY BY CABS ACTIVISTS

Due to the disproportionate number of hunters in the field and the lack of enforcement, it was not possible to report all the illegalities.

In some occasions, when enforcement patrols were not available, CABS activists continued to observe the hunters shooting at birds and collected the evidence to report them to the authorities. The evidence was then submitted to the Head of Forestry Service to initiate a legal case against the reported offenders. In total 18 offenders were reported to the Forestry Service by CABS activists.

CABS had a personal meeting in May 2023 with the Prosecutor in Zakynthos to discuss the procedure undertaken by CABS to submit the evidence and he referred to the possible outcome, saying “he will see case by case”. Upon our request in

January 2024, we were informed that no case had been taken into consideration so far.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The most important finding of the first bird protection camp in Zakynthos is the discovery of massive and undisturbed spring hunting activity all across the island.

A total of 73 hunters were seen shooting migrating turtle doves in the areas monitored by CABS team. The total number of hunters shooting turtle doves was even much higher as the team monitored only a small part of the island and they often only heard shots without seeing the person shooting. CABS activists are confident in their assessment that several hundred hunters were hunting turtle doves on the island of Zakynthos this spring.

From the behavior of hunters observed during the camp, it was evident that they acted in full impunity. They were hunting in prominent hides erected above the tree canopies, well visible from main roads and other public places. They often stayed in these hides for the whole morning. CABS activists observed dozens of hunters every day, some of them they watched for hours and yet none of the observed hunters was checked by the enforcement officers during the camp.

The lack of enforcement against spring hunting was evident also from the poor response from the Forestry Service enforcement patrol for cases reported by CABS. After several meetings with the representatives of the Forest Service, it became obvious that the patrols were avoiding any action leading to a prosecution for illegal spring hunting. The activists urged the officers and the Head of Forestry Service in Zakynthos to start with more resolute actions against spring hunting due to their massive levels and the endangered status of turtle doves but without success.

To make it even worse, the Forestry Service patrol was not working on Sundays and during the public holidays (Orthodox Easter, 1st May) when spring hunting activity was the most prolific.

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