



Over the centuries, the bi-annual migration of millions of birds passing between continental Europe and sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in deep-rooted traditions of migratory bird hunting and trapping along the main migration routes or corridors. Most of the birds are killed in so-called 'bottleneck' regions where substantial numbers are concentrated into a limited area of land.

It is estimated that more than 30 million migratory birds are illegally killed each year around the Mediterranean. Many of these individuals belong to protected species that are threatened with significant population declines, or are considered birds of international conservation concern.

### Why hunting continues

Migratory birds are primarily targeted to be killed for consumption, as they are considered seasonal delicacies and are part of popular dishes throughout the entire Mediterranean. Songbirds are often the most sought-after choice. For example, in Spain thrushes and warblers are served with paella; in France Ortolan Buntings are drowned in cognac; in Italy robins and flycatchers are served on a skewer with corn porridge; and in the eastern Mediterranean Blackcaps, Lesser Whitethroats and other warblers are grilled and served up as a meze dish. Species such as European Turtle Dove

# Tackling the Med massacre

Although the wholesale slaughter of migrating birds around the shores of the Mediterranean has been ongoing for decades, **Lloyd Scott** outlines the important work of CABS in sowing the seeds of change.

are victims of overhunting, both legally during open season in several countries and illegally during closed season while attempting to return to breeding areas.

Other motivations for targeting migratory birds include live trade on the black market. Many birds end up confined in tiny cages or aviaries as pets, or in horrific conditions as live decoys for hunting, where they are used to attract others of their kind to waiting guns and traps. Another reason is for trophy collections. For example, it is popular in Malta for larger species such as birds of prey, flamingos and herons, or colourful species such as Golden Oriole, European Bee-eater and Hoopoe, to be shot for private taxidermy collections.

### Other pressures

Hunting and trapping are not the only threats migratory birds face. Agricultural intensification,

habitat degradation, climate change and pollution are also significant hazards. However, as specialists in anti-poaching work the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) focuses its efforts on combatting bird crime along the flyways used by our feathered friends. This is sometimes a dangerous field of conservation activity, in which CABS is unique in Europe and perhaps also the world.

CABS – also known as Komitee gegen den Vogel mord e.V. in Germany – is an international charitable organisation working to protect migratory birds from illegal poaching, persecution and commercialisation. Founded in Germany in 1975, it has grown to consist of a small administrative team of staff based in headquarters in Bonn, and more than 400 regular 'Bird Guard' volunteers from all corners of the globe. It also has around 10,000 supporter members without whom its work

**Facing page:** These Blackcaps have been caught on limesticks. CABS has been working tirelessly to stop such activities.

simply would not be possible as CABS is entirely dependent on donations from private individuals or foundations. Every single penny is used to enable direct action against the poaching of migratory birds.

As it is the country of origin, the majority of CABS donors are from Germany, although it is keen to grow as an international conservation organisation. Furthermore, most of its active volunteers come from Germany, Italy and the UK, working primarily in the Mediterranean region.

### Migration camps

Each spring and autumn teams of CABS activists join forces to participate in 'bird-protection camps' that take place during peak migration periods in the poaching hot-spots of the Mediterranean. The area covered spans from Spain and France in the west, through Italy and Malta on the central flyway, to Greece, Cyprus and Lebanon in the east. CABS teams are led by experienced staff or volunteers who conduct field investigations to monitor and document incidents of illegal shooting, trapping and trade of protected species. In 2022 alone, CABS conducted a total of 31 bird-protection camps across seven different countries, which resulted in 324 poachers being prosecuted, more than 5,000 traps seized and 3,000 birds freed from illegal traps. Countless other birds avoided persecution altogether as a result of its actions.

All of its anti-poaching operations are carried out in close co-operation with local partner organisations, environmental authorities, the police and regulatory agencies to ensure the poachers are prosecuted and as many wild birds as possible can be saved. The reality is that most government agencies lack staff and specialist knowledge to effectively enforce nature conservation laws against criminal bird poachers and traders. With decades of experience fighting conservation crimes in more than 15 countries, CABS teams help authorities with current actions and report hundreds of new cases each year.

Where the support of authorities is lacking, CABS takes action itself. For example, each year in Cyprus and Italy it dismantles or destroys thousands of items of illegal hunting equipment, frees hundreds of protected birds and documents its findings for press



Migrating raptors are a popular target among hunters. In this photo, CABS volunteers salvage the bodies of dead European Honey Buzzards in Lebanon.

campaigns to lobby decision makers at both national and international levels. Documenting mass cruelty towards animals and the damage caused to the environment by illegal hunting are a central part of the work of CABS.

The organisation originated from bird-protection projects in Germany. These included managing a large wetland reserve near the city of Kiel and a Black Tern conservation project in eastern Germany, as well as investigation work against raptor persecution. Founded in Berlin in 1975, it was during the mid-1980s that the attention of CABS really started to turn towards direct action and activism.

### The Italian job

After becoming aware of the rampant trapping of robins and other songbirds passing through the subalpine mountains of Brescia in northern Italy, a small group of budding CABS activists would drive to the area each weekend between September and early November and camp out in the mountains. They spent their days scouring the difficult terrain to find and dismantle bow traps known locally as *archetti*. Bow traps are among the most brutal animal traps in the world. A small stick and string keep a bow made of metal or hazel under tension. Birds are attracted by berries and fooled into attempting to perch on a horizontal stick. When they touch it, the bow springs apart. In a fraction of a second, the bird hangs upside-down with its legs completely crushed in the snare. This way it remains fresh until the trapper arrives; sometimes birds will spend hours in agony in the warm autumn sun.

The CABS bird-protection camp in Brescia has grown to become one of its



This Eurasian Wren was found in northern Italy, where rampant trapping of passerines migrating through the subalpine mountains of Brescia is a major issue.

largest annual anti-poaching operations with more than 50 volunteers routinely cleaning the mountains of traps and reporting the poachers to police. After more than 40 years of continuous work, bow traps are now essentially almost extinct in the region. While in 2001 CABS teams dismantled more than 12,000 traps, in 2022 the figure was only 200! Of an estimated 300,000 traps routinely set out in the 1980s, less than 5% are presumed to stand today.

### A Maltese challenge

CABS subsequently expanded its bird-protection camps to Malta in 2001. With its central location in the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese archipelago is an important stepping stone for bird migration between Europe and Africa. Particularly during

# BIRD SLAUGHTER

bad weather, the arrival of large flocks of birds to roost on Malta and its sister island Gozo is a unique natural spectacle, which unfortunately not only inspires nature lovers, but also eager trappers and hunters. Malta has the highest density of hunters in the world, with 35 per square kilometre of land. In addition to the permitted hunting of thrushes, starlings, various waders and waterbirds, quail and turtle dove, poaching remains a widespread phenomenon. Poachers target birds of prey and storks, which are sought-after trophies. Through legally questionable 'exemptions' to EU law, the Maltese government also annually allows the trapping of thousands of plovers and thrushes, the trapping of finches in autumn under the guise of a dubious 'science project' and internationally criticised spring hunting of turtle dove and quail as they attempt to reach their breeding grounds in central and eastern Europe.

Hunting and bird trapping in Malta is a highly political issue. For decades there have only been two parties in parliament, which are often on a par with each other. Hunters, trappers and their family members make up a significant electoral group. As such, migratory birds have become the pawns in the battle for power in the country. To ensure that existing conservation measures are being respected, CABS teams patrol and monitor important roosting sites and known poaching hot-spots, documenting cases of poaching and illegal bird trapping. Since 2014 it has had a permanent office in Malta, with employees co-ordinating the operations and accompanying legal proceedings against poachers, and organising site inspections year-round.

## Holiday-island hell

Further east is Cyprus – an island which is essentially the 'problem child' of bird protection in the EU. The south of the island – which has been part of the EU since 2004 – is a black hole for migratory birds crossing the eastern Mediterranean. Particularly in the south-east, olive gardens, bushes and acacia groves are specially prepared for poaching. Hundreds of bird trappers set out 'limesticks' – carefully prepared canes covered in glue – and industrial-scale trapping sites with large mistnets, where thousands of birds are caught each night. It is estimated that around 2 million to 3 million migratory birds are illegally killed in Cyprus each year. Warblers and thrushes are the primary targets, to be offered as expensive



Some colourful species, such as European Bee-eater, are shot for private taxidermy collections. Birds can be killed en masse as they migrate north in spring and back south again in autumn.



Bow traps – pictured on the right – are among the most brutal animal traps in the world. CABS has collected many of them over the years, especially in Italy.

delicacies, but also Golden Orioles, cuckoos, owls and other protected species are caught indiscriminately and killed.

CABS has conducted regular bird-protection camps in Cyprus since 2008 and now maintains a permanent presence throughout the trapping seasons. Its teams patrol during the night, listening for electronic decoy callers playing songbird calls. The callers are used to lure passing birds into waiting traps. Active sites are then reported to the authorities who raid the sites at first light to catch the poachers red-handed. Remarkably, the Cypriot government dissolved the police Anti-Poaching Squad in 2018 and transferred enforcement duties to the Game and Fauna Service. Although not completely inactive, there is usually a lack of staff able to intervene effectively due to the

scale of the trapping, particularly with regard to the use of limesticks. On the other hand, the work of CABS with the British Military Police in the Sovereign Base Areas has resulted in a dramatic reduction of trapping with mistnets. Furthermore, due to higher penalties being enforceable outside of any official hunting season, incidents of both trapping and illegal hunting in spring are now at record low levels.

## Murder in the Middle East

Last but certainly not least is Lebanon. Although there are relatively few ornithologists and birders in the country, more than 385 bird species have been identified. Because of its central location on the eastern flyway, millions of migratory birds that breed in Europe cross Lebanon each year, with their origins proven by ringing recovery

data and because the migration routes of storks and various raptors have been recorded using GPS trackers. For example, the entire global population of Lesser Spotted Eagle crosses Lebanese airspace twice each year.

Many fall victim to the hail of bullets from Lebanese poachers, who even use military-grade weapons to kill between 3 million and 5 million migratory birds each year. Among them are birds of prey, storks, pelicans, nightjars, swallows and bee-eaters, as well as countless species of songbirds. Besides shooting birds for personal consumption, commercial trapping with gigantic nets is also a big issue. Plucked and frozen songbirds are considered a delicacy in Lebanon and are offered openly by most supermarket chains and restaurants despite an official ban.

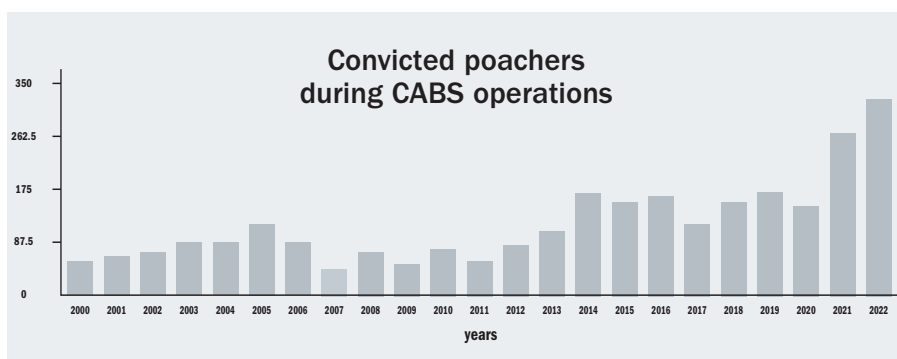
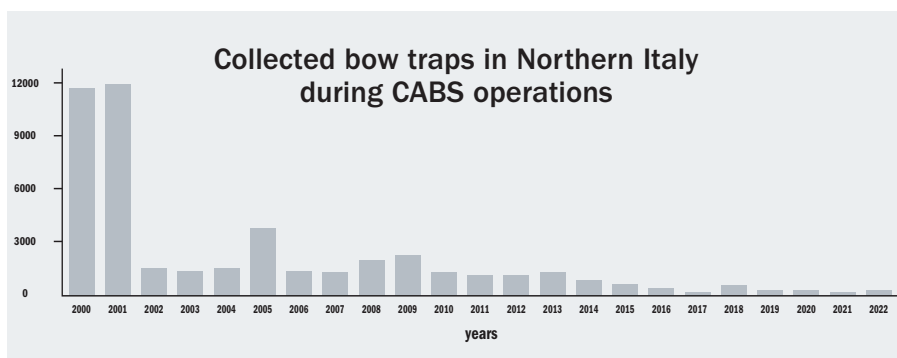
Together with its partners from the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL), CABS has conducted regular bird-protection camps in the country since autumn 2017. Over time this has led to the evolution of the Lebanese Anti-Poaching Unit, which is made up of members from several environmental NGOs, local 'pro-regulation hunters' and enforcement officials who acknowledge the negative impact of large-scale massacres of protected species. CABS teams lead patrols in the mountain passes where they disrupt and prevent the massacres of large soaring birds and ensure poachers finally face up to the law, which has only been enforced since the start of the campaign. CABS regularly conducts training seminars with community groups, senior officials and local and state police. The programme of both education and enforcement is going from strength to strength and at the time of writing the biggest campaign is set to start in autumn 2023, with further expansion into 2024.

### Spreading the word

CABS is now growing faster than ever. With more volunteers and resources, the experience gained from many recent campaigns and the growing reputation of its successes will enable it to embark on projects on new shores. The progress made in Malta, Italy, Cyprus and Lebanon required years of work, significant financial resources and a lot of dedicated passion and willpower. Looking back over the past 40 years shows how some successes were only achieved after decades of dedicated work. A good example is the end of legal bird trapping in Italy, which was fought for since 1975 and only became



CABS relies on volunteers to get in the field and seek out illegal hunters and traps. It is a time-consuming, arduous and sometimes dangerous task.



a reality in 2014. So, it is perhaps too early to expect drastic results across the board in all the current priority areas, even though this remains the target.

Experience shows that with patience, passion and courage, CABS can achieve a lot for the better protection of migratory birds – and it already has. It has the drive and determination to achieve even more going forward. This

spring marked its first anti-poaching campaign in Greece, where thousands of turtle doves, orioles and bee-eaters are shot as they pass through the Ionian islands. This autumn, it will send more resources than ever to combat bird trapping in eastern Spain. In the coming years it will certainly expand into new areas as it approaches its 50th anniversary in 2025. ■

### Support CABS

If you think you have what it takes to become a member of the CABS community visit the website [www.komitee.de/en](http://www.komitee.de/en) to read more, volunteer or donate.