



The fight for the flyway



When a migratory bird crosses the Mediterranean, it is looking for a thermal to save energy in flight, a suitably rich habitat to stop and feed at, or perhaps a safe roost for the night. What it is not looking for are illegal hunters, trapping nets, wind turbine blades and electrical power lines. But, migratory birds have no choice. An instinctive urge drives three billion of them into the skies twice a year: to migrate thousands of kilometres to breed in

Eurasia, and subsequently to return to Africa.

“I wouldn’t want to be a bird because it is so difficult”, said a young girl in a school in Cyprus. She had just been a migratory bird herself, whilst taking part in a board game created by BirdLife Cyprus, as part of their illegal bird trapping communications campaign. The realisation of a little Blackcap’s plight clearly made a big impression on her.

Undertaking such dramatic journeys pushes birds to the

limit of their endurance. They exist on an energetic knife edge relying on favourable weather conditions and on the presence of adequate food resources at key stopover sites along the way.

What’s more, birds migrating along the Africa–Eurasia Flyway face two major obstacles; the barren expanse of the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Songbirds weighing only a few grams can be engulfed by sandstorms and larger birds such as raptors, storks and cranes, reliant on

rising thermals, have to cross the sea via land bottlenecks.

This extraordinary wonder of nature marks the change in seasons and is celebrated by many cultures; yet it is seen as a hunting and trapping bonanza to be capitalised on by others. Any hunting or trapping during this period knock out the birds best-selected for survival before they even have a chance to reproduce. Indeed, any safe passage or spot to rest and refuel in the Mediterranean (for an individual) is crucial

A Zitting Cisticola meets a grizzly end on a Cypriot lime stick (BirdLife Cyprus)

BirdLife Cyprus is trying to influence the next generation by educating children about migratory birds through participatory games.



in droughts and desertification in the Sahel region of Africa, trans-saharan migrants will face an increasingly arduous journey. This is a time to be looking after our migratory birds in the Mediterranean, not kicking them while they are down.

A migratory bird sees no international borders or national park boundaries. When you consider this perspective and all the threats migratory birds face, it becomes clear that a robust coordinated multi-national response is needed.

The BirdLife Partnership is in a unique position to achieve this. Its extensive global network includes 21 organisations in the Mediterranean region, with a shared vision for the protection of migratory birds as part of BirdLife's Global Flyways Programme. This has led to the development and implementation of a new international initiative, generously funded by the MAVA Foundation.

The project, *Capacity Development for Flyway Conservation in the Mediterranean*, aims to establish and strengthen a dynamic network of conservation NGOs working effectively with local people, national governments, and the international community to protect key migratory species, sites and habitats in the Mediterranean region.

The first phase of the project (October 2012–October 2014) supported the delivery of national conservation action in seven main countries: Cyprus; Malta; Turkey; Tunisia; Lebanon; Macedonia; Montenegro; with Morocco also taking part. Each country faces very specific cultural, social and political challenges as part of their mission to protect migratory birds. However, the true strength of this international project is the formation of a Mediterranean network, where

expertise and experience can be shared between NGOs. Furthermore, addressing the threats to migratory birds is more effective through coordinated regional initiatives. This is particularly relevant to the reduction of illegal killing of migratory birds—which relies heavily on raising public and political awareness and influencing policy and law enforcement. Illegal killing of migratory birds is the most significant common battle faced by the majority of countries across the Mediterranean.

The creation of this NGO network and the national level conservation action implemented in eight countries is already generating many wins for migratory birds in a number of countries across the Mediterranean region.

The case of Cyprus

In Cyprus, the illegal trapping of birds is a chronic problem. On this island every year millions of migrating birds stop for a rest on their journeys across the Mediterranean Sea, only to find they cannot take off again. Their feet are stuck in glue, which trappers have pasted onto sticks. The birds suffer an agonising death from thirst and exhaustion, or at the hands of the trappers. Or just as inhumane is the death in fine 'mist' nets where every attempt to escape causes further entanglement. Based on the last systematic sample, there were over 13km of mist nets estimated on Cyprus in the autumn in 2013 and an unknown number of limesticks, many accompanied by bird-calling devices that imply a safe resting spot for the weary migrants but actually lure birds to their death.

The reason: *ambelopoulia*. A local 'delicacy' consisting of trapped Blackcap and other tiny songbirds, eaten whole—legs, beak, entrails and all. A plate of a dozen *ambelopoulia* sells for between €40 and €80 in lawbreaking restaurants.

The majority of Cypriots do not consider bird trapping to be a serious issue, despite it being illegal by national legislation since 1974. But, with 152 different bird species implicated, of which 78 are classified as threatened, and with more than 2.5 million birds killed every year it becomes clear that an ecological disaster is taking place under the radar.

So a major shift in public opinion is needed: with funding from the MAVA Foundation, BirdLife Cyprus embarked on a zero-tolerance communications campaign to shift public opinion against *ambelopoulia* and trapping. In Cyprus it is quite groundbreaking to be disseminating "up front" environmental messages, and BirdLife Cyprus is taking their campaign right into the public eye. They have placed huge *Make the Change: Say No to Ambelopoulia* posters on billboards on major highways and in notorious trapping areas, and pushed further with national media coverage in the lead up to the spring hunting season.

The campaign is dispelling the myth that bird trapping is still the harmless, small-scale tradition it perhaps used to be: in fact it is a lucrative and

Ambelopoulia despite being illegal can still be bought at some restaurants (Guy Shorrock; rspb-images.com)





The numbers of a single species – here Eurasian Golden Orioles – taken at a single site in a single day can be shocking (SPNL)

industrialised business earning mafia-like criminal networks a total of around €15 million illegally each year, according to the state Game and Fauna Service. “This initiative funded by the MAVA Foundation gave us the platform we needed to jump to a new level in our communications campaigning”, said Martin Hellicar, Research Coordinator, BirdLife Cyprus. Martin and the team are focusing their messages on the huge scale of the organised slaughter and the reckless indiscrimination of the criminals’ trapping methods. When informed, the public are largely against it.

BirdLife Partners recognise that long-term commitments are needed to solve such a chronic problem as illegal killing, so it is important to cut the recruitment of the next generation. As well as pushing for political and consumer change, BirdLife Cyprus’ communications campaign is finding a way into the trapping communities through school visits. Sadly, many children there have seen nets and limesticks in use. “At one particular school”,

said Natalie Stylianou, Media Officer for BirdLife Cyprus, “the first mention of the word *ambelopoulia* caused one young boy to immediately rub his belly and lick his lips.” It is a difficult arena, but one that the team are making a big difference in.

With the initial MAVA foundation funding, the team first produced educational materials and the success of this catalysed further funding for an educational package including a cartoon animation in which a friendly blackcap clearly explains his plight, and the aforementioned board game.

BirdLife Cyprus have developed a Strategic Action Plan against illegal bird trapping that, for the first time, brings together all relevant stakeholders to agree a common framework.

“We have now managed to persuade them that we need a game-changer”, said Martin. Political will to address this issue has been the major challenge in recent years, but encouragingly, the Strategy has the support of the European Commission, whom BirdLife Cyprus have been keeping

updated with reports, and the Commission is keen to see the adoption of this strategy by Cyprus.

Lebanon: an alternative approach

In many Middle Eastern countries, hunting has deep cultural roots. With this in mind, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL; BirdLife Partner) is addressing threats to its 399 bird species in an alternative way.

Uncontrolled hunting is the largest threat to migratory birds in Lebanon and is undermining all conservation efforts for many globally threatened species. Many shooters are not aware of the details of the law, safety measures or the wider conservation implications of their decision to aim at a bird, any bird, and pull the trigger. With an estimated 500,000 hunters in the small country, migratory birds are shot out of the sky on private and public lands and even in buffer zones of protected areas.

Recognising that awareness about the hunting law and its application is still limited to professional conservationists, senior representatives of hunting organisations and national government, SPNL have developed and implemented the first training course in Lebanon that prepares all hunters for a mandated national hunting license exam; in addition to an online quiz to test their knowledge. The course includes modules on bird identification and the importance of Lebanon for its migratory bird guests, hunting law details, and other conservation issues, and is complimented by SPNL’s work to collaborate with professional hunters.

“The training programme aims to turn indiscriminate, unprofessional ‘shooters’ into responsible, sustainable hunters”, said Bassima Khatib, Assistant Director General for SPNL.

SPNL aims to extend its awareness campaign through the developments of a short film, TV spots, and holding a bird identification competition—appropriate tools to reach a much wider audience of shooters in Lebanon.

Stopover sites in Tunisia

The Capacity Development for Flyway Conservation initiative has also focused on the conservation of key stopover sites for migratory birds. Association ‘les Amis des Oiseaux’ (AAO; BirdLife in Tunisia) has developed a new strategy to build a network of Local Conservation Groups to protect these sites.

Since the revolution in spring 2011, Tunisia has been through a turbulent period of insecurity that has taken its toll on the environment. It has witnessed a resurgence of old (and illegal) hunting practices and the emergence of new forms of illegal bird trade, such as sale over the internet.

However, at the same time there has been an awakening of the social responsibility of a population that was for a long time deprived of certain rights and freedoms. In this context, through the project AAO informed people about the conservation issues affecting birds and mobilised them to form Local Conservation Groups (LCGs). By providing training in bird monitoring and project management, and equipment, they continue to develop LCGs to monitor and protect their key sites for migratory birds in Tunisia. All want Tunisia to be an oasis for birds to rest and refuel after crossing the Sahara.

Hunting tourism

Montenegro, in the Balkans, is a small country visited by millions of birds. It holds major wetland sites that are crucial stopovers for birds migrating on the Adriatic Flyway. However, birds resting here to refuel are under a massive hunting pressure, with lack

of law enforcement blurring the line between legality and illegality.

There are also more problematic visitors to the Balkans—hunting tourists. The organisation of this lucrative and unsustainable business is not yet fully understood, but we do know many Italian hunters exacerbate the problem with a big injection of money.

With many hunters also comes much disturbance, which the birds suffer from in Montenegro. Even legal hunters coming to shoot a particular duck species do not realise they are scaring other species away from important feeding grounds and impacting the rest of their migration.

After many years of effort, CZIP (Centre for the Protection of Birds; BirdLife in Montenegro) has for the first time secured a hunting ban at one of its major wetland stop-overs, Lake Sasko. CZIP has been working with a local hunting organisation which itself has proclaimed the two year hunting ban at the lake.

This is an excellent result for CZIP who are now monitoring the birds' reaction to the ban. As in the calm after a storm, birds will be able to return to the lake without hindrance and early next year, in the waterfowl census, CZIP will be able to work out the total natural capacity of the lake.

Colliding with wind turbines

With the low morning sun warming tired wing muscles, and oblivious to the luck of their survival, some birds take off to continue along their migratory route from Balkan wetlands. They are safely fed, rested and watered beyond the gunfire, but these birds still face unknown challenges ahead.

BirdLife Partners are finding dead migratory birds beneath wind farms and powerlines, so sensibly locating energy infrastructure in the Mediterranean is becoming increasingly important.

In Montenegro there is a great opportunity: there are currently no wind farms in the country, so surely developers have a chance to prove their responsibility? With development proposals coming in, it is only thanks to CZIP and their collaborators as part of the Capacity Development for Flyway Conservation initiative that the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) of prospective wind farms are starting to be taken seriously in the country.

“We have seen some “dirty” Environmental Impact Assessments”, said Darko Saveljic, Ornithologist at CZIP. “One was based on research from less than one day in the field for a whole year.”

After almost a year of difficult negotiations, CZIP have established a new standard for wind farm EIAs that, rather than complementing the investor's needs, gives appropriate consideration to birds and wildlife. Now developers must go into the field for a certain number of days' research and involve many ornithologists in order for their EIA to be verified.

“What is most important is that this has been achieved in consensus with all relevant organisations, institutions and all the ornithologists in the country”, said Darko. “So, with continued monitoring of the process, Montenegrin bird fauna should be adequately protected from wind farms in the future.”

With the first wind farm in Macedonia built in 2013, the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES; BirdLife Partner) are also working with the renewable energy sectors to ensure EIAs are satisfactory. It is promising that MES have already held workshops with the energy sector, which poses the greatest threat to migratory birds in Macedonia.

AAO in Tunisia have also established new partnerships with key stakeholders within the energy sector such as

Tunisian Society for Electricity and Gas, they are participating in discussions on new standards for impact studies and measures to reduce negative impacts of energy infrastructure on migratory birds.

Acting together

In May 2014, BirdLife organised a workshop involving a group of 26 representatives from conservation NGOs in the Mediterranean (including 13 BirdLife Partners—that's over 10% of the whole Partnership) with one common thought in mind: we will work together to protect migratory birds in the Mediterranean. “The strength of the BirdLife Partnership lies in the power of many”, said BirdLife's Director

of Conservation, Richard Grimmett. “Things can change. Give them a chance and the birds will come back.”

Referring to the regional support BirdLife has provided through the Capacity Development for Flyway Conservation in the Mediterranean project, Martin Hellicar says: “Cyprus is a little island besieged by illegal trappers, so to know you are not alone is really important.”

So next time you see a migratory bird fly overhead, spare a thought for its treacherous journey and the commendable conservation work of BirdLife Partners all along its flyway.

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by Shaun Hurrell



ABOVE Macedonian Ecological Society are making sure that renewable energy companies are completing rigorous Environmental Impact Assessments (Sergey Dereliev)

BELOW Volunteers monitoring waterbird populations at Sasko Lake, Montenegro, to evaluate the effect of the hunting ban (CZIP)

