

Every year an estimated 150 million migrant birds pass across the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. It is also the winter home for a large number of European birds such as robins and stonechats. Situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Cyprus has long held the unenviable reputation as the worst place in Europe for the illegal trapping and shooting of migrant birds. It has been calculated that 20 million or more birds meet their death on the sun-drenched island popular with so many tourists.

In the autumn of this year, I visited Cyprus on two occasions following disturbing reports that the levels of illegal trapping were actually escalating. The RSPB was fortunate to have the assistance of a number of British birdwatchers living on Cyprus who were able to point us in the right direction.

The first occasion was with a work colleague and the second with a journalist and reporter from the Daily Mail. We concentrated on the south-east end of the island near the tourist resort of Ayia Napa. The geography of this area forms a natural migration route for millions of birds moving to and from North Africa. Consequently illegal trapping takes place on an intensive scale in such areas with hundreds of local people involved.

Bird trapping using twigs coated in a sticky substance called 'lime' is a traditional culinary activity in Cyprus and at one time caught birds were probably an important food source. Today things are very different and the liming and netting of birds is totally illegal under Cypriot law. While the liming of birds still takes place on a huge scale, it is the intensive use of modern mist nets which is of particular concern. These fine meshed nets, said to be imported from Italy or Japan, are effectively invisible to birds when stretched out inside vegetation. In the UK such nets are legally used by licensed bird ringers under strictly controlled conditions. Small metal rings fitted to birds provide vital information on bird migration and other behaviour. Indeed, birds such as lesser whitethroats ringed in the UK have been recovered in Cyprus.

There is effectively no legal ringing of birds on Cyprus, yet despite this thousands of mist nets are imported into the country obviously intended for illegal bird trapping. In addition to the huge numbers of birds that are limed, netted and shot, many of the species involved

are of conservation concern in Europe. Cyprus itself has two endemic breeding species, the Cyprus warbler and the Cyprus pied wheatear, both with just a few thousand breeding pairs. Both these species are indiscriminately caught and killed. There are several species where populations are concentrated in Europe and currently undergoing a disturbing rate of decline due to numbers of man-induced factors such as habitat loss and the intensification of modern agricultural methods. Such species include redstarts, rollers, shrikes, ortolan and black-headed buntings to name a few. The crimes on Cyprus cannot be helping the plight of such birds.

My first impression during my short visits to Cyprus was the sheer blatant nature of what was happening. While many mist nets and lime sticks were 'off the beaten track', they were still easy enough to find. In many places, however, nets were obvious and visible near main roads and in back gardens. Several large houses had securely fenced grounds containing numerous set mist nets. Considerable effort had been taken to prepare the rides in the vegetation for the nets, with matting and concrete bases to prevent weeds snagging the nets. Many of the metal poles used to support the nets had pulley systems to allow them to be hoisted as high as 25-30 feet. One place had eight of these huge invisible barriers. In conjunction with the use of tape lures, such nets at one site can catch thousands of birds every year. The tape lures could be heard playing the songs of blackcaps and other birds to entice migrating birds to their death.

The use of such tape lures with mist nets has proliferated in the last few years and dramatically increased the efficiency of the nets. Trappers can easily catch dozens of birds in a single morning prior to work. Although early morning is always the best time for netting and liming, in many places they are left out continuously and visited periodically during the day. Once caught, birds are plucked and prepared either for sale in shops, usually pickled, or served freshly cooked in local restaurants. Although not on the menu, the birds - known locally as 'Ambelopoulia' - are served in many restaurants. Typically a dozen birds are served on a plate with a garnish of sauce or a salad. Blackcaps are a traditional favourite and caught in huge numbers. With a single blackcap being worth up to £1.50p, the trade is obviously very lucrative. Not surprisingly, in many places young men in shiny new 4-wheel drive pick-up trucks are involved.

We initially visited an area called Cape Pyla, just west of Ayia Napa, a natural headland for migrants. Here the trappers had gone to huge trouble to plant and irrigate several acres with a fast-growing, non-native, Acacia. Several diesel pumps thudded away throughout the day illegally pumping up groundwater, which was dispersed into miles of black plastic piping to irrigate the area.

Some 60 net rides had been cut through the vegetation, although all

were not currently in use. Bird feathers and drops of blood indicated which sites were active. We returned before first light to hear the sound of several tape lures with the mist net poles poking above the bushes. The trappers were already present. We returned during the evening and parked our vehicle near a busy restaurant before heading across the rocky hillside to the trapping site. We slept overnight amongst the bushes. I had positioned myself with a video camera in a well-camouflaged position about 60 yards from the end of one of the net rides. My colleague was a short distance away watching my back. At midnight tape lures started bursting into life and continued eerily throughout the night. I awoke at 4.30 a.m. and waited quietly in the darkness. At 5.30 a.m. in the dim light I saw two men in their 30s arrive and quietly and efficiently erect some six mist nets.

Once everything was set, the men retreated some 100 yards and started shouting and throwing stones in order to drive birds into the nets. I could actually see the birds flying into the nets and could make out a blackcap and a wood warbler amongst the dozen caught. One of the men appeared and ominously took out his penknife. I filmed him cutting the throats of each of the birds in turn. As they wriggled in their death throes, he returned with his red bucket and collected the bodies. Some species had no culinary value and I saw him throw away the bodies of several birds, including a great tit, into the bushes. The birds were killed simply to save the 'inconvenience' of removing them after further drives. A second drive caught further birds and I left the site a short while later. The graphic video footage is being passed to the authorities in Cyprus.

During the first trip, we took down several illegally set nets and released trapped birds including blackcaps, ortolan buntings and a noisy but no doubt grateful golden oriole. We also removed a number of limesticks, although the liming season was not yet in full swing.

What was evident from our local contacts was the apparent total apathy of the local police. Despite nets being blatantly obvious and numerous reports made to them, they took little or no action. Trappers would often allege that birdwatchers reporting them were spying, something the police took much more seriously.

Following our visit, a British birdwatcher found himself at the peak of the liming season and horrified to see dozens of gaudy bee-eaters helplessly caught on limesticks.

My second visit with the Daily Mail was towards the end of the autumn migration. On the first morning, I left at 5.30 a.m. and headed up the hill behind our seaside hotel in Ayia Napa. A couple of miles away were a couple of pick-up trucks, a sure sign that trappers were about. I could also hear a tape lure being played and

creeping through the bushes I spotted a couple of bushes festooned with limesticks. A few minutes later a middle-aged trapper appeared, checked the bushes then retired to his chair hidden in a juniper bush.

I returned with others later that morning after the trapper had no doubt left for work and found some 70 limesticks set out. During my job I unfortunately see birds which have been illegally killed, injured and trapped. Despite this, and having seen plenty of photographs of limed birds, I was not really prepared for the pitiful site that greeted us. The macabre site of some eight birds with their feet, wings and tails trapped in the sticky lime and leaving them hanging in grotesque poses. Some birds had obviously been struggling for several hours so violently that all their tail feathers had been pulled out. Using water and saliva we removed all traces of the glutinous substance before releasing them. At least three stonechats, a blackcap, a chiffchaff, a Sardinian warbler, a dunnock and a robin had a chance of surviving. All the limesticks were removed and destroyed.

During the evening of the following day, I sat on my hotel balcony. Earlier in the day hundreds of tourists had thronged the beach enjoying the cool sea and beautiful weather. As the sun set I could hear the twinkling song of a robin coming up from the hotel gardens. It seem so surreal that earlier that day I had found and removed a further 80 limesticks only half a mile from this tranquil scene. In the process, I had freed a further robin and five chiffchaffs.

The illegal killing of migrant birds is a huge problem on Cyprus and one that cannot be solved overnight. The scale of the problem needs to be brought firmly to the attention of the authorities and I would urge anyone concerned to write to them. If Cyprus wishes to join the EU, and the benefits it entails, it surely needs to get its house in order and address the enforcement of its own conservation legislation.