

CABS & SPA AUTUMN 2021 BIRD PROTECTION CAMP IN CYPRUS



Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS)

1 OVERVIEW

In this report we present data collected during our Autumn 2021 Bird Protection Camp in a new format, which aims at simplifying the reading, focusing on the main aspects of the illegal killing of birds in Cyprus. Our most recent data shows an alarming increase in all (but one) indicators that we monitor to understand the evolution of trapping: the number of active sites and the number of detected limesticks and nets. All the figures are divided between the administration of the Republic and the ESBA, considering the importance of observing different effects achieved by different enforcement policies. We add a short evaluation of the effort and success of enforcement in both administrations and our analysis on the systematic failure by the authorities of the Republic to tackle largescale wildlife criminals.

2 DURATION, MONITORED AREAS, PARTICIPANTS OF THE CAMP

Each autumn since 2009, CABS & SPA organise bird protection camps in Cyprus to prevent and disrupt the largescale indiscriminate slaughter of migratory birds passing over Cyprus. This autumn, the camp started on the 6th of September and ended on the 14th of November, running for a total of 70 days and covering most of the autumn poaching season. 14 bird protection activists from 7 different countries (Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland, Slovenia, Spain and United States of America) participated at the camp. 10 volunteers already participated in previous camps within Cyprus, while 4 of them were first timers. The volunteers monitored the eastern and the southern part of Cyprus: Famagusta and Larnaca District within the Republic of Cyprus, the British Eastern Sovereign Base Areas and part of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.



Picture 1: CABS activist rescuing bird from a net found in Kalavassos, October 2021 (Photo: Alex Milan/CABS)

3 TRAPPING IN THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

CABS international staff and volunteers conducted field investigations in search of active bird trapping and illegal bird hunting sites day and night and reported them to the enforcement officers on duty. The overall results of the investigations are **120** active trapping sites detected - **73** with limesticks, **40** with nets, **2** with both and **5** with unknown methods - in the Republic of Cyprus. The total number of limesticks and nets observed in the trapping sites found active is **2371** limesticks and **108** nets, of which **1871** limesticks and **79** nets were removed with, or in some cases without, the intervention of enforcement authorities.

To note that the number of traps does not include those stored and not used when trappers were prosecuted, as game wardens do not perform house searches unlike the former Anti-Poaching Unit of police, that was dismantled in 2019.

Table 1: Trapping activity recorded at CABS & SPA Autumn Bird Protection Camps 2012-2021 in the Republic of Cyprus

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Active limesticks trapping sites	65	111	80	66	105	90	71	60	65	73
Active net sites	33	35	39	50	51	21	33	22	35	42
Unknown or both methods sites	10	2	5	6	8	5	3	0	1	7
Total active sites	108	148	124	122	164	116	107	82	101	122
Limesticks found	-	-	-	-	-	3298	2560	1893	1916	2371
Nets found	-	-	-	-	-	48	38	25	48	110

New trapping sites have been discovered by our teams in 2021, i.e., sites that were never previous known and that show a new vitality in the trapping world: during the camp, CABS teams found **33** new trapping sites (20% of the findings). In previous years, the number of new trapping sites discovered was considered irrelevant.

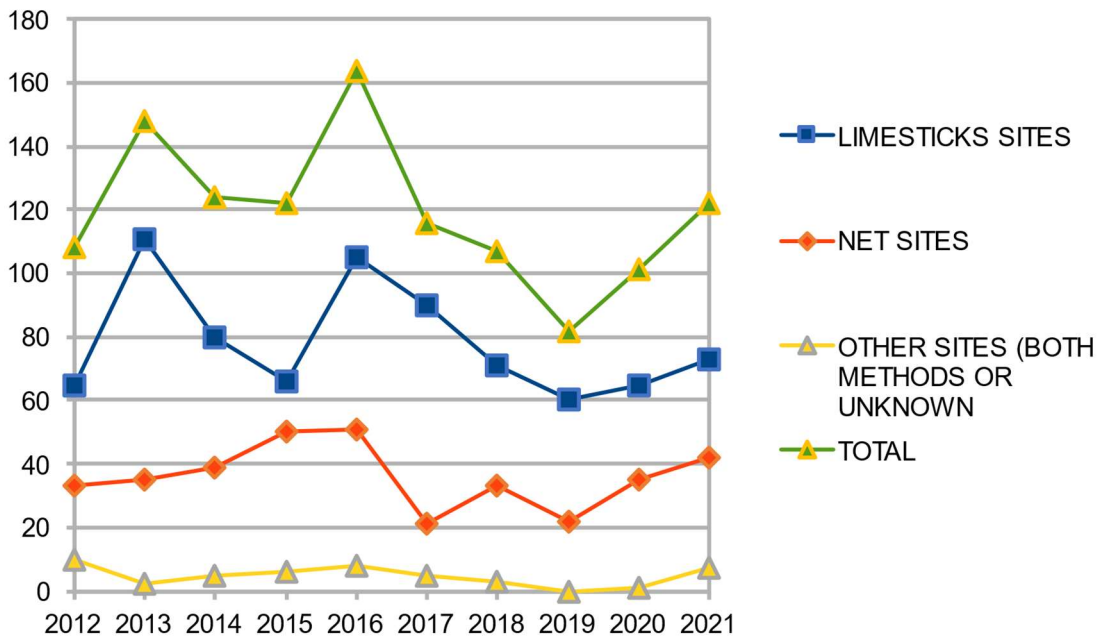


Figure 1: Trapping sites recorded at CABS & SPA Autumn Bird Protection Camps 2012-2021 in the Republic of Cyprus

Given the variability in the length of the camps and the number of participants, as done in previous reports, it can be useful to compare the number of sites checked with the number of active sites. After a steady decrease that arrived at 35,5% in 2019, in the last two years we have observed an increase in the ratio, with more than 40% of the sites checked found active in both years.

Table 2: Ratio between checked and active sites in the period 2012-2021 in the Republic of Cyprus

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Duration of field investigations (days)	17	24	28	40	47	60	75	84	77	70
Total no. of activists conducting field investigations	13	15	14	22	28	28	29	24	11	14
No of trapping sites checked	197	226	176	220	350	277	273	231	230	290
No. of trapping sites confirmed as active	109	148	124	122	164	116	107	82	101	122
Percentage of active sites	55,3	65,5	70,5	55,5	46,9	41,9	39,2	35,5	43,9	42,1

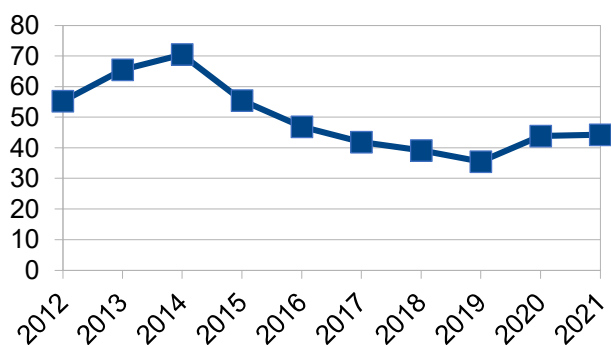


Figure 2: Trapping trend in the Republic of Cyprus based on the comparison between active and checked sites in 2012-2021

4 TRAPPING IN THE BRITISH EASTERN SOVEREIGN BASE AREA

In the ESBA, we do not compare the active sites found to the total amount of checked sites as, given the high level of trapping in the Republic of Cyprus, CABS teams could dedicate only marginal time to investigate wildlife crimes in the SBAs. Nonetheless, the total amount of active sites discovered in the British base confirms the worrying increasing trend seen in recent years. In the first part of the season in particular the number of active trapping sites with nets in the night was significant. This was probably due to the lack of proper enforcement, as the police unit dealing with wildlife crime (CAT) was understaffed and there was not always a patrol around nor available. As many cases were reported by CABS and BirdLife Cyprus, more agents were designated to wildlife crime and in our opinion this, together with some successful operations, acted as a deterrence and trapping decreased within few weeks. It is worth noting that the CABS teams monitoring in the ESBA concentrated efforts during the night, therefore the situation of day-trapping with limesticks remains mainly unknown. Even if the response of the authority was efficient, it is important to highlight the initial increase in trapping, meaning that the decrease recorded before, is not due to a change in culture, but rather the deterrence of enforcement action and therefore proving the importance of the continuous presence of dedicated police patrols. It is likely that trappers realized the increased risk in the ESBA and moved into the republic, where the lack of enforcement is now chronic.

Table 3: Trapping activity recorded at CABS & SPA Autumn Bird Protection Camps 2012-2021 in the British Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) in Cyprus

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Active limesticks trapping sites	3	0	2	4	7	5	1	2	7	4
Active net sites	22	14	6	32	115	59	19	13	8	11

Uknown or both methods sites	3	1	1	1	15	5	2	1	0	3
Total active sites	28	15	9	37	137	69	22	16	15	18
Limesticks found	-	-	-	-	-	134	36	76	71	102
Nets found	-	-	-	-	-	90	12	13	2	29

5 EVALUATION OF THE ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS IN THE REPUBLIC

5. 1 THE GAME AND FAUNA SERVICE

In the Republic of Cyprus, the Game and Fauna Service is the only statutory institution specifically delegated to deal with the problem of bird poaching since 2019, when the Anti-Poaching Unit of the police was dismantled. For this reason, CABS report the cases of wildlife crimes to game wardens whenever possible.



Picture 2: Bag with 24 shot Spanish sparrow was found in possession of a hunter reported by CABS activists in October 2021 (Photo: Alex Milan/CABS)

The Game and Fauna Service is often not proactive and sometimes not effective (not all illegal trappers reported, not all trapped birds recorded, no house searches conducted etc...). Despite the area being ‘the’ poaching hotspot of the island, in the south-east (Famagusta and Larnaca districts) there is indeed not always a patrol available to deal with

wildlife crimes; and the lack of enforcement is particularly worrying during the night, when there is no patrol on duty, but many of the illegal trappers with nets are most active. In more than half of the cases discovered (55 to 42), game wardens were not available, arrived after the poacher left, the operation failed, or the intervention consisted only in the confiscation of the illegal traps.

It is notable that after many years, the cooperation with game wardens is improving - for each case reported, CABS teams assist the enforcement agents, by documenting the illegality, doing or taking part in the ambush, identifying the suspect and often providing witness statements to report the suspect and incident at the police station. The effects of the good cooperation are remarkable, with **42** poachers reported by CABS to game wardens prosecuted, but more improvements are needed to face the high level of illegalities.

Table 4: Quality of the response by the Game and Fauna Service

	Positive response	Negative response/operation
Prosecution	42	
Patrol not available		13
Inappropriate response*		17
Operation failed**		9
Only confiscation		16
TOTALS	42	55

* cases of late arrival, not appropriate search of the trapper's equipment resulting in no evidence gathered, short ambushes, poorly performed ambushes, no action taken against offender...

** cases where the ambush fails for no clear reason nor responsibility

5.2 THE CYPRUS POLICE

Out of the **13** cases of illegal trapping reported to the police, in **11** occasions the response was negative: in **4** cases there was no police patrol available, in **5** cases (including operation of the special unit of the police) the operation failed or the culprit was not identified and in **2** cases the intervention was limited to the confiscation of the illegal traps.

Table 5: Quality of the response by the Cyprus Police

	Positive response	Negative response
Prosecution	2	
Patrol not available		4

Operation failed*		5
Only confiscation		2
TOTALS	2	11

* Including operations of the special unit at the reported site belonging to a criminal gang in Maroni.

It is to be noted that trapping cases are reported to the local police stations only in instances where no game warden patrol is available. Therefore, cases with lack of police intervention mean that there is no enforcement to stop wildlife crimes and identify the criminals and there is a significant safety risk for international environmentalists, especially when gangs of professional trappers are involved.

5.3 ESBA POLICE

In the British bases the main enforcement body for wildlife crimes is CAT, a specialized unit of the police. CABS team report every case of illegal trapping and hunting to CAT whenever possible; when they are not available, cases are reported to the local police stations.

Out of **16** reported cases, **5** resulted in prosecution. In **5** cases, CAT or regular police only confiscated the traps and in **6** cases the operation failed (the enforcement arrived too late to find the trappers or to seize the electronic decoy).

Table 6: Quality of the response by the ESBA Police

	Positive response	Negative response
Prosecution	5	
Operation failed		6
Only confiscation		5
TOTALS	5	11

6 AUTHORITIES OF THE REPUBLIC CONTINUE TURNING A BLIND EYE ON THE DAILY ACTIVITY OF THE BIGGEST TRAPPER IN CYPRUS

It seems that everyone in Cyprus knows that the trapper nicknamed 'Akas' and his gang are catching and killing hundreds of birds every day within his fenced property near

Maroni: The Game and Fauna Service officers know about his relentless trapping activity; police officers know about it. But still, nobody wants to do anything to stop him.

During the camp, we visited the trapping site of Akas four times; and it was found active on all occasions. Investigation Officers from the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) also visited the site twice and the site was found active on both occasions. A total of **6** visits were made by CABS teams and the RSPB to the Akas trapping property; and each time we confirmed a loud electronic decoy caller in the night, playing from the site and during the morning, we observed a group of **5-8** trappers setting out **3 to 7** mist-nets in which they flushed several hundred birds, killed them and they left the site with buckets full of dead birds.

As we observed Akas's gang trapping birds during each of visit to his trapping site we have made this autumn together with RSPB, we are convinced that the site was active every single day between September and October 2021, like in all previous years. Considering daily trapping activity and large quantities of birds that are trapped and killed during each trapping session, the total number of birds, which are trapped and killed at Akas trapping site every autumn is enormous. We estimate that the Akas gang is responsible for killing tens of thousands of protected birds every autumn.

As in previous years, we have invested a lot of resources to stop Akas and his accomplices this autumn, but sadly we did not succeed in stopping him, even for a single day. Table 11 shows the list of reports we have made to stop Akas and his gang.

Table 7: List of the reports of trapping activity of Akas gang made by CABS during the camp and the results of investigations made for these reports

Report no. 1	Date	CABS findings	Reported to
	11/09/2021	5 trappers trapping with 5 mist-nets	GFS
Results	Comments		
nothing found	GFS and Ziggy police officers arrived at the site at 9:30 and waited for almost half an hour for Akas to open the gates of his trapping site. In the meantime, we observed from the hilltop how the gang removed all the nets and when the officers entered, nothing was found		
Report no. 2	Date	CABS findings	Reported to
	22/09/2021	trapping site was not visited on that day	Ziggy Police
Results	Comments		
a complaint against Akas was filed by us	We have filed a complaint at Zygi Police Station against Akas, which we have recognised in our video as one of the trappers trapping on the 11th September. Together with a complaint we have submitted video evidence of Akas trapping. Police officers told us that the case will go to Court		
Report no. 3	Date	CABS findings	Reported to
	02/10/2021	7 trappers trapping with 5 mist-nets	Ziggy Police

Results	Comments		
nothing found	Zygi police and GFS officers arrived at the site at 7:00 and waited for almost half an hour for Akas to open the gates of his trapping site. In the meantime, the gang again removed all the nets and when the officers entered, nothing was found.		
Report no. 4	Date	CABS findings	Reported to
	16/10/2021, 20/10/2021	operations were carried out by Cyprus Police independently	Special Unit of Cyprus police
Results	Comments		
nothing found on both occasions	CABS & BirdLife Cyprus reported Akas trapping activity to the Head of Game & Fauna Service and the Head of Special unit of Cyprus Police. Police officers visited Akas trapping site twice, both time they had search warrant and they could enter the trapping site immediately. Both times nothing was found. CABS member visited the site the next day, on the 21st October and Akas was trapping as usual, with caller in the night and nets set out in the morning. We have previous evidence (2019) that these checks are leaked to Akas who can “stage” what needs to be found or not.		



Picture 3: Trappers with buckets full of killed birds, collected from nets at the trapping site of Akas, September 2021 (Screenshot taken from a video recorded by CABS)

7 ILLEGAL HUNTING

Illegal hunting in Larnaca and Famagusta district is rampant, both with regard to shooting of protected species and the use of electronic decoys to lure both protected and game species. **To make the reader clear with what can be observed on the field: the killing of protected passerines is the rule, not the exception, on a daily basis in areas with good migration, like the coastline and the South Eastern portion of the island.** Oddly enough, most of these areas have been given by the Cyprus authorities to the hunters as every-day shooting areas during the peak migration season.

CABS & SPA began investigating illegal hunting only in recent years and this issue still only constitutes a small portion of our fieldwork, as priority is given to illegal trapping. Despite the little monitoring, it is clear that illegal hunting is out of control, with hundreds of shots and dozens of callers, also of protected species, heard in every single hunting area inspected.

Table 8: Cases of illegal hunting dealt with by CABS volunteers

	REPUBLIC	ESBA	TOTAL
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded quail calls	34	1	35
Hunting of protected bird species with electronic caller emitting recorded blackcap call	18	3	21
Hunting of protected bird species without electronic caller	18	0	18
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded song thrush calls	12	1	13
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded skylark calls	5	0	5
TOTAL CASES	87	5	92
NUMBER OF PROSECUTIONS	15	1	16

In total, **87** cases have been dealt with by CABS in the Republic of Cyprus and **5** in the ESBA. **16** prosecutions followed the reports made by CABS & SPA teams to the authorities, **15** in the Republic of Cyprus and **1** in the ESBA. Though hard to quantify the total amount of protected birds shot dead, it's safe to assume that also illegal hunting has a massive impact on migratory birds, including on declining protected species (Roller, Barn Swallows, Wood Warblers, Harriers, Wagtails, Bee eaters have been commonly found shot dead). No cases of prosecution for the shooting of protected passerines are known by the Game and Fauna Service before CABS intervention on this specific matter.

8 CABS & SPA PARTICIPATION IN THE OVERALL ENFORCEMENT RESULTS AGAINST BIRD TRAPPING

During the period from August 2021 until the end of October 2021 a total of **1883** limesticks and **83** mist-nets were seized by Game and Fauna Service officers in Famagusta and Larnaca Districts of Republic of Cyprus (Birdlife Cyprus 2022). **65%** of all seized limesticks (**1289**) and **78.3%** of all seized mist-nets (**65**) were seized after they were found by CABS & SPA activists and were reported to the GFS officers during CABS & SPA Autumn 2021 Bird Protection Camp (Table 9).

Table 9: Overall number of limesticks and mist-nets, seized by GFS officers and the number of seized limesticks and mist-nets found by CABS & SPA activists and reported to the GFS officers in Famagusta and Larnaca during August- October 2021

	Traps found by CABS & SPA activists and seized by GFS officers	Total number of traps seized by GFS officers¹	Percentage of seized traps that were reported by CABS & SPA activists
Limesticks	1289	1883	68.5
Mist-nets	65	83	78.3

1- Autumn 2021 bird trapping survey (Birdlife Cyprus 2022)

Again, in the same period a total of **105** limesticks and **26** mist-nets were seized by Sovereign Base Areas (SBA) Police officers in Sovereign Base of Dhekelia in Cyprus (Birdlife Cyprus 2022). **71.4%** of all seized limesticks (**75**) and **69.2%** of all seized mist-nets (**18**) were seized after they were found by CABS & SPA activists and were reported to the SBA Police officers during CABS & SPA Autumn 2021 Bird Protection Camp (Table 10).

Table 10: Overall number of limesticks and mist-nets, seized by SBA Police officers and the number of seized limesticks and mist-nets found by CABS & SPA activists and reported to the SBA Police officers in Sovereign Base area of Dhekelia in Cyprus during August- October 2021

	Traps found by CABS & SPA activists and seized by SBA Police officers	Total number of traps seized by SBA Police officers¹	Percentage of seized traps reported by CABS & SPA activists
Limesticks	75	105	71.4
Mist-nets	18	26	69.2

1- Autumn 2021 bird trapping survey (Birdlife Cyprus 2022)

The proportion of traps that were seized after they were found by CABS & SPA activists and reported to the enforcement officers in relation to all traps seized this autumn in south-

eastern Cyprus is very high and is ranging between **68.5% and 78.3%** in relation to type of traps and the jurisdiction area.

In relation to prosecutions, a total of **57** were secured by Game and Fauna Service officers in Famagusta and Larnaca Districts of Republic of Cyprus and **9** prosecutions were made by SBA Police officers in Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia for bird trapping related offences (Birdlife Cyprus 2022). **64.9%** of all prosecutions (37 out of 57) secured in Republic of Cyprus and **55.6%** of all prosecutions (5 out of 9) secured in British Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia, were secured after trapping activity was reported by CABS & SPA activists to the enforcement officers during CABS & SPA Autumn 2021 Bird Protection Camp (Table 11).

Table 11: All prosecutions and prosecutions with participation of CABS & SPA activists, secured for bird trapping offences in south-eastern Cyprus during August- October 2021

	Prosecutions secured with the assistance of CABS & SPA activists	All prosecutions secured for bird trapping offences¹	Percentage of prosecutions secured with assistance of CABS & SPA activists
Game and Fauna Service (Famagusta and Larnaca Districts)	37	57	64.9
SBA Police (Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia)	5	9	55.6

1- Autumn 2021 bird trapping survey (Birdlife Cyprus 2022)

Proportions of prosecutions that were secured for bird trapping cases found by CABS & SPA activists and reported to the enforcement officers in relation to all prosecutions for bird trapping offences secured this autumn in south-eastern Cyprus, is high both for Famagusta and Larnaca Districts of Republic of Cyprus with **64.9 %** and for British Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia with **55.6 %**. Assistance of CABS & SPA activists in securing prosecutions didn't include only reporting active trapping cases to the enforcement officers, in majority of cases they also assisted the enforcement officers in catching and identifying the offenders.

9 DISCUSSION

The worsening of the trapping situation over the two recent years is now clear to all stakeholders. The creation of new trapping sites is another worrying signal and the increase in trapping activity is proven by the higher numbers of traps and active sites found by CABS. Considering that due to COVID restrictions, less volunteers participated to our camp than usual, these results are sadly remarkable.

The bill approved by the Cypriot Parliament in 2017 when the 'Protection and Management of Wild Birds and Game Species Law' has been amended, with the decriminalization of the use of limesticks and recently the decriminalization of the capture and killing of the **14** protected species mostly targeted by trappers and illegal hunters is bearing a big responsibility in making trappers and illegal hunters feel “backed up” by the authorities. The offences of using up to **72** limesticks and capturing or shooting of up to **50** individuals of the main targeted protected species is sanctionable with fines of **200€**, while other wildlife crimes are sanctioned with a minimum fine of **2000€**. Such fines are not effective and do not deter potential poachers to continue or even start trapping. The fine is low in absolute terms but also in relative terms as comparing it to the bird price on the black market (3-4€ per bird) it is clear that a fine can be easily repaid with a 2 or 3 days-catch.

Another driver of this unwelcomed upwards trend is definitely the absence of the specialised Anti-Poaching Unit within Cyprus police: since its dismantling, poaching has started increasing. The Game and Fauna Service are not perceived as a deterrent within the trappers' community and much less among the hunters: most of the time the Game and Fauna Service do not attend to sanction illegal hunting or they give priority to other duties.

As shown in Section 8 of this report, CABS volunteers have now clearly become the main stakeholder in the field against illegal bird killing activities and this unpleasant role has made CABS the main target for criminal individuals and gangs. In 2021, our teams suffered the highest level of intimidation and violence with two dangerous and serious aggressions – even a pyrotechnic bomb placed on our car - happening in autumn and winter. Although the relevant Ministries have been always and immediately informed of these events, we have never received a reply from anyone. Instead, we see that the Parliament is discussing a law proposal which should punish people who “disturb” legal hunting activity. Since there are no such people in Cyprus, it is clear that the aim is to prevent CABS from exposing and pushing to sanction the illegal killing of birds that take place in the Republic of Cyprus.



Picture 4: Heads of Bee-eaters, found at the hunting site near Lake Soros, September 2021 (Photo: Alex Milan/CABS)