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Convention on the Conservation of European  
Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Annual Meeting of the Standing Committee  
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Report on the Illegal Killing and Trading  
of Protected Birds in Cyprus

September/October 2004

Concerning the Recommendation No 90(2001) on the catching, killing or  
trading of protected birds in Cyprus (T-PVS/Files (2002) 9 revised)

and The Specific File of Illegal Killing and Trapping of Birds in  
Cyprus (Report by the Cyprus NGO's (T-PVS/Files (2003)9)

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## The Camp of Observers in Protaras in September and October 2004

We were a team of 2 to 7 people again, of whom three voluntaries from Switzerland and several members of the "Vogelschutz Komitee" in Göttingen (D) with Dr Eberhard Schneider, who had arrived a second time to monitor bird migration and bird catching in the Southeast of Cyprus.

At the annual meeting of the Standing Committee in Strasbourg in November 2001, our Swiss deputy had announced that Switzerland was active and preoccupied with the illegal trapping of birds of passage in Cyprus and wished a more efficient control of the catching and trading of the protected wild birds ( report 10 December 2001 (tpvs2001/tpvs89f-2001)).

Our autumn observations in September and October 2004 in Cyprus were only one of many activities in 2003/4 against bird trapping. We were again very active observers on the south east peninsula and Cape Greco area and went out to disclose a great number of bird trapping activities.

Our team worked in contact with the two observers of Birdlife Cyprus and in close co-operation with the game wardens of Larnaca and Paralimni.

## 1 Migration season of autumn 2004

The main migration started already in early September, probably due to the cold and rainy weather in Northern and Central Europe.

The cranes are rather late passage birds in Cyprus. Last year after the exceptionally long and hot summer in Europe, they were migrating in November. This year the big flocks of several hundred birds passed at the beginning of October. Within two weeks there were nearly 5000 cranes being carried up by the thermals over the south eastern peninsula and Cape Greco.

On 24 September an enormous flock of several thousand bee-eaters was circling high up in the sky over the cliffs of Atopetres ( South eastern peninsula).

We also noted a surprisingly high number of Corncrake (*Crex crex*) individuals migrating.

In the middle of September the bird trappers were already at work. The migration was not only starting very early, it had also an early end. The main migration of the long distance fliers had stopped at once. The weekend of 17 October were the last days of bird catching in autumn.

## 2 Bird Trapping and Trade steadily increasing

The report on winter 2003/2004 and following spring (attached to this report) described yet another heavy increase of bird trapping in spring 2004.

Autumn 2004 showed an even higher increase, indicating a gradual relapse to the pre-accession situation.

There were signs that the many trappers were afraid to a certain extent of being caught by the police, since they have become highly organised this autumn.

They had cars going out in the middle of the night, bringing trapping equipment such as mist nets and lime sticks to the trapping places.

After three o'clock trappers in lookout cars patrolled the roads without headlights and at extremely low speeds making them quiet and almost invisible. Their task was to watch out for spies or patrolling game wardens, so as to warn the trappers well ahead and give them time to switch off loudspeakers with bird calls.

When the trappers arrived, between 3 and 5 am, they parked their cars in hidden places, reminding each other to be quiet while disappearing like phantoms in the scrub used for catching.

They arrived and left without any trapping material, so spot checks on trappers' cars continue to produce no results.

**In these conditions the trappers reaped an easy and safe harvest of thousands of killed birds.**

How did the Game Fund react to the message of the high numbers of trappers in Paralimni?

The number of bird poachers along one road in Paralimni must be estimated at well over 40 men, poaching with loudspeakers, nets and lime sticks. The bird poachers with this kind of equipment are supposed to be professionals, dealing and trading in birds killed. The responsible Game Fund in Larnaca was informed in detail about the situation and was asked to send several cars for a raid and to hit these professional poachers. After this request our phone calls were not answered anymore. We were unable to organise any patrol cars within a "reasonable" time, despite contacting the Game Fund offices in person. We were fobbed off with unconvincing explanations, while two weeks passed without any efficient action being taken against the poachers.

In the meantime, thousands of birds were caught with the knowledge and tacit acceptance of the Game Fund in Larnaca.

The chief officers responsible, who appeared very dedicated to reduce and eradicate bird poaching during early migration, showed complete indifference a short while later.

The clear implication was that this strange change in the Game Fund's conduct and consideration for bird poachers, which shifted from severe control to a sympathetic attitude tantamount to collusion, could only be due to orders from above at government level: we realised this was the only possible and logical explanation.

There were hundreds of bird catchers active at this time in the Paralimni area, far more than in 2003, with no apparent attempt at arrests or prosecutions.

In 2002 bird trapping with nets and lime sticks fell to such a low level under EU pressure that the bird trapping could have been finally ended in 2004, if the government had effectively performed its undertakings as signed in the *acquis communautaire*.

The patent laxity over the past 18 months **has led to extensive use of mist nets again in 2004**, and bird catching has become organised on an industrial scale as never before.

The trapping equipment is transported in special cars to the houses of individual bird catchers in the middle of the night, so they need not store lime sticks, nets and killed birds in their houses and are safe from any Game Fund inspections.

The roads to the catching places are well watched by patrolling cars so the poachers cannot be caught unaware at their bird massacres by any spy or game warden car.

Full cars bring the poachers and leave again.

They remain in constant contact by mobile phone.

The area seems completely under control and dead when suspicious persons arrive.

- Recommendation No 90 (2001) - Increase of wardening in areas where birds are illegally caught.

### 3 The Trade in Protected Birds

Any attempts to restrict the illegal bird capture and trade by the government have been accompanied by stories and rumours that in Syria (and Egypt) millions of the same protected birds are killed and traded – probably to Cyprus – for 45 Cyprus cents (while Cyprus birds cost C£ 2). Another popular story is that Greek Cypriots go to the Northern occupied area to eat ampelopulia (the bird delicacy) and as a result the Turks are killing more birds than ever before, because they are well paid by Greek Cypriot traders and customers.

At the same time the Greek Cypriot restaurateurs risk raids to search for protected birds and lose their custom and income.

These stories encourage a perception of injustice and unequal treatment among the dedicated staff of the game wardens who have so far been responsible for the eradication of bird catching with lime sticks and mist nets, leading them to support the view and opinion that the EU acquis places an unfair burden on the Greek Cyprus government, forcing the community to give up the valuable business of killed protected wild birds.

No open mention is made of the blatant illegal import and export of killed protected birds over the borders of Southern Cyprus, which nobody seems to hinder.

- Recommendation No 90 (2001) - strict control of illegal capture, killing, possession, trade, sale and offering for sale of protected birds!
- Action recommended **5 iii** T-PVS(2003)9 to develop a long action plan.....

The essential aim of the Bird Convention, to protect the endangered species of Europe's birds, seems to have been lost sight of.

### 4 Shooting

The amended new hunting law implemented on 1 October 2003 shows no improvement in preventive measures, but was accompanied by a major extension of the shooting season over three months in autumn.

Shooting in August, September and October seems to be a new but regular shooting season in the Cyprus hunting diary. September shooting at the south coast came up for the first time in 2003 and was extended in 2004 from August up to the end of February. The shooters are now replacing and killing what the bird catchers used to kill for decades.

The new hunting law of 1 October 2003, harmonised with EU legislation, forbids any shooting of protected birds. But what Cyprus offers for shooting, apart from a few hares and bred Chukar hens (from November to February), consists almost entirely of protected birds. And these are indeed shot on a massive scale. **We watched hunters shooting at Cranes, Kestrels, Bee-eaters and any small bird which came in sight in September and October.**

The so called licensed hunters have chairs everywhere in the fields and in the scrub, where they sit and watch out for any bird target passing by or hiding in the bushes.

Recommendation No 90(2001) – Strict control of illegal capture and killing of protected birds – is failing to be secured.

## 5. The amount of birds killed during the migration

It is extremely difficult to calculate the numbers of protected birds killed, as trapping and shooting were taking place at the same time during the main autumn migration.

In Paralimni the birds killed were certainly double last year's level, given the highly increased number of bird trappers in 2004.

Fortunately there were no days of outstandingly high numbers of passerines arriving on the South Coast of Paralimni comparable to last year, when all the scrub seemed to be alive with birds.

The shooting may have accelerated the departure of the birds from the South coast. No migrating falcons were observed staying on, whereas these birds tended to stop and rest in the area for several days, while the large flocks of bee-eaters also failed to remain for weeks as happened two, three years ago. The main migration ceased very early.

## 6. Cyprus Species

The birds of the south eastern peninsula with Cape Greco were well observed in 2004. In February I found absolutely no birds left in the area of several square km around Phanos (Paralimni). The shooters had killed all of the winter visitors and the Cyprus residents (report of May 2004).

At the end of April we found a good number of migratory birds and also the returning Cyprus breeding birds of passage (see census of April/ May 2004) in these areas.

A few weeks later when most birds of passage had left Cyprus, there was a relatively small variety of breeding birds left, of which some were in abundant numbers such as Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Black-headed Buntings and Crested Larks.

When the migration in autumn stopped in the middle of October, there were extremely few species left again: a few Night Jars and Crested Larks, which migrate late, a few Hooded Crows, Kestrels, very few Black Francolins and wild Chukar partridges (on Cape Greco only), plus Sparrows and the Stonechats which are winter visitors.

The poor variety of species shows the negative effects of shooting on the Cyprus avifauna: almost all the Cyprus birds that stay on the peninsula year-round are exterminated. This is a very sad result, especially in this excellent bird habitat of the south east peninsula.

Action recommended 5 v T-PVS/Files (2003)9

The Cyprus government is encouraged to influence public opinion so that it becomes unacceptable to trap, kill, sell and/or consume protected species of birds.

There were TV talks in autumn 2004 about the bird trapping, compared with other animal killing traditions like the bull fights in Spain. Bizarrely, however, the programme focused on the life expectation of small birds as compared to bulls: viewers were told that there was little point in worrying about small wild birds, which it was suggested live only for three years, while bulls can reach an age of at least 6-7.

## 7 Consumption of protected species of birds

Is it any wonder if citizens talk about government ministers' preferences for restaurants where protected wild birds are served as a delicacy?

Restaurants still advertise such illegal fare openly.



Family Restaurant

Anna Maria

We serve fresh fish

Seasonal Bird delicacies

Tel: 24322541-99659787

## 8. Action Plan

The game fund took steps to reorganise its structures in favour of the fight against bird trapping in spring 2004.

This reorganisation showed great disadvantages in autumn for the crucial area of Paralimni. All the Paralimni patrol cars were moved to Larnaca, 50 km away, making immediate intervention impossible. The game wardens of Paralimni have to drive 100 km till they reach the places of massacres. The relief of the crew of wardens takes place at 3 o'clock in the morning. The new crew cannot be expected to be in action earlier than 4 – 5 o'clock in the morning, which may be too late to hit the poachers at work, given the current situation in Paralimni.

The reorganisation may have some advantages for other Cyprus catching areas, but the disadvantages far outweigh any benefits and will not help to eradicate trapping in Paralimni.

Actions recommended **5 iii** T-PVS/Files (2003)9

The Standing Committee requests the governments of Cyprus and the United Kingdom to develop and adopt, during 2003, a long term action plan spelling out the practical steps they intend to take to eradicate the trapping and trading of birds in the run up to accession and beyond.

## 9 New high-tech equipment is slowly disappearing

In autumn 2002 new lime sticks made of glass-fibre and sticks covered by an industrially produced thick mixture of water-repellent glucose birdlime appeared on the market and proved deadly for birds, which could not be released from the lime in any way. This lime promised to be effective all year round in any weather.

In 2004 the fibre-glass sticks disappeared completely and the birdlime had changed back to a near-normal, natural mixture made of plums and honey and a part of industrially produced lime, with the many different home-made combinations proving less harmful for the birds.

The former 100% industrially produced birdlime apparently dried and hardened too easily in the wind and rain, losing much of its adhesive qualities.

Action recommended **5 vi** T-PVS/Files(2003) 9

The standing Committee encourages the Cyprus Government to take all measures to eradicate new high tech trapping methods.