

# Malta votes whether to ban hunting of migrant birds

April 10 2015, by Matthew Xuereb

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Quail and other birds are traditionally shot and killed as they migrate through Malta

Malta votes in a referendum Saturday which could spell an end to the long tradition of spring hunting in which birds migrating across the Mediterranean are killed before they can breed.

The European Court of Justice found Malta guilty in 2009 of permitting

the hunting of birds during their return from Africa to breeding grounds in Europe, before they have had a chance to reproduce.

But while spring hunting is outlawed by the EU Birds Directive, Malta applies yearly for a short period of exemption.

Migrating turtle doves and quail "end up being shot and killed towards the end of their voyage as they prepare to breed," Mark Sultana, spokesman for the Spring Hunting Out (SHout) organisation, told AFP.

But the Federation of Hunters and Trappers says other European countries allow the hunting of birds in spring and that Malta should be no exception.

This will be the seventh referendum on the controversial practice in 145 years—but the first to be held in response to a voters' petition, in this case signed by some 44,000 people, more than 10 per cent of the electorate.

Critics say the hunting community—with some 14,000 registered shooters—ignores limits on the numbers of quails and turtle that can be killed.

Some [hunters](#) are also accused of illegally shooting other birds including swifts, storks, yellow-legged gulls, kestrels and harriers, and campaigners say the emphasis must be on protecting all feathered creatures from the hunter's gun.



A petition for a referendum on curbing bird hunting garnered 44,000 signatures

"We had a positive campaign that focused on conservation. We cannot talk about conservation and then allow the killing of [birds](#) in spring," Sultana said.

But lawyer Kathleen Grima, a spokeswoman for the "Yes" vote, said hunters were feeling bullied and she feared the fight to ban spring shoots would be just the start, putting a long-held tradition at risk of extinction.

"We are appealing to people to retain this right. We are prepared to sit down and discuss ways of going about it but not abolish it outright," she said.

The debate has been raging for years. In September 2014, the government suspended the hunting season after it was discovered that protected storks had been gunned down.



Hunters in Malta are accused of ignoring quotas on how many turtle doves and other birds can be shot

The stop saw hunters take to the streets in protest for a demonstration which turned violent and saw several hunters arrested.

The referendum has since lost its political bite: Prime Minister Joseph Muscat and opposition leader Simon Busuttil have both said they are in

favour of allowing Malta a limited spring hunting season.

Early polls suggested the "No" camp would win. For the [referendum](#) to be valid, more than 50 percent of those eligible to vote must take part. Voter turnout in Malta is traditionally very high at over 70 percent.

The result was expected on Sunday, just days before the start of the next spring [hunting season](#), due to run from April 14 to April 30—if the "Yes" vote triumphs.

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