



A STEP FORWARD

CONSERVATION ON A
MIGRATORY STOPOVER

THE EU LIFE+ PROJECT ON BIRD MIGRATION AND TRAPPING



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A step forward – conservation on a migratory stopover The EU LIFE+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping Report LIFE07 INF/MT/000554 Layman’s Report

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The views presented in this report are the project’s (BirdLife Malta, Media Today, and the RSPB), and not necessarily representative of any other organisation or government authority.

Cover photo caption:

This Common Chaffinch was photographed by Aron Tanti in Marsa, Malta in November 2009.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

When Malta joined the European Union in 2004, it agreed to change some of its laws to comply with European legislation. Trapping of wild birds is not permitted under the EU Birds Directive and through its EU Accession Treaty agreement Malta committed to phase out finch trapping by the end of 2008.

As this deadline approached, many trappers were not aware of the impending change in legislation, nor did they appreciate the conservation concerns regarding trapping. Recognising this, the project was developed by BirdLife Malta together with Malta Today and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and in consultation with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) to facilitate the change in legislation.

The project, running from 2009 to 2011, was designed to achieve this by widely communicating the changes to national legislation and the conservation concerns relating to trapping. The project also predicted that finch trapping would continue illegally after 2008 and anticipated helping to reduce levels of illegal trapping.

RAISING AWARENESS

The project ran a national campaign using a series of media actions and the distribution of communications literature. Education of the young featured highly, reaching primary school children through an established environment education programme. The project also developed and piloted an education programme in secondary schools and maintained a presence at the University of Malta.

Meetings were held with a variety of stakeholders and decision makers, and an international seminar was organised during which experts shared their experience in dealing with the trapping of wild birds in other EU member states. The project also ran Malta's most ambitious environmental outreach programme to date, meeting 9 % of trappers in face-to-face meetings.

It emerged that a variety of hobbies and activities, using similar skills and interests to those of trappers, could be carried out legally and without damaging the natural wild bird populations or the local habitats. The

most popular include captive bird breeding and cage bird competitions, scientific bird ringing, and wildlife photography. Although not part of the original plan, the project went a step further and identified local organisations which would be able to help interested trappers in taking up these activities, communicating this to trappers and stakeholders.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Malta has honoured its EU Accession Treaty by not opening a finch trapping season after 2008. Project surveys reveal that by 2010 only about 25 % of trapping sites were being used and over one third of the 4,616 trappers have not renewed their licenses.

However, 2,896 trappers have renewed their licenses since the government has applied a derogation permitting trapping of four non-finch bird species. While the reduction in licensed trappers indicates that many trappers have accepted the end of finch trapping, 96 % of operational trapping sites were illegally targeting finches instead of the derogation species.

THE FUTURE

It is clear that while a promising start has been made, further education, provision of alternatives, and the prevention of illegal activities need more effort.

Trapping has resulted in the disappearance of Malta's own breeding finch populations and significant damage to habitats in the Maltese countryside. The end of finch trapping will allow habitats to recover and will give these birds the opportunity to re-establish local breeding populations. Education and awareness raising are key, so that trappers, stakeholders, and the general public appreciate the value of Malta's natural wealth. This needs to be complemented by more rigorous law enforcement, since that will also help change attitudes and raise awareness.

Birds from 48 countries (36 in Europe and 12 in Africa) have been recorded migrating over Malta



TWO BIRDS OVER MALTA

Birds have been a source of fascination for humanity through the ages. Perhaps it is flight that draws us to them, representing boundless freedom. Perhaps it is the variety of shapes, sizes and colours – from enormous eagles to small sparrows.

Life for many of Europe's birds begins in spring when food is plentiful. Chicks hatch and spend the first few days of their lives defenceless and dependent on their parents. This changes and chicks grow stronger until within a few weeks they are ready to leave the nest. They need to grow strong quickly, to be able to leave their birth place and fly south before winter sets in and food sources become scarce.

Many of Northern Europe's birds journey south to wintering grounds in the mild Mediterranean climate, or even as far as sub-Saharan Africa, covering vast distances and a wide range of habitats, braving bad weather and many other dangers.

Then, having wintered in more hospitable areas it is time for the birds to undertake the return journey to Europe to breed. The long journeys and the wintering period in a strange new place will have taken their toll, particularly on young and inexperienced birds, and fewer birds return north to Europe than left. These birds are the strongest individuals: the survivors nature has chosen to raise the next generation.

Europe's birds use three main routes on their twice yearly migration journeys: via the west over Gibraltar, the east over the Bosphorus in Turkey, and the central Mediterranean across Italy, Malta and other islands that dot this stretch of open water.

The Maltese archipelago, situated on this central flyway, is particularly important as resting grounds since these islands lie in the middle of the longest stretch of water that Europe's birds must cross. Many birds of different species travel over Malta and in fact, 398 different bird species have been recorded in Malta.

As a source of fascination, birds have been studied for many years, and these studies reveal that migrating birds link Malta to no less than 36 European and 12 African countries¹.



Many raptors, particularly Honey Buzzards, migrate over Malta every autumn.

¹ The International Impact of Illegal Hunting and Trapping in Malta, Raine A. F., 2007

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO TRAPPING

A HISTORY

Trapping is the practice of capturing wild birds alive, using live decoy birds on sites prepared specifically to appear attractive to wild birds while hiding the danger they pose. For these reasons trapping is a very effective means of removing birds from wild populations.

Old trappers have explained that trapping in the past provided poorer families with game birds which could be kept for the pot and song birds as pets. Poverty was largely eradicated as time passed, meat became more readily available and pet shops offered captive bred song birds.

The increase in wealth and improved technology also brought with it increased free time, money to spend on pastimes, and access to the countryside. Instead of dying out, as would have been expected, trapping boomed. Trapping sites grew in size to multiple net setups, with nets swung shut by powerful springs or shock-chord, instead of the strength of a person's hand. These evolutions have taken trapping away from its traditional roots, causing increased damage to Malta's environment.

IMPACT ON BIRD POPULATIONS

Malta used to have small populations of several finch species. However, widespread trapping of these birds led to local populations disappearing by the 1980s; since then finches have only bred occasionally in very small numbers in the Maltese Islands. The finches trapped on Malta are migratory birds that come from several other European countries. Trapping is a threat these birds currently face in addition to other natural and man-made hazards in the countries they visit.

ACCIDENTAL CATCHES

It is not only the targeted birds that become trapped. Malta's national bird the Blue Rock Thrush and other local breeding birds as well as hedgehogs and snakes have been found entangled in unattended trapping nets. Many of them die of exposure, victims of accidental by-catch

IMPACT ON HABITATS

Most trapping sites are created by removing natural vegetation using herbicides, fire or mechanical means. Gravel, sand or soil is then spread to create a level area where nets can be laid. New growth of natural vegetation is removed before each trapping season. This process destroys the natural wild vegetation and is therefore detrimental to a wide range of biodiversity. After a trapping site is abandoned it can take years for some plant species to re-establish and for the natural habitat to recover.

SCALE OF TRAPPING

The project surveyed 4,787 of the 7,310 trapping sites identified by MEPA in 2007 and established that 44.2 % of them are within 23 accessible Natura 2000 sites. Many Natura 2000 sites have large numbers of densely packed trapping sites – the record being Ir-Ramla taċ-Ċirkewwa in the Southwest of Malta with 1,394 trapping sites, translating to a density of 60 sites per square kilometre². MEPA figures show that trappers declared an average of 38,000 finches caught per annum between 2002 and 2008, however a MEPA survey shows that the annual catch could sometimes be as high as 100,000³.

SPECIES TRAPPED IN MALTA:

Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Hawfinch, Linnet, Siskin, Serin, Golden Plover, Quail, Song Thrush, Turtle Dove, and others.

Wild birds are not suited to living in captivity and many of them die after being trapped.

FINCHES IN MALTA HAVE BEEN RECORDED COMING FROM:

Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, England, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine

WHAT ARE NATURA 2000 SITES?

Natura 2000 sites constitute a network of areas protected throughout the European Union due to the presence of threatened habitat, birds, or other animal species.

² A Survey of Trapping Sites in Natura 2000 Sites of the Maltese Islands, Raine A. F., Saliba G., Webb P., Tribe A., 2010

³ Carnet de Chasse 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 reports and the Finches 2004 Report

This photo, taken in 2011, shows how densely packed trapping sites can be. Trapping sites are a common feature of the Maltese countryside.

FOUR

LAW AND ENFORCEMENT

MALTESE LAW

Historically, finch trapping was allowed in Malta for up to six months a year. Malta has disallowed finch trapping since 2008, but subsequently permitted the trapping of Turtle Dove and Quail from 1st September to 30th October and Song Thrush and Golden Plover from 20th October to 10th January in 2009 and 2010.

EU LAW

Trapping is recognised as a large scale and very effective method of removing birds from wild populations and is not permitted throughout the EU under the Birds Directive.

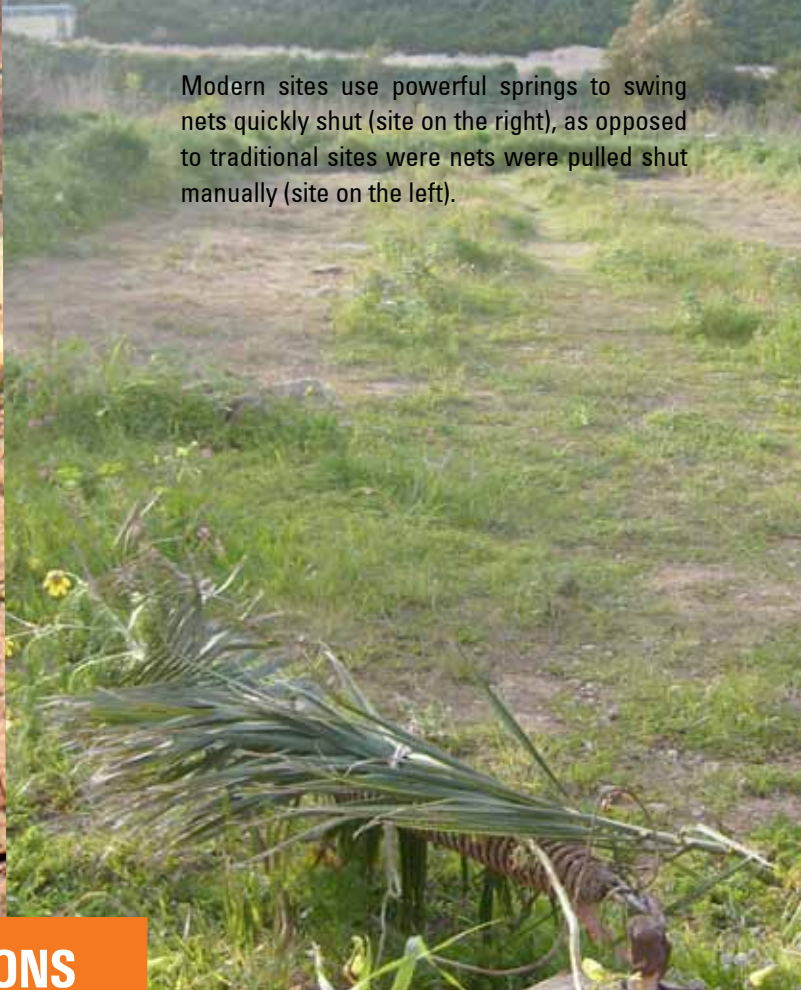
Malta now allows trapping for Golden Plover, Song Thrush, Quail and Turtle Dove under a special provision known as a “derogation”. Derogations are exemptions from EU law which are only permissible in specific circumstances and must meet strict conditions of application.

Member states can apply derogations on an annual basis, following which a report justifying the derogation must be sent to the European Commission. If the Commission feels the derogation is not justified, legal proceedings may be initiated against the member state for failing to comply with EU law.

ENFORCEMENT

The police unit which deals with illegal hunting and trapping, mainly during the spring and autumn migration periods, is the Administrative Law Enforcement Unit (ALE). This unit consists of fewer than 30 officers with a mere handful of vehicles and has a host of other duties. By 2011 there were approximately 10,300 licensed hunters (shooting with guns) and 2,896 licensed trappers. The derogation on EU law implemented by the government permits trappers to renew their trapping license and register up to two trapping sites each – it is clear that 30 officers cannot effectively monitor such large numbers throughout the Maltese and Gozitan countryside.

The number of active trapping sites in the countryside appears to have decreased. However, a disused trapping site can easily be restored for use if the hide and infrastructure are not dismantled. Since few trapping sites have been dismantled, the under-resourced police are required to monitor a large number of potentially active sites. Dismantling un-registered sites, apart from allowing natural wildlife to reclaim the site, would also take pressure off the ALE. Increasing ALE resources, ideally by establishing a dedicated wildlife crime unit like those in other EU member states such as the UK, would also help Malta to meet its EU obligation by reducing illegal trapping.



Modern sites use powerful springs to swing nets quickly shut (site on the right), as opposed to traditional sites were nets were pulled shut manually (site on the left).

FIVE PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

The project aimed to facilitate the phasing out of finch trapping and promote increased acceptance of the new legislation amongst the general public and bird trappers, thus helping to stop illegal finch trapping. This was done by raising awareness about the change in legislation and the conservation implications of trapping – both of which were poorly known by many trappers prior to the end of finch trapping in 2008.

ACHIEVING THE OBJECTIVES – PROJECT ACTIONS

MEDIA ACTIONS

The project has issued press releases, feature articles, opinion pieces and attended TV and radio interviews regularly in a sustained information dissemination drive. Magazines, daily and weekly papers and a variety of TV and radio shows were targeted to ensure the project information reached as broad an audience as possible.



COMMUNICATIONS MATERIAL

Several large scale actions were undertaken to widely distribute communications material. Billboards were set up in high traffic arterial routes for the month of January 2009, launching the project. Information leaflets were distributed to all residences in Malta at the start of 2010, and during the spring of 2010 posters were distributed with four popular weekly papers.



ENVIRONMENTAL TV DOCUMENTARY

A 13 episode environmental documentary dealing with issues related to the Birds and Habitats Directives was produced and aired on One TV, Malta's second most popular TV station. The series was also uploaded to a dedicated YouTube channel www.youtube.com/Oikos2010/ and is freely available online.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The project increased awareness for Malta's natural environment amongst students in primary and secondary schools as well as university. In primary schools, the project twinned up with BirdLife Malta's environmental education programme "Dinja Wahda". In secondary schools the project developed and trialed an environmental education programme, and targeted tertiary students and young people through presentations at the University of Malta and at fairs and events.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

Speakers from five EU member states joined local experts for a one-day seminar on bird trapping. Topics covered included bird migration, EU legislation relating to trapping, case studies from other EU members states, and enforcement.

MEETINGS WITH TRAPPERS

In the first environmental outreach programme of its kind in Malta, the project chose an ambitious approach and engaged trappers directly, holding informal face-to-face meetings in the field, in bars and cafes. The meetings raised awareness about the legal situation and environmental concerns of trapping, also giving trappers an opportunity to share their opinions and experience.

INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS

The project has reached a wide range of other stakeholders including environmental NGOs, several local councils, MEPA, the police force, and the Office of the Prime Minister, raising awareness about the law and conservation implications regarding trapping. Meetings were also held with the Malta Cage Bird Association and correspondence exchanged with scientific ringing and captive breeding organisations in Belgium and Holland to investigate alternatives to bird trapping.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF TRAPPING LAW AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

To measure the impact of the project's awareness raising activities amongst the general public telephone surveys were undertaken. In January 2011 the surveys assessed general public knowledge of the project's key messages:

CAMPAIGN MESSAGE	LEVEL OF AWARENESS
MALTA'S GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION IS IMPORTANT FOR BIRD MIGRATION	88.60%
TRAPPING AFFECTS THE NUMBER OF FINCHES SEEN IN MALTA	84.40%
TRAPPING HARMS THE COUNTRYSIDE	83.80%
THE EU DOES NOT ALLOW TRAPPING	47.20%
MALTA COMMITTED ITSELF TO A SPECIAL EU AGREEMENT ON TRAPPING	27.20%

Table 1 – Survey results showing the level of awareness in percent of the total number of respondents)

It is clear that the majority of the public is now aware of the conservation implications of trapping. The legal status of trapping is well known by a lower percentage of the public, which is nevertheless still sizeable. Communication of these key issues needs to continue to ensure that this awareness is maintained and where possible improved.

INVESTING IN FUTURE GENERATIONS

12,253 primary schoolchildren and 989 secondary school students from schools in Malta and Gozo have participated in the project's education actions. The project also gave presentations at the university and was present at popular events, reaching tertiary education students and other young people.

REACHING TRAPPERS DIRECTLY – A FIRST FOR MALTA

The project has held face-to-face meetings with 411 trappers, 9 % of the trappers licensed prior to the end of the phasing out period for finch trapping, disseminating information about the legal status and conservation implications of trapping directly through the project's outreach programme.

MONITORING TRAPPING SITES, IDENTIFYING REDUCTION IN ILLEGAL TRAPPING

Over the course of 2009 and 2010 a combined total of 4,787 trapping sites were surveyed. The surveys show that the number of active and maintained sites has decreased from 33.2 % of all trapping sites in 2009 to 24.8 % in 2010. 96 % of the active or maintained sites surveyed in 2010 were illegally targeting finches.

The decrease in active finch trapping sites shows that many trappers are respecting the law. However, further awareness raising and enforcement are needed to encourage remaining trappers to obey the law.



The percentage of active trapping sites has decreased from 33% in 2009 to 25% in 2010. 96% of the active and maintained trapping sites in 2010 were illegally targeting finches.

In addition to achieving the planned results, the project has tried to go a step further, taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities which resulted in the following unplanned achievements:

STAKEHOLDER CONTRIBUTIONS

Environmental NGOs have contributed to monitoring trapping sites and expressed interest in supporting further efforts to resolve trapping issues.

IDENTIFYING ALTERNATIVES TO TRAPPING

Through the project's face-to-face meetings, trappers have expressed interest in several activities which are potential alternatives to trapping.

REDUCED NUMBER OF LICENSES

In 2008 there were 4,616 licensed trappers, which decreased to 2,896 licensed trappers at the end of 2010.

Although no finch trapping season was opened after December 2008, the government has applied a derogation permitting trapping for Golden Plover, Song Thrush, Quail and Turtle Dove, which accounts for the trapping licences renewed after 2008.

Many trappers contacted by the project explained that they retained their license for one of three reasons:

- Trappers hoping that finch trapping will be reinstated are renewing their licenses because those who do not renew their license lose it after a period of two years, and no new trapping licenses are being issued
- Trappers intending to solely target the four derogation species
- Trappers using the derogation as a cover for illegal finch trapping

The reduction in trapping licenses indicates that around 30 % of finch trappers have accepted the end of finch trapping.

ASSISTING THE POLICE

Project surveys of trapping sites show that many trappers are respecting the law; but illegal trapping is still being carried out. Details of active trapping sites located through project surveys undertaken in 2009 and 2010 have been passed on to the police to aid their investigations.

FROM TRAPPING TO CAPTIVE BIRD BREEDING AND SHOWING...

All the finch species previously trapped have been bred in captivity in Malta, and there exists sufficient captive bred finches locally and in Europe to ensure a healthy and diverse breeding stock. National and international shows are organised on a regular basis, where captive bird breeding enthusiasts can compete for titles. Apart from being a positive way forward for trappers, this also helps protect wild birds which no longer need to be trapped for breeding and showing.

TRAPPERS TURNED SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHERS?

Scientific bird ringing involves the capture of wild birds by licensed bird ringers who carry out a series of measurements, then affix a standardised, individually numbered ring to the leg of a bird, and immediately release it. Details are then shared internationally through a common database. This important conservation tool requires skill and knowledge, and in Europe it is coordinated by EURING, the European Union for bird ringing. Trappers in other EU member states have given up trapping and taken up scientific bird ringing following training by the EURING representative in their country.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Trapping requires patience and knowledge of wild birds' behaviour and environments. These attributes are also required for wildlife photography.

TAKING UP ALTERNATIVES TO TRAPPING

One of the main hurdles for trappers interested in these activities is lack of knowledge or experience. In all the cases mentioned above however, there are national organisations which provide an infrastructure facilitating trappers' entry into these hobbies, including:

- Scientific bird ringing – Birdlife Malta (National EURING Representative)
- Captive bird breeding and cage bird competitions – Malta Cage Bird Association
- Wildlife photography – Malta Photographic Society

THE FUTURE

BUILDING ON A PROMISING START

A continuation plan (also called an After LIFE plan) has been developed to ensure that the progress made in facilitating the phasing out of finch trapping is continued after the project ends in June 2011.

To continue on the successes enjoyed to date, it is important that:

Information continues to be disseminated to further increase knowledge of the damage trapping does to the environment and the legal status of trapping, thus guaranteeing support for the discontinuation of finch trapping.

Education remains a priority and through education programmes, awareness about the environment and an appreciation for nature are nurtured amongst the younger generations. This will increase future public commitment for nature conservation and protection.

Conservationists continue to reach out to trappers to ensure that trappers understand the impacts of their activities on the environment and are aware of the legal situation. This will also provide valuable feedback on trappers' progress in taking up alternative activities which respect both the law and the environment, while fulfilling their love for birds.

Project partners keep the authorities up to date, providing the best information which decision makers can use to inform policy.

Trapping sites continue to be monitored to survey progress in eliminating illegal trapping; this could also provide important data which law enforcement officers can use in their investigations to control illegal trapping.

Enforcement on illegal trapping continues to be carried out by the police and other competent authorities. Although many trappers are respecting the law, illegal trapping is still widespread; increased enforcement could serve to deter this activity, continuing to decrease levels of illegal trapping.

With trapping sites dismantled and the lost habitat restored, a whole host of biodiversity would benefit. Increased awareness of the damage trapping does to the environment and increased enforcement would lead to the end to illegal trapping. Finches would then be given the opportunity to re-establish themselves, and Malta could then join the ranks of other small central Mediterranean islands, such as Lampedusa and Linosa, where finches maintain local breeding populations.

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Further reading:

- A Survey of Trapping Sites in Natura 2000 sites of the Maltese Islands , Raine A.F., Saliba G., Webb P., Tribe A., 2010
- Monitoring the change in populations of birds targeted by trappers in Malta : 2008-2010, Webb P., Saliba G., Raine A.F.,
- The International Impact of Illegal Hunting and Trapping in Malta , Raine A.F., 2007

Material produced by the project may be downloaded here:

http://www.birdlifemalta.org/Content/trapping/life_project/Downloads/1080



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