



Media release

International action to stop illegal hunting in Malta

18 January 2010, Malta & Brussels - BirdLife International [1] Partners in Europe today launched an international campaign aimed at Maltese Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi demanding the proper enforcement of the EU Birds Directive, which has been largely ignored since EU membership.

The international conservation organisation is demanding an end to the illegal killing of migratory protected birds that are regularly shot over Malta. BirdLife also demands that the Maltese Government ensures that a spring hunting and trapping season for European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*, and Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* is never re-opened on the island.

“Illegal hunting in Malta is a serious concern for the BirdLife International Partnership because of the scale of the illegal activity and lack of efficient governmental action against it”, commented Angelo Caserta, Regional Director of BirdLife International European Division in Brussels.

“BirdLife is not against legal hunting and we do not endorse any sort of tourism boycott against Malta as wrongly claimed by the hunting lobby. It is not those who are calling for an end to illegal hunting that are giving Malta a bad name but rather the poachers who are shooting down the same birds other countries are investing millions of euros to protect. The authorities insist on downplaying the true scale of poaching and refrain from taking effective action to end this practice” he added.

There are around 12,000 hunters on the small island - the highest density of hunters per square kilometre in Europe. Maltese hunters can legally hunt 32 species in autumn and they have the longest bird hunting season in Europe, which lasts five months.

Due to its strategic location on the European-African migration route, Malta has a long and impressive list of bird species with a total of 389 species recorded. Of these, over 170 occur regularly during migration periods and many fly over Malta in significant numbers.

Scientific ringing studies carried out by BirdLife Malta since the 1960s have shown that birds from at least 48 countries (36 in Europe and 12 in Africa) use Malta during migration [2].

Conservationists in Malta have long been recording the widespread illegal shooting of protected birds every migration period in spring and autumn. Last September, BirdLife Malta discovered the hidden remains of over 200 dead protected birds in a woodland in the north of the island that is heavily used by hunters.

The remains included those of Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* and Black-crowned Night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* among others. To this date no one has been charged and no statement has been made by the authorities.

BirdLife Malta believes that thousands of protected birds including rare raptors such as Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* and Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, as well as herons, storks and other protected birds are illegally gunned down each year.

Bob Elliot, Head of Investigations for RSPB Scotland (BirdLife in the UK), witnessed the illegal shooting of birds in Malta during BirdLife Malta's conservation camps. He said: "Malta is the only place where you do not want to see a raptor flying low as it will definitely be shot at in the absence of conservationists or police in the area".

Mr Elliot said, as a professional wildlife crime investigator, he was appalled with the scale of illegal hunting and trapping in Malta. "In Scotland, we record an average of 60 cases of wild bird crime every year. In Malta, BirdLife recorded over 2100 incidents in 2008 alone. Scotland is 250 times the size of Malta and has some very challenging problems regarding the illegal killing of protected species, but Malta still stands in a league of its own" he added.

In spite of a poor track record in law enforcement for the protection of migratory birds, the Maltese government is once again considering the opening of the spring hunting season for European Turtle Dove and Common Quail. It will do so in defiance of a European Court of Justice Judgment that found Malta in breach of the Birds Directive for allowing spring hunting of European Turtle Dove and Common Quail since it joined the EU. [3]

BirdLife Malta President Joseph Mangion concluded: "Malta has shown it cannot meet the conditions of a derogation for another spring hunting season. Every time the government opens the season for limited hunting, it opens the door for hunters to kill protected species. Action has long been overdue. It is now time for the politics to come in line with the law."

The international petition can be signed online at <http://www.birdlifemalta.org/petition/sign/>

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Notes for the editor

[1] BirdLife International is a global Partnership of nature conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries and territories. BirdLife is the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the problems affecting them, and is working on a wide range of environmental issues.

For more information about the work of the BirdLife European Division:
<http://europe.birdlife.org>

[2] The international impact of hunting and trapping in the Maltese islands, Dr André F. Raine, May 2007

[3] Throughout the EU, Birds Directive bans hunting of birds during their breeding period and during their spring migration back from Africa. Member States can apply

derogations to this under certain conditions. The European Commission had taken Malta to Court in January 2008, arguing Malta did not comply with the EU Birds Directive, since it had allowed spring hunting of the mentioned two species since EU accession in 2004.

In 2008, upon the request of the European Commission, the Court had issued an “interim measure” ordering Malta not to open a spring hunting season (http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/04/malta_interim_measures.html).

The government of Malta did not open the season in 2009, deciding to wait until a final ruling was given.

In a verdict delivered on 10 September 2009, the European Court of Justice (ECJ, case [C-76/08](#)) declared that Malta has not met the conditions and breached European law by allowing spring hunting of Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* and Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* in the years 2004-2007.

BirdLife therefore urges the Maltese Government to now respect the Birds Directive and never open spring hunting again.