

KOMITEE GEGEN DEN VOGELMORD
CABS - COMMITTEE AGAINST BIRD SLAUGHTER
RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION OPERATIONS
INTO BIRD TRAPPING WITH LIME STICKS IN THE
BOUCHES-DU-RHONE REGION, FRANCE

Report by:

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1. Introduction

The Komitee gegen den Vogelermord - Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) is currently conducting a large scale investigation of legal and illegal bird trapping in Europe. Based on the information gathered, an assessment is made of their effect on migrating birds. Throughout Europe the use of lime sticks is considered to be an illegal trapping method as it is non-selective and can cause lasting damage to the feathers of the birds caught. Lime stick installations, when strategically deployed on passage routes and enhanced by alterations to natural vegetation and use of decoy birds, also have a high daily trapping ratio, ranging from 1:2 to 1:6. Lime sticks have been used traditionally for bird trapping in Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy and Spain. Their use is banned in Cyprus, Greece, and Italy and offenders are prosecuted; in Spain there are new attempts to legalise the practice¹ and in France lime sticks may be used legally in certain circumstances.

Over the past few years the French Government has pursued a policy of legalising traditional hunting methods. Some restrictions have been introduced in an attempt to comply with the EU Bird Protection Directive. The use of lime sticks is presently permitted in five départements of the *Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur* (PACA) region where the prefecture annually lays down the dates of the trapping season and the number of birds that can be trapped. This derogation from European law is justified by the argument that the practice is the only satisfactory means of providing live decoys for shooting of song birds from hides (*poste a feu*).

In the period 14 to 21 November 2009, a CABS team of six (from CABS Germany, TutelaFauna Italy and LAC Italy) conducted investigations on lime stick use in Bouche-du-Rhone. The aim was to gather information on the numbers and distribution and possible effects of lime stick installations. This report presents some of the most important issues that emerged during the investigation in relation to the use of lime sticks in PACA.

2. Methodology

The six CABS members visited the region for an eight day operational period, checking shooting hides and lime stick installations. The operational area encompassed the Départements of Vaucluse (Montaigne de Luberon, Mérindol, Vidauque, Oppède) and Bouches-du-Rhone (Peynier, Lascours, Plan de Cuques, Peypin, Mimet, Allauch, Roquevaire, La Ciotat, Roquefort la Bedoule, Auriol). Eight hunters were interviewed by the team about the lime stick trapping practice. On two occasions a CABS team took up concealed positions close to a shooting hide with an adjacent lime stick installation in order to film the number of captures and test the veracity of statements made by hunters.

¹ Despite the judgement of the European Court of Justice of 9th December 2004 in the case C79/2003, on 14th October 2009 the Valencian Parliament published a new Ley de Caza which legalises the use of limed twigs in paranyes.

3. National and regional legal framework

The national law *Arrêté du 17 août 1989 relatif à l'emploi de gluaux pour la capture des grives et des merles destinés à servir d'appelants dans les départements des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, des Alpes-Maritimes, des Bouches-du-Rhône, du Var et de Vaucluse* (Annex 1) legalises the use of lime sticks subject to the following conditions (summary):

- The use of lime sticks is authorized in the départements of Var, Vaucluse, Bouches-du-Rhône, Alpes-Maritimes and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence only.
- Trapping with lime sticks is permitted from dawn to 11.00 am.
- A shotgun may not be carried during the setting out of the lime sticks (*Le port du fusil est interdit durant ces opérations*).
- The hunter must be present in the installation when the lime sticks are active.
- Only five species may be trapped: Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*), Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) and Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*).
- In the lime sticks installation only these five species may be used as decoys.
- All thrushes caught must be freed immediately from the lime stick and their plumage cleaned. All non-target birds caught accidentally must be cleaned of lime and released into the wild immediately.
- The marketing of captured thrushes is prohibited.
- All hunters, except those prosecuted previously for offences related to the practice, have the right to apply for a lime stick trapping permit.
- All hunters must be in possession of their trapping licences on-site, and must record their daily catch tally on the form provided. The completed form is to be presented to the prefecture at the end of the trapping season.

The prefectures of the five départements concerned complete this legal framework by laying down the dates of the trapping season (usually from the beginning of October until mid- December - 70 days), as well the maximum number of birds which may be trapped, the number and size of lime sticks permitted to be set, the extent of the trapping installation, and in some cases the minimum height at which they may be set.

4. Information gathered on the practice of lime stick trapping

There are at least four different methods of lime stick trapping.

- a. The most prevalent method is the shooting hide (*post a feu*). Hunters use the prepared space in front of the shooting hide (laid out with trees and bushes as attractive perches for birds) and cages with live decoys to lure migrating thrushes and catch them on lime sticks. The sticks are placed on the horizontal branches of the trees or bushes carefully sited around the hide. Lime sticks on poles or dead branches are also erected in the crowns of the trees. The hunter waits in ambush in the hide. He may *either* set out the lime sticks and remove caught birds *or* shoot birds flying into the killing area, but may not practise both methods at the same time.

It is important to note that almost every shooting hide checked had a lime stick installation. According to official data from 2005, 2,000 hunters in the Département of Bouches-du-Rhône legally use lime sticks - the vast majority of them setting them out around the hides.

- b. Some shooting hides have developed a particular form which is better suited for trapping than for shooting. During the investigation some hides with a complex adjacent arboreal structure were observed. This was in the form of a large bush, shaped and trimmed to form tunnels and windows, and offering the birds only a few perches, all strewn with lime. These structures (resembling the Spanish paranys although somewhat smaller) are quite rare in the area.
- c. 'Pure' hunting with lime sticks is called *chasse à la cabane* and is no longer common. One of the hunters we interviewed stated that, of 30 hunters in his village licensed to trap with lime sticks, he was the only one who still practises this method. Areas in low mountain passes with an east-west orientation (thrushes migrate along the coast from east to west) are leased for hunting and the small Holm Oaks *Quercus ilex* growing there are trimmed to create horizontal perches for bird. These lime sticks sites are set along a 50 m long trap line with usually a total of 30 lime sticks (before the provisions of the EU Birds Directive were implemented these areas were much more extensive with 500 lime sticks in a 1 ha area). The trapper conceals himself in a bush and imitates thrush calls to lure migrating birds. Live decoys are also placed in cages near the lime sticks to increase the catch.
- d. The final method is practised at home, often in the trapper's garden, where lime sticks are placed close to bushes bearing berries.

5. Trapping rates

Lime sticks have a high trapping rate, which although not as high as that of mist nets, is much higher than *tendelles* (stone crush traps) or snares. Four hunters who had set out between 5 and 30 lime sticks were observed trapping 4, 0, 2, 1 thrushes respectively in a four hour period. The number of records gathered was too few to allow an average capture rate to be calculated and the situation differed considerably from case to case. Our 'pure' hunter (see 4. c. above) stated however that he was able to trap 12 thrushes a day on average, with this number rising to 40-50 on days with heavy migration. He added that in the past he had caught 500-600 thrushes every season and can reach this total again in his installation.

6. Infringements of the law

Our team members had no authority to act on breaches of the law. We were however interested in investigating whether and how the law was infringed. We therefore waited in concealed position to observe the hunters trapping birds. In addition we gained an overall insight into the problem by interviewing a number of hunters.

- a. The permitted timings and dates for trapping were adhered to. All lime sticks were removed by 11.00 am daily and no installations were active in the afternoon. No trapping was observed after mid-December.
- b. Trappers were on-site at all times when installations were active in accordance with the law and tradition in the Provence.
- c. We recorded no trapping of protected bird species. In one installation two Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* were caught and the trapper was observed freeing them from a lime stick using a sprayer (from our position we were unable to see if the birds were then released). In interviews some hunters expressed an interest in trapping smaller species such as Robin *Erithacus rubecula*. It should also be noted that in some installations around shooting hides

lime sticks were set out only 40 cm above the ground, a height at which it is easier to catch Robins and Dunnocks *Prunella modularis* rather than thrushes (For this reason some départements do not permit the setting out of lime sticks under a height of 2 m). Many hunters commented however that the police were very strict in regard to compliance with the capture of protected species.

- d. The requirement to release captured birds immediately was respected only with regard to thrushes. During our observations on 19 November all four thrushes trapped were freed from the lime stick within two minutes. This is obviously done to minimise damage to feathers as the birds are valuable if kept alive. The two Blackcaps caught were however not released until after 7 and 35 minutes respectively had elapsed. In our opinion this reflects the difference in importance the species have for the hunter and their future after capture.
- e. The most common infringement observed - in 100 % of cases - is possession of a shotgun within the hide or trapping installation when trapping with lime sticks is taking place. This enables the hunters to maximise their bag by illegally shooting and trapping at the same time. The birds arriving near the hide, if not caught on the lime sticks within the first few minutes, are shot by the hunter.
- f. The most serious infringement of the law is failure to comply with the legal trapping bag limits. It is important to note that there is a great contradiction between the number of thrushes permitted to be taken by each hunter (usually between 6 and 15 in the season) and the period available for trapping (70-75 days or some 280-300 hours). In order to ensure that the law complies with the 'small numbers' laid down in Article 9 of the EU Birds Directive, and since the justification for the derogation is the provision of live decoys for hunters, the prefectures must fix a low annual quota (15,000-30,000) that then has to be divided by the number of hunters. This determines the individual annual bag of 6 - 15 birds. Our interviewee stated however that he can catch 12 thrushes on a bad (trapping) day. We have also observed and filmed one hunter catching 4 thrushes in a single morning (between 25 - 60 % of his annual permitted bag!). Our interlocutor also told us that in the parish of Roquefort la Bedoule, where 30 hunters are permitted to catch an annual total of 180 thrushes (6 each), all catch as many as they like during the season and submit their report sheet with an annual total of '6'. According to him the official controls are not a problem and everyone knows that the '6' recorded catches are fictitious and a formality. It is therefore impossible to estimate the true size of the annual catch in all five départements.
- g. The large surplus of live thrushes not required by local hunters for use as decoys and has generated an illegal trade in thrushes, which are smuggled into northern Italy where live decoys, especially Redwing, are in great demand. This information was confirmed anonymously by several hunters who told us that some of their colleagues legally trap thrushes throughout the season for sale to Italian hunters or middlemen at 10 € per bird. The middlemen arrive in trucks and drive around the region buying thrushes until their vehicle is full. The sale of these birds is in strict contravention of national law. This information was provided by hunters who prefer to remain anonymous and there is no concrete evidence available at present to confirm it. Nevertheless it seems to be coherent with the context and the size of trapping in Provence.



P.1: Holm oak plantation used as lime stick installation. The hide is on the right
P.2: In this hide in Bouches-du-Rhones the structures to put up lime sticks are set out only a few centimetres above the ground.
P.3: structure to put up lime sticks set on branches all around the hide.
P.4: Hunting hide with living decoys in Provence. This hunter was shooting and trapping at the same time.



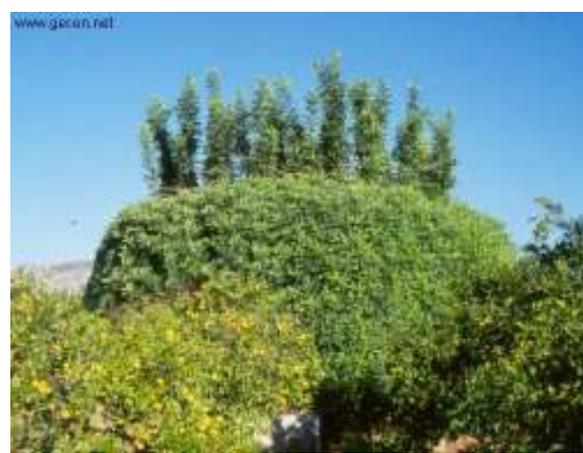


- P.1:** Hunting hide surrounded by poles (here inactive) for lime sticks.
- P.2:** Hunting hide with inactive pole for lime sticks.
- P.3:** The same shooting hide of picture 2 with erected pole and a thrush stuck on the lime stick.
- P.4:** The glue used in Provence.





P.1: Hunting hide (right) with arboreal structure (left) shaped for setting out lime sticks (similar to the structure of parany). In this hide hunters were trapping and shooting at the same time.
P.2: A type of parany in Valencia for comparison.
P.3: Another example of parany in Valencia for comparison.



P.4: Arboreal structure for lime sticks. On the left the lime stick where a Blackcap has been caught.

P.5: Zoom in: the Blackcap caught on the stick. The bird was stuck for about 30 minutes (recorded on video).





P.1: On the main mountain passes vegetation has been trimmed by trappers for setting out of lime sticks. Between them the cages where live decoys lure birds on migration.

P.2: The poles for lime sticks set out (inactive) in a coppice.

P.3: Redwing trapped by a lime stick on one of the poles set out by hunters. A few seconds after the picture was shot the bird loses all the feathers on its right wing and falls to the ground (recorded on the video).

P.4: Song Thrush found dead in a forgotten lime stick.

P.5: CABS team member shows the lime sticks held in the traditional bag.

