

Migrating birds stop off in Cyprus at their peril

May 20 2014, by Celine Cornu



A lesser whitethroat (*Sylvia Curruca*) is seen caught on a lime stick bird trap, in Paralimni, Cyprus, on April 15, 2014

Under the cover of night, activists patrol key poaching sites in southeast Cyprus, described as an ecological disaster zone for endangered migratory birds on their Mediterranean stopover.

"Cyprus is the worst country in Europe for the number of [birds](#) killed

and the species," said Andrea Rutigliano of the Bonn-based Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS).

Blackcaps, thrushes and other songbirds face a high-risk passage through the island despite tough prison terms and fines for poachers.

Cooked up in restaurants as a prized if illegal delicacy known as ambelopoulia, they are served "under the table", and a typical plate of a dozen birds costs between 40 and 80 euros (\$55 and \$110).

Hunkered down with car engines and lights off, CABS activists armed with maps of hotspots track down locations where poachers are active and pass the information on to police.

The poachers traditionally use nets and limesticks—twigs covered in a sticky substance that instantly trap birds that alight on them, leaving them to dangle helplessly—and speakers that emit the call of blackcaps to attract their prey.

During the peak season in autumn, 3,000 to 4,000 poachers take to the woods and hills of Cyprus, according to CABS. The spring migration season draws lower numbers because the birds are less plump.

"The situation is very worrying—it's actually getting worse," said Martin Hellicar of the association BirdLife Cyprus.

Cypriot authorities cracked down hard on illegal hunting in the years running up to the island's accession to the European Union in 2004, with up to an 80 percent decline in the numbers of birds killed.

But Hellicar said the activity has made a strong comeback over the past seven years, with some 150 species affected indiscriminately, including a number already threatened with extinction.

"When they eat it at the restaurants, people have a picture in their mind of a grandfather catching a few birds with a few limesticks," he said.



An olivaceous warbler is seen being caught in a mist net, in the Famagusta district of Cyprus, on April 16, 2014

"But this picture is a complete fantasy. The reality is a very organised activity, using extensive nets and technology," Hellicar said.

"The problem is that huge amounts of money can be made."

'Mafia types'

The Game and Fauna Service, in charge of the fight against poaching in

Cyprus, estimates that the illegal trade is worth some 15 million euros (\$20 million) a year.

One poacher, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP he made thousands of euros from bird trapping and added that "everybody does it".

Hellicar said it was also attracting "organised criminals, mafia types... people whose portfolio includes gambling, prostitution".

Some sectors of southeast Cyprus in the autumn are controlled at night by shotgun-toting "professional organised gangs" wearing balaclavas who defend their turf, Rutigliano said.

Ecologists say the situation is worst on the British sovereign bases, a hangover from the colonial era that ended with Cyprus's independence in 1960.

Prince Charles, himself a keen conservationist, wrote to President Nicos Anastasiades and the commander of the British military on the island to condemn the "industrial-scale killing" of birds.

The Greek Cypriot leader's response was to order a "targeted and synchronised campaign" by Cyprus police and the British bases.



A red-backed shrike (*Lanius Collurio*) is seen being caught on a lime stick trap, in the Larnaca district of Cyprus, on September 27, 2013

NGOs say the Cypriot and British authorities are not deploying enough people to meet the challenge.

"We prosecute about 200 cases a year, more than that, and each case can be more than one person. We have vigorous campaigns," said Game and Fauna Service head Pantelis Hajiyeou.

"There is a major decrease" in trapping in government-controlled Cyprus "but an increase in the (British) bases," he said.

Hajiyeou said plans are being drawn up for a "holistic approach on the poaching problem", including education on the island where tradition is

all-important and 90 percent of people "don't think it's wrong to eat ambelopoulia".

The British bases police divisional commander for Dhekelia on the south coast, James Guy, said: "The wider problem is the political attitude.

"There are people in positions of power who if not overtly, covertly support the practice of trapping."

BirdLife Cyprus said that the law—"on paper"—provides for hefty penalties of up to three years behind bars and fines as high as 17,000 euros.

But the sentences passed so far have been a few hundred euros in fines, serving as "no deterrent at all", Hellicar said.

© 2014 AFP

Citation: Migrating birds stop off in Cyprus at their peril (2014, May 20) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-migrating-birds-cyprus-peril.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.