

EU clips Malta's wings over migrant bird hunts

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Dr Andre Raine Conservation Manager from Bird Life Malta explaining to a journalist the different bird species found in Malta

The European Union has referred Malta to the bloc's top court over the controversial tradition of hunting birds migrating across the Mediterranean every spring, officials said Thursday.

The island nation has been at odds with Brussels for years over the issue, which critics say is a cruel practice in which the [birds](#) are killed before they can breed but supporters defend as a longstanding custom.

"The European Commission is referring Malta to the Court of Justice of the European Union over its decision to allow finch trapping on its territory as of 2014," the commission, the executive bloc of the 28-nation EU, said in a statement.

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.

Maltese voters also narrowly approved the continuation of the hunts in a referendum in April.

The European Commission said the yearly exemptions should be used "judiciously, with small numbers and strict supervision" but added that "these conditions have not been met in this case."

Brussels sent Malta formal warnings in October 2014 and May 2015 but Malta went ahead with the hunts and disputed the Commission's views, meaning that the EU had now referred the case to [court](#).

Environmentalists have long criticised the bird hunts in Malta and the Mediterranean, with the leading US novelist and birdspotter Jonathan Franzen lending a celebrity voice to the campaign against the practice.

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