

Title BirdLife Europe, together with its national Partner BirdLife Malta, strongly asked for an immediate suspension of the ongoing spring hunting season in Malta, in order to prevent more protected birds from being killed and injured. In a highly contested move that caused concerns across Europe, the Maltese government had allowed, for the period of 13-30 April 2011, the shooting of a limited number of Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* and Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* using a derogation under the EU Birds Directive. However, BirdLife Malta's field surveys on the ground show that this open season is used as a cover for many illegal activities that put at risk many birds of European conservation concern. Since 13th April alone – the start of the hunting season – BirdLife Malta has received 17 shot birds including rare species such as Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, and Montagu's Harrier *Cyrus pygargus*. The real total number of shot protected birds is likely to be much higher. According to **Paul Debono, Director of BirdLife Malta**, "This shows that even the increased enforcement efforts of the government have been neither sufficient nor effective in preventing illegal hunting from happening this spring. The situation we are witnessing on the ground is terrible and the government has to act now and stop this." Despite the Maltese government's commitment on enforcement, it cannot be seen that, compared to previous years, illegal bird shooting had been reduced. On the contrary, evidence collected by BirdLife Malta indicates that this year's open season is leading to a significant increase in protected birds being killed compared to previous years: In 2008, 2009 and 2010, when virtually no spring hunting was allowed in the country, the numbers of killed protected birds that were recovered by BirdLife Malta in comparable periods of time were much lower: only 1, 7, and 5 respectively. **Angelo Caserta, Director of BirdLife Europe**, sees Malta in direct violation of the EU Birds Directive. "If a country is not able to safeguard our most protected birds during their dangerous migration from Africa to their European breeding grounds from illegal shooting, it cannot be granted the right to open any hunting season in this critical period." BirdLife Malta and BirdLife Europe therefore urge the Maltese government to immediately close the current spring hunting season. Angelo Caserta adds: "We also call on the European Commission to take all necessary steps to ensure compliance with EU bird protection law. Malta had already been condemned once by the European Court of Justice for not respecting EU rules on bird protection, it should not be allowed to continue putting our European natural heritage at risk." (2) **Further background to spring hunting in Malta:** Under EU law, hunting of birds during their spring migration and breeding period is prohibited in general. Malta, however, insists of using a derogation clause of the EU Birds Directive for allowing the shooting of a limited number of individuals of two species (Turtle Dove and Quail). BirdLife stresses that Malta fails to meet several of the requirements for such an exception (derogation according to Art.9 of the Birds Directive): One of the key preconditions for granting such a derogation is that the Member State government has to ensure strict control and supervision, to prevent other species from being killed or injured along the way. The reality in Malta of the last days shows this is far from being the case. Other preconditions refer to the conservation status of the species in question, the number of individuals permitted to hunt and the test whether autumn provides a sufficient alternative solution to spring hunting. BirdLife has concerns regarding all of these as well. Following BirdLife complaints and European Commission investigations, Malta had already been condemned by the European Court of Justice in 2009 (C-76/08) for having allowed spring hunting in between 2004 and 2007. After a pause in this practice in 2008 and 2009, Malta is now trying again, arguing this time it would limit and control spring hunting sufficiently to meet EU standards.