



CABS Malta Bird Protection Camp Report Autumn 2011

Operation Safe Voyage 9 - 24 September 2011

Background

For more than 20 years the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) has organised so-called bird protection camps in the poaching hotspots in the Mediterranean. One of our important operational areas is the Malta Archipelago, situated between Sicily and the Tunisian coast, where poachers kill or trap thousands of protected birds every year. There are some 15,000 licensed hunters on the islands of this small archipelago that have a total land area of about 360 square kilometres. This gives the highest density of hunters per square kilometre for anywhere in the world.

During the more than four month hunting season in autumn and winter many hunters use the opportunity presented by the legal hunting of Turtle Dove and Quail to target protected migratory bird species. The birds most affected by this illegal practice are Herons, Storks, Honey Buzzards, Harriers, Eagles and other rare large bird species that are coveted as stuffed trophies. A number of the Honey Buzzards killed, in particular the juvenile birds migrating to their winter quarters in autumn, also land in the cooking pot. In addition to the killing of birds of prey and other large birds, trapping of finches and wader species with large clap nets is widespread.

As the populations of many of the species illegally shot or trapped on Malta are categorised as vulnerable or endangered in their breeding grounds in Northern and Central Europe, poaching on Malta represents an international species conservation problem. Despite numerous and consistent protests from conservationists and the governments in other EU member states, the Maltese agencies responsible for the protection of migratory birds have to date failed to effectively come to grips with the problem.

Autumn bird protection camp 2011

This year's CABS autumn bird protection camp took place from 9 - 25 September. The primary aim was to prevent the illegal shooting of birds of prey by deployment of our volunteers, in a highly visible manner, at important night roosts and on the known flight corridors. In addition to the preventive effect the teams were also given the tasks of collecting evidence of poaching and reporting illegal shooting of protected species and the operation of active trapping sites to the authorities

In addition to the direct filming of the killing of or shooting at protected bird species, the volunteers were also tasked with recording birds with obvious shotgun injuries such as dangling legs or tattered or missing flight feathers.

A total of 24 volunteers from Bulgaria, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Malta participated in the autumn 2011 camp. As always, the operation was conducted in close coordination and cooperation with the Maltese environmental police unit ALE and BirdLife Malta. More information on the situation on Malta and the operational methods of our Bird Guards can be found in our final reports from the years 2007 to 2010 (available as download on our homepage at <http://www.komitee.de/en/projects/malta>).

Hunting season and bird protection regulations in September 2011

The official season for legally huntable bird species - in September primarily Turtle Dove and Quail - is from 1 September to 31 January annually.

In addition to the permanent ban on hunting after 13:00 hours on Sundays and public holidays, the Maltese government also imposed a complete ban on hunting after 15:00 hours in the second half of September this year. According to the authorities this restriction, also applied in previous years was intended to prevent the shooting of migrating birds of prey arriving over the islands during the afternoon and early evening.

In addition, the ban on trapping of finch species with clap nets imposed three years ago was extended this year to include Golden Plover, Turtle Dove, Quail and Song Thrush. This is the first time that a total ban on bird trapping has been officially imposed across the complete Malta Archipelago. The trapping ban this autumn was introduced as a result of a written warning to Malta from the European Commission that severely criticised the mainly unmonitored and unlimited use of clap nets to date.

Additional regulations, the compliance with which was monitored by our teams, included the ban on firearms capable of firing automatically more than 3 shots in succession as well as the ban on the use of electronic bird decoy devices.

Results

Bird migration during the camp

The high pressure zone prevailing over Malta during the camp, combined with at times extremely bad weather in South and Central Italy, led to a noticeably smaller number of strong migration days in comparison to the same period in autumn 2009 and 2010. This meant that there were correspondingly fewer birds of prey on passage or resting overnight on the islands. Nonetheless, strong migration was registered on a few occasions, notably on the 15.9, 17.9, 18.9, 23.9 and 24.9.

In addition to the usual large numbers of migrating Marsh Harriers and Honey Buzzards, other birds of prey including Montagu's Harriers, Common and Lesser Kestrels, Hobbies and Black Kites were observed, as well as a few Lesser Spotted Eagles (e.g. 6 individuals on the afternoon of 15.9 in Girgenti, 1 individual on the afternoon of 18.9 over Dwejra Lines), Short-toed Eagles (e.g. 2 individuals on the evening of 23.9 in Tal-Virtu), Ospreys (e.g. 1 individual in the evening of 23.9 in Buskett, at least 1 individual on the afternoon of 24.9 near Bahrija), Eleonora's Falcons (e.g. 2 individuals on the afternoon of 9.9 at Dwejra Lines, 1 individual on the afternoon of 15.9 in Buskett) and a Steppe Buzzard (1 individual on 15.9 around 16:00 hours in Has-Saptan). Other notable sightings of non-raptors included several Black Storks (e.g. 2 individuals on the evening of 16.9 on the coast near Mtahleb), Night Herons, Purple Herons (e.g. 2 individuals on the morning of 22.9 near Ghar Lapsi), Dotterel (on 12.9 at least 1 individual calling at night on Gozo) and a single Ring Ouzel (on 15.9 above the Girgenti Valley). Other birds on passage included Barn Swallows, Swifts, Bee-eaters (in good numbers), Golden Orioles, Nightjar (e.g. 1 individual warming itself at night on a tarmac road

near Bingemma), Whinchats, Wheatears, Short-toed Larks, Spotted Flycatchers, Red-backed Shrikes, Common Redstarts, Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Turtle Doves and Quails.

Illegal bird hunting and trapping

Many of the sightings recorded by our teams were published in an online diary during the course of the camp. For tactical reasons details of some incidents were either not published at the time or became known at a later date. The following Tables 1 to 3 include a full list of all birds recorded by our teams as shot at or killed, as well as dead birds found and protected birds observed in flight with obvious shotgun injuries.

Table 1: Observations of shooting down (killing) of protected species
A total of 20 incidents involving at least 23 poachers and with 22 birds killed (4 species)

Date	Location	Time		Species	Comments
9.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	17:10	pm	Barn Swallow	10 shots at swallows, 1 bird shot down, hunter arrested
10.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	16:50	pm	Swallow spec.	3 birds shot down
10.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	16:55	pm	Bee-eater	1 bird shot down
13.9.11	Bahrija	17:57	pm	Bee-eater	Several shots at a flock, 1 bird shot down
13.9.11	Bingemma Fort	18:44	pm	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down with at least 4 shots
14.9.11	Fawwara	09:13	am	Bee-eater	1 bird shot down
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	15:30	pm	Bee-eater	1 bird shot down
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	18:30	pm	Bee-eater	1 bird shot down
16.9.11	Has-Saptan	17:55	pm	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down with 1 shot
17.9.11	Safi	07:06	am	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down with 11 shots from at least 3 weapons
17.9.11	Ghar Lapsi	09:13	am	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down
17.9.11	Fiddien	17:55	pm	Marsh Harrier	1 bird shot down with 2 shots
17.9.11	Girgenti	18:14	pm	Marsh Harrier	1 bird shot down with 1 shot
17.9.11	Fiddien	21:00	pm	Marsh Harrier	8 shots at a roost of Marsh Harriers
18.9.11	Rabat	06:18	am	Marsh Harrier	1 bird shot down
18.9.11	Quormi	07:44	am	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down
18.9.11	Girgenti	07:48	am	Honey Buzzard	1 bird shot down with 5 shots from at least 2 weapons
18.9.11	Dingli	18:00	pm	Marsh Harrier	1 bird shot down
19.9.11	Rabat	06:37	am	Marsh Harrier	1 bird shot down
21.9.11	Laferla Cross	08:44	am	Swallow spec.	1 bird shot down

Table 2: Shooting at or hits on protected species
28 incidents involving at least 38 different poachers (5 species)

Date	Location	Time		Species	Comments
9.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	17:15	pm	Bee-eater	4 shots at a flock by 2 hunters - both arrested by the police
9.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	17:16	pm	Finch-species	2 shots at a flock
12.9.11	Ghar Lapsi Hill	07:55	am	Bee-eater	2 shots at a flock
13.9.11	Bingemma Fort	17:50	pm	Marsh Harrier	several shots at 1 bird
13.9.11	Bingemma Fort	18:10	pm	Honey Buzzard	several shots at 1 bird
13.9.11	Bingemma Fort	18:25	pm	Honey Buzzard	several shots at 1 bird
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines	15:30/ 18:30	pm	Bee-eater	several shots at a flock from at least 3 different weapons
14.9.11	Bahrija	19:10	pm	Honey Buzzard	2 shots at 1 bird
15.9.11	Girgenti	19:01	pm	Lesser Spotted Eagle	1 shot at 1 bird
16.9.11	Dingli North	06:10	am	Honey Buzzard	1 shot at 1 bird
17.9.11	Airport South	08:05	am	Honey Buzzard	6 shots at 1 bird from at least 3 different weapons
17.9.11	Ghar Lapsi	9:13	am	Honey Buzzard	2 birds shot at from at least 2 different weapons
17.9.11	Safi	08:33	am	Marsh Harrier	4 shots at 1 bird from at least 2 different weapons
17.9.11	Girgenti	18:24	pm	Honey Buzzard	3 shots at 1 one bird
17.9.11	Buskett	18:15	pm	Marsh Harrier	1 shot at 1 bird
17.9.11	Buskett	18:35	pm	Honey Buzzard	1 shot at 1 bird
18.9.11	Rabat	06:22	am	Marsh Harrier	5 shots at 1 bird from at least 2 different weapons
18.9.11	Ghar Lapsi	06:48	am	Bee-eater	2 shots at a flock
18.9.11	Siggiewi	07:13	am	Honey Buzzard	4 shots at 1 bird from at least 2 different weapons
18.9.11	Quormi	07:15/ 8:50	am	Marsh Harrier	several shots at 2 birds
18.9.11	Siggiewi	07:58	am	Honey Buzzard	4 shots at 1 bird from at least 2 different weapons
19.9.11	Rabat	06:25	am	Marsh Harrier	1 shot at 1 bird
19.9.11	Fawwara / Ghar Lapsi	06:33	am	Honey Buzzard	2 shots at 1 bird
19.9.11	Fawwara	06:50	am	Marsh Harrier	2 shots at 1 bird
19.9.11	Fawwara / Underground Chapel	07:06	am	Bee-eater	1 shot at 1 bird
19.9.11	Fawwara / Underground Chapel	07:51	am	Honey Buzzard	1 shot at 1 bird
24.9.11	Tal Virtu	07:45	am	Honey Buzzard	1 shot at 1 bird
24.9.11	Tal Virtu	18:30	pm	Honey Buzzard	3 shots at 1 bird

Table 3: Finds and observations of birds with shotgun injuries
41 individuals (13 species)

Date	Location	Description of incident	Species
10.9.11	Delimara	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Montagu's Harrier
10.9.11	Dwejra-Lines	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Montagu's Harrier
11.9.11	Mizieb	6 protected birds found under boulders in a hunting reserve (shot in spring or 2010)	Golden Oriole (1), Night Heron (1), Little Egret (1), three raptor-sculls
12.9.11	Laferla Cross	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Kestrel
12.9.11	Kuncizzjoni	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Marsh Harrier
12.9.11	Kuncizzjoni	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	7 birds with shotgun wounds found in an old ditch	Bee-eater
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	2 birds with shotgun injuries found in an old ditch	Pallid Swift
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	1 bird with shotgun injuries found in an old ditch	Sardinian Warbler
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	2 birds with shotgun injuries found in an old ditch	Marsh Harrier
14.9.11	Dwejra Lines / Bingemma Chapel	3 birds with shotgun injuries found in an old ditch	Racing Pigeon
15.9.11	Fawwara	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Barn Swallow
15.9.11	Ghar Lapsi	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Racing pigeon
16.9.11	Fawwara / Underground Chapel	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
17.9.11	Girgenti	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
18.9.11	Fiddien (roost)	4 birds with shotgun injuries observed	Marsh Harrier
19.9.11	Fawwara / Underground Chapel	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
19.9.11	Bahrija	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
21.9.11	Bahrija	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Bee-eater
23.9.11	Laferla Cross	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Kestrel
23.9.11	Laferla Cross	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Hobby
24.9.11	Gebel Ciantar	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard
24.9.11	Dingli	1 bird with shotgun injuries observed	Honey Buzzard

Data summary

A total of 221 contraventions of Maltese Hunting Law and bird protection regulations were witnessed and recorded by our monitoring teams during 14 days of operations.

These contraventions included 48 cases of the shooting at or killing of protected species by at least 61 different individuals, as well as 41 protected birds observed with obvious shotgun injuries or found dead. At least 14 different species were involved including Night Heron, Little Egret, Honey Buzzard, Marsh and Montagu's Harrier, Common Kestrel, Hobby, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Golden Oriole, Bee-eater, Barn Swallow, Pallid Swift, an unidentified Finch species and Sardinian Warbler.

In addition the operation of 20 separate electronic lure devices for Quail (18) or protected wader species (2) was detected in the early morning hours or at night. On 9 occasions the use of firearms capable of firing more than 3 shots in automatic succession, forbidden by Maltese law and the bird protection guidelines, were registered. During monitoring of the afternoon hunting curfew our teams recorded a total of 96 shots (the locations of official shooting ranges, not affected by the ban, are marked on our team maps). In a single case the illegal use of an artificial Curlew decoy for hunting was filmed (Fig.1), and in two cases the police confirmed that persons filmed while hunting were not in possession of the necessary licence.

The find of a 15 metre long Japan net below Nadur Tower on 14.9, with a live and a dead Red-backed Shrike as well as a live Common Redstart and Bee-eater entangled in its meshes, was the only evidence of an active trapping site recorded during the camp (Fig.7+8). At a further three locations trappers had set out clap nets despite the ban on trapping, but these had not been activated at the time of our check. Two of the locations were reported to the ALE; the map coordinates of a third trapping site was passed to BirdLife Malta for future monitoring.

In addition to the incidents witnessed and recorded by our teams, BirdLife recorded a further 405 contraventions of the law in the time-frame 14 - 30.9. These included 83 incidents of shooting at or killing protected species (including Black Stork, Eleonora's Falcon and Short-toed Eagle) and 90 sightings of protected bird species with obvious shotgun injuries.

Shooting of protected bird species on Dwejra Lines 14.09.2011

On 14 September, on the Dwejra Lines, a search conducted by a team of ten camp volunteers found numerous dead protected birds shot by poachers. These included seven freshly-shot Bee-eaters, two Pallid Swifts, a Sardinian Warbler and the carcasses of two Marsh Harriers (Fig.2-5). All four species are strictly protected on Malta. In addition the remains of four racing pigeons were found - one of them wearing the ring of a local racing pigeon club. The birds were at the bottom of a defensive ditch, some 5 metres deep, constructed by the British in the 19th Century. Over the previous few days hunters had been observed on several occasions shooting at protected species in this area. Some of these incidents were also filmed by a CABS patrol. During the three hour operation a stretch of some 200 metres only of the in total one kilometre long densely overgrown and often almost penetrable ditch was searched. A search of the rest of the fortifications would only have been possible using professional climbing equipment. Two poachers, who were partly responsible for this massacre, have been identified in the meantime by the police from the CABS video material. Both men were known to the police and had come to the latter's attention in the past in connection with illegal hunting. The men admitted to shooting the Bee-eaters at this location and will now be charged with offences against the hunting law.

Bird killing at night roost

A further incident took place on 18.9 in the fields between Fiddien und Mtahleb, where some 80 Marsh Harriers had come to roost in the early evening. Around 21:00 hours, a team from BirdLife Malta on the spot witnessed how a number of persons suddenly appeared at the roost with torches and fired several shots into the grounded flock of dazzled birds. A CABS team summoned by BirdLife to assist scanned the area with a thermal imaging video camera and were able to make out five persons sitting in a darkened vehicle parked on a closed off track immediately adjacent to the roost. The video material was handed over to the police who identified the vehicle owner and called him in for questioning. The man at first denied being present at the scene but, after being confronted with the video film, admitted to having

been in the vicinity of the Marsh Harriers. It is not known if or what further action was undertaken by the police.

Media and Public Relations Work

On 14.9 CABS issued a press statement about the shot Bee-eaters and Swifts on Dwejra Lines that was taken up by the English-language daily papers (Times, Independent, Malta Today) and published in both the online and print versions.

On 21.9, simultaneously with the issue of a short interim report, a Youtube video was published online with material showing the shooting down of Honey Buzzards in Gudja, Fawwara, Ghar Lapsi and next to the Malta International Airport main runway. Other video sequences show the dismantling of nets as well as birds in flight with obvious shotgun injuries, freshly-shot Bee-eaters and the use of illegal electronic calling devices by hunters to attract Quail. The video can be viewed online at <http://youtu.be/hgwigysWvyc>.

Evaluation and Discussion

The data collected by the bird protection camp participants demonstrate that the illegal killing of protected migrant birds on Malta is still widespread, and represents a severe problem for the conservation of these species in Europe.

Comparison of the data from the years 2010 and 2011 show that the total of incidents of shooting down and shooting at protected bird species, as well as finds of dead birds and sightings of protected species with obvious shotgun injuries, has noticeably increased from 50 (in autumn 2010) to 67 (autumn 2011). On the other hand there has been a decrease in the number of incidents involving illegal trapping (15 cases in autumn 2010 and only 4 cases in autumn 2011) as well as contraventions against the afternoon hunting curfew (121 shots in autumn 2010; 96 in autumn 2011).

In the context of this comparison of data from different years it must be not be forgotten that the extent of poaching on Malta is heavily dependent on the scale of bird migration in the respective monitoring period. Data from different years are therefore only comparable to a limited extent. In addition, it has to be borne in mind that our teams are only capable of monitoring a fraction of the islands at any one time and that, over the years, the poachers have developed more and more effective strategies to avoid detection and identification. Nowadays, persons with communications devices are regularly posted as lookouts at most of the observation points used by our teams and warn the poachers of our presence. Photographs and the current locations of our volunteers, as well as information on our operational methods, are also posted and discussed in a forum on the Maltese hunters' association (FKNK) website.

A particularly disturbing development is the increasing shooting of birds of prey shortly before dusk and during the night. In autumn 2010 and spring 2011 there were several cases of poachers dazzling roosting birds with torches and spotlights before shooting the helpless creatures. Two similar cases were recorded this autumn. As only a fraction of the night roosts can be monitored on days with heavy migration, and as a rule the ALE has no personnel available after sunset, it can assumed that a large number of such incidents remain undetected.

Conclusions

There is still a great deal of room for improvement in bird protection on Malta. The most important objective from a bird conservation point of view still continues to be an appropriate reinforcement of the ALE environmental police unit, which was again hopelessly undermanned this autumn. The spring hunting season in April this year demonstrated that resources can be made available for the unit if necessary. In April 2011, in order to meet the European Commission requirement for strict monitoring of the controversial hunting of birds on pre-nuptial migration, the ALE was temporarily reinforced by some 40 additional police officers to monitor hunting. It was therefore a reasonable expectation that these additional personnel would also be made available in autumn. However, although many more birds use Malta as a rest area at this time, and more than twice as many hunters are present in the countryside than in spring, reinforcement of the ALE was negligible. It was therefore often impossible for the few available patrols to react timely to all reports from the CABS teams, or those of colleagues in BirdLife Malta. The consequence was, as in previous years, that on a number of occasions the police officers arrived after the poachers observed by us had left the scene, or had had sufficient time to conceal or otherwise dispose of weapons or dead birds.

With its accession to the EU, Malta accepted not only the obligation to give legal protection to rare bird species, but also to effectively implement and monitor the ban on hunting of these species. At present Malta is a long way from fulfilling this obligation. CABS will therefore continue to press for a long-overdue adequate reinforcement and better equipping of the ALE, both at government level in Valletta as well as with the European Commission in Brussels. From a conservation standpoint, more than enough evidence has been presented over the past few years to demonstrate that the numbers police officers committed this to task to date are inadequate to combat the problem. It is now up to the responsible politicians and civil servants in Valletta and Brussels to finally act on these facts and ensure that adequate skilled resources are made available to effectively deal with illegal bird hunting on Malta.

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APPENDIX – Photo documentation



Fig .1: Hunting of protected species. Left: Hunter using a plastic Curlew-decoy at an artificial pond, Delimara 10.9.2011.



Fig .2: Shot Pallid Swift, Dwejra Lines 14.9.2011



Fig .3: Shot protected Bee-eaters and Swifts found in a ditch at the old fortifications on the Dwejra Lines, 14.9.2011

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Fig .4: Hunting of protected species. Shot Sardinian Warbler, Dwejra Lines 14.9.2011.



Fig .5: Shot Bee-eater, Dwejra Lines 14.9.2011



Fig. 6 : ALE officers remove an unattended clapnet, Fiddien 19.9.2011

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Fig .7 +8: Illegal mist net with trapped Red-backed Shrike, Common Redstart (left picture) and Bee-eater, Nadur, 14.9.2011



Fig .9 +10: Birds of prey with visible gunshot wounds. Left: Kestrel, Laferla Cross 12.9.2011, Right: Marsh Harrier, Fiddien 18.9.2011