



Malta bird protection camp autumn 2010
Short operational report

Operation “Safe Passage” : 12–26 September 2010

1. Introduction

Despite an unambiguous ban by the EU, illegal shooting and trapping of protected bird species are still widespread on Malta. The victims include above all rare birds of prey such as Honey Buzzards, Osprey, Lesser Spotted Eagles, Marsh, Pallid and Montagu’s Harriers, but also small song birds, herons and waders. The populations of many of these species are critically endangered throughout Europe and are the subject of costly conservation measures and projects. Illegal bird hunting on Malta represents therefore an international bird conservation problem. In order to lend support to the local authorities in their campaign to combat poaching, and to force the offenders on to the defensive, CABS organises two annual bird protection camps (BPC) lasting several weeks on Malta. In 2010 the 8th CABS large scale BPC on the Mediterranean island took place from 11 to 26 September - during the peak autumn migration period for birds of prey.

Our mission was to curb the still widespread bird poaching by monitoring of migrant bird rest areas and night roosts, as well as selective controls of known problem areas.

2. Operational Methods

This autumn 22 volunteers from 6 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy Malta and the United Kingdom) participated in the BPC. These were mostly experienced biologists, ornithologists and veterinary surgeons who are involved in bird conservation projects in their home countries.

In teams of at least three members the activists were deployed to various parts of the island in the periods from before dawn to mid-morning and mid-afternoon until after dusk to collect data on bird migration and record evidence of offences against hunting and bird protection laws and regulations. During the 14 days of operations between three and five teams were deployed; on most days four teams were active.

In **the early morning hours** the majority of teams were deployed to those locations where night roosts of raptors had been determined the previous evening. The main aim of the morning patrols was to monitor the departure of the birds from their overnight roosts and, by a high profile presence, to as far as possible guarantee

them a safe passage to the sea and out of range of hunters' guns. The morning deployments were therefore concentrated on the areas south and south-east of Buskett (the Girgenti valley, Gebel Cantar plateau, Fawwara) as well as those stretches of the coast to the south-east of Buskett (incl. Dingli Cliffs, Blue Grotto, Ghar Lapsi, Birzebugga). Other locations where large bird of prey roosts were found during the camp, and monitored in the mornings by the teams, were the Mizieb woodland to the east of Manikata, the valley near Mtahleb with its groups of trees and reeds, the Ras ir-Raheb valley west of Bahrija, the woods on the east of the Marfa Ridge, the T-Lombardi valley between Delimara and St. Thomas Bay as well as the coppices in the Dwejra Lines area.

Mid-afternoon to dusk: From about 15:00 hrs the teams were deployed to a search area between 2 and 5 square kilometres in size. The area was kept under observation to monitor bird migration and to identify and report to the CABS control room any sign of illegal hunting and trapping. The afternoon tasks included in particular:

- Observation and reporting of the direction of migration and the landing areas (probable roosts) of large numbers of birds to the control room
- Filming and Identification of poachers
- Regular checks of all trapping sites in their area known to CABS
- Recovery of injured or dead birds and handover to the police against written receipt
- Monitoring of the observation of the hunting ban in the afternoons: recording of all shots fired illegally after 15:00 on weekdays and 13:00 hrs on Sundays
- Mapping of electronic bird decoys

Other detailed information on CABS organisation operational procedures can be found in the already published final reports for the time frame 2007-2009 (available online at <http://www.komitee.de/en/projects/malta>).

Night operations: Maltese poachers do not restrict their activities to shooting birds in flight. Night roosts are regularly visited by groups of marauding hunters who illuminate the roosts with spotlights and shoot the birds out of the trees, bushes and reeds in which they have taken refuge. In several cases special CABS roost protection patrols were mounted, where possible in conjunction with the police. The presence of the latter did not however prevent the poachers either from carrying out reconnaissance of the roosts, or from harassing the CABS teams during the night from pick-ups, with vehicle registration plates covered with masking tape. In addition night reconnaissance of wader trapping sites was conducted.

Security: Following the two extremely brutal attacks on our teams in spring 2010 we cooperated with a professional security team for the first time in our organisation's history. Instead of working in our usual 2-person teams, these were deployed with at least 3 volunteers. In areas of the island dangerous for bird conservationists teams were accompanied with one or two unarmed and licensed, Maltese-speaking, close protection personnel from a company with international experience.

3. Results

During the 14 days of operations our teams recorded 222 single offences in contravention of hunting and bird protection laws and regulations. These included 23 direct shootings down of protected birds (Tab. 1), 20 incidents of shooting at or inflicting injury or damage to protected species (Tab. 2), 11 finds or observations of protected birds with shotgun injuries (Tab. 3), 15 cases of illegal trapping (Tab. 4) and 121 shots fired during the afternoon and evening hunting curfew (weekdays from 15:00 hrs, Sundays from 13:00hrs). These did not include the 72 shots fires on the evening of 21 September in a bird of prey night roost near Ta-Santi. In addition the illegal use of electronic bird callers for Common Quail and wader species was registered on 32 occasions (The search for decoys was not a priority of this camp - see Para. 3.4. below).

Tab.1: Shooting down of protected species

A total of 19 incidents with 23 individual birds killed (6 species)

Date	Location	Time		Species	Comments
13.09.2010	Garghur	8:00	AM	Night Heron	Offender not identified
14.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	?	PM	European Bee-eater	Offender not identified
15.09.2010	Bahrija	07:00	AM	Honey Buzzard	Police present, offender not identified
17.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	07:18	AM	Dotterel(2)	Offender not identified
18.09.2010	Fawwara	06:18	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
18.09.2010	N of Zurrieq	07:08	AM	Honey Buzzard (2)	Offender not identified
18.09.2010	Bahrija	18:36	PM	Honey Buzzard	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	S of Dingli	06:15	AM	Honey Buzzard	Shooting filmed, offender not identified
19.09.2010	Fawwara	07:10	AM	Honey Buzzard	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	Fawwara	07:10	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	06:40	AM	Marsh Harrier	Shooting filmed, offender not identified
19.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	06:42	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	07:25	AM	Honey Buzzard (2)	Shooting filmed, offender not identified
19.09.2010	S of Mgarr	18:40	PM	Marsh Harrier (2)	Offender not identified
21.09.2010	Zurrieq	08:21	AM	Common Kestrel	Offender not identified
22.09.2010	Girgenti	07:26	AM	Common Kestrel	Offender not identified
22.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	08:41	AM	Common Kestrel	Offender not identified
23.09.2010	St. Thomas Bay	?	PM	Heron spec.	Offender not identified
26.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	7:29	AM	Dotterel	Offender not identified

Tab. 2. Shooting at or inflicting injury or damage to protected species:

Total of 20 incidents (8 species)

Date	Location	Time		Species	Comments
13.09.2010	Ghar Lapsi	06:42	AM	European Bee-eater	Offender not identified
14.09.2010	Mellieha	07:10	AM	Grey Heron	Offender not identified

15.09.2010	Bahrija	19:07	PM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
15.09.2010	Mgarr	17:35	PM	Barn Swallow	Offender filmed and identified
17.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	06:56	AM	Honey Buzzard	Offender not identified
17.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	07:07	AM	Honey Buzzard	Offender not identified
17.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	07:08	AM	Honey Buzzard	Offender not identified
17.09.2010	Fawwara	07:38	AM	Hobby	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	Fawwara	06:20	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
19.09.2010	Girgenti	07:35	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
21.09.2010	Ghar Lapsi	06:23	AM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
21.09.2010	NW of Dingli	18:17	PM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
21.09.2010	Mtahleb	18:00	PM	Bird of prey spec.	Offender identified and arrested
21.09.2010	Ta-Santi	19:15-20:45	PM	Honey Buzzard, 72 (!) shots at already roosting birds	Offender not identified
22.09.2010	Bahrija coastline	17:09	PM	Marsh Harrier	Offender not identified
22.09.2010	Girgenti	18:45	PM	European Bee-eater	Offender not identified
24.09.2010	Buskett	18:30	PM	Common Kestrel	Offender not identified
25.09.2010	Delimara	08:37	AM	u/i Falcon	Offender not identified
25.09.2010	Delimara	09:22	AM	u/i Falcon	Offender not identified
26.09.2010	Gebel Cantar	?	AM	Dotterel	Offender not identified

Tab. 3. Finds of birds with shotgun injuries:
Total of 11 finds and observations (7 species)

Date	Location	Incident summary	Species
18.09.2010	Ghar Lapsi	Bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
19.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	During a search the remains of 6 protected birds were found in the fortification ditch - clearly 'disposed of'.	Marsh Harrier, Honey Buzzard, u/i. falcon
21.09.2010	Ghar Lapsi	Bird with shotgun injuries observed	Common Kestrel
22.09.2010	Ta-Santi	Dead bird with shotgun injuries found	Barn Swallow (7)
22.09.2010	Ta-Santi	Dead bird with shotgun injuries found	Marsh Harrier
22.09.2010	Dwejra Lines	Bird with shotgun injuries observed	Osprey
24.09.2010	Fawwara	Bird with shotgun injuries observed	Marsh Harrier
24.09.2010	Delimara	Bird with shotgun injuries observed	Grey Heron
16.09.2010	Santa Lucija (Gozo)	Dead bird with shotgun injuries found	Common Kestrel
22.09.2010	Bahrija coastline	Bird with shotgun injuries found	Marsh Harrier
18.09.2010	Mizieb	Dead bird with shotgun injuries found	European Nightjar

Tab. 4. Trapping of protected species:
Total of 15 cases (8 species)

Date	Location	Trapping method	Species	Comments
12.09.2010	St. Thomas Bay	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender identified, net dismantled by police
14.09.2010	Bahrija	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender identified and filmed, 1 plastic decoy seized

14.09.2010	Zurrieq	Clap net, live decoy	Ortolan Bunting, Red-throated Pipit, Short-toed Lark	Offender identified, filmed and arrested, 6 live decoys seized by police
16.09.2010	Santa Lucija area (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender identified, filmed and arrested at trapping site, 3 live Dotterels seized
16.09.2010	Santa Lucija area (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender not identified
16.09.2010	Gharb (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Trapper fled unidentified
16.09.2010	San Lawrence (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender not identified
17.09.2010	Dingli	Clap net, electronic decoy	Golden Plover	Offender identified, filmed and arrested at trapping site, police seize 2 live decoys
18.09.2010	Xemxija	Cage trap	song bird spec.	Offender identified, filmed, police conduct enquiry
25.09.2010	Santa Lucija area (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Police called, offender gets away
25.09.2010	Santa Lucija area (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	police called, offender gets away
25.09.2010	San Lawrence (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender flees unidentified
25.09.2010	Gharb (Gozo)	Clap net, electronic decoy	Dotterel	Offender not identified
25.09.2010	Delimara	Clap net, electronic decoy	u/i wader	Offender flees unidentified
25.09.2010	Santa Lucija area (Gozo)	Cage trap	Turtle Dove, Song Thrush, Starling Short-toed Lark	Trap shown to police and official complaint made

3.1. Use of electronic bird decoys

In contrast to previous operations no specific night searches were conducted in order to map the locations of electronic decoys. The teams registered 19 electronic decoy Quail callers and an electronic Golden Plover calling device during the course of normal daylight operations. In addition, 12 further decoy birds, used to catch protected Dotterel and Golden Plover were found (see Tab. 4).

3.2. Search of the “Mizieb” hunting preserve on 20.09.2010

The discovery last year of more than 220 dead birds of prey, herons and other protected species in woodland near Manikata was greeted with shock and revulsion throughout Malta and led to protest by bird conservationists and politicians across Europe. On 20 September 2010, a year to the day of the 2009 find, some 50 international volunteers from BirdLife Malta (BLM) and CABS carried out a search of another part of the woods. The result is shattering. Poaching in this stretch of woodland, supposedly managed by the Maltese Hunting Association (FKNK), clearly continues without restraint. In the course of the search a further 85 bird fresh corpses, rotting remains and other remnants of protected birds were discovered. These included 20 Marsh Harriers, 4 Hobbies, 4 Montagu's or Pallid Harriers, 4 Hoopoes, 2 Honey Buzzards, 2 Common Kestrels, 2 European Bee-eaters as well as

numerous other unidentifiable falcons and song birds. All the birds found had been concealed under large stones or rubbish by persons unknown. A disturbing incident occurred when two self-admitted hunters lurked in wait for a 26 year old CABS activist, destroyed a bird skeleton she had just found, and attempted to take away an evidence bag with further bird remains she was carrying. The police called to the scene were able to find the culprits and started criminal proceedings against them. The case comes before the Maltese courts in February 2011.

The depressing finds were presented to the media at a press conference held in the woodland at the culmination of the search operation. A large banner was displayed to remind the public that neither the results of the investigation into the 2009 finds had been published to date, nor had there been an official statement on the massacre of protected birds. Indeed no direct measures had been taken to prevent a repeat of the large scale and needless poaching activity in this impenetrable area. Spokespersons for CABS and BLM challenged the Prime Minister Laurence Gonzi - whose office is directly responsible for environmental matters - to finally introduce measures to combat poaching in Mizieb and order the removal of illegally erected shooting hides and trapping sites - most of them environmental eyesores. With media film cameras still running, an irate FKNK board member then shouted abuse at the CABS press officer and slapped him in the face. Thanks to the quick reaction by our security personnel the man was immediately rendered *hors de combat* and escalation of the incident was avoided. The hunting functionary was later sentenced to a fine of 100 Euros for the unprovoked attack.

A comprehensive documentation of the 'Mizieb Bird Cemetery - Part II' has in the meantime been forwarded to the Maltese Government as well as the European Commission in Brussels.

4. Evaluation and Conclusions

Incidents observed and recorded by our teams demonstrate unquestionably that bird poaching in autumn on Malta is as widespread as ever and presents a real threat to the preservation of protected species, especially migrating birds of prey. As our teams could at any one time never cover more than a maximum of 5 % of the islands' area suitable for hunting, our collated data represent of course only a very small percentage of offences committed during our operational time frame. In addition to the offences registered by CABS teams, our partner organisation *BirdLife Malta* recorded a further 461 offences in the same period, including 78 incidents of hunting of protected birds and 44 finds of protected species with shotgun injuries (Raptor Camp 2010 Report).

A comparison of this year's data with that of autumn 2007 to 2009 can only be a very limited one due to the differing areas of deployment, variability in strength of migration as well as an increasing 'adaptation' of the hunters to our operating methods. Nonetheless it is remarkable that the number of recorded incidents of illegal hunting of protected species, per team and operational day (total of all cases of shooting down, shooting at, finds and observations of protected birds with shotgun injuries), has declined by about a half since 2007. Even if this, because of the factors described above, cannot be taken as scientific proof of a decline in poaching, it gives however grounds for hope. The fact that our data represents a snapshot of a two week period during a 3 month long hunting season also need to be taken into consideration. What takes place at the bird of prey night roosts (and the trapping

sites) before and after our operations is generally unknown outside Malta. Observations by local bird conservationists and the finds - two years running - of dead birds of prey and many other protected species in Mizieb point to the fact that the pressure from hunting in the weeks before and after our camps is markedly higher than when our teams are covering the roosts.

5. Our thanks go to ...

... all this year's camp participants, and especially our Maltese assistants, for your courageous and selfless work to protect our bird life. The organisation and running of the camp, especially transport, accommodation and security of our volunteers costs a great deal of money and the camp would not be possible without the help of numerous private donors and sponsors. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their open-handedness. The Pro Biodiversity Foundation (Stiftung pro Artenvielfalt) were particularly helpful in supporting this year's camps on Malta with a generous four figure sum.

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Abbildung 1: Beschlagnahme von verbotenen Fangnetzen durch die Polizei nach einem Hinweis des Komitees – *Police seize illegal clapnets in Gozo after a CABS tipp-off*



Abbildung 2: Geschossener Ziegenmelker, gefunden in Mizieb – *shot Nightjar, found in Mizieb*



Abbildung 3: Geschossener Turmfalke, gefunden in Santa Lucija (Gozo) – *shot Kestrel, found in Santa Lucija (Gozo)*



Abbildung 4: Polizist mit an einem vom Komitee observierten Fangplatz beschlagnahmten lebenden Lockvögeln (Kurzzehenlerchen und Rotkehlpieper) – *ALE officer with seized decoys (Short-toed Larks and Red-Throated Pipits) from a trapping place which was observed by CABS volunteers.*



Abbildung 5: Komiteemitarbeiter und Polizisten suchen nach Jagdopfern. Im Vordergrund liegen geschossene Rauchschnalben – *CABS volunteers and ALE officers search for dead birds. Shot Barn Swallows in the foreground.*



Abbildung 6: Der deutsche Botschafter auf Malta, seine Exzellenz Bernd Braun, besucht das Komitee-Vogelschutzcamp – *The german ambassador on Malta, HE Bernd Braun, visits the CABS birdprotection camp*



Abbildung 7: Pressekonferenz in Mizieb - *Press conference in Mizieb*