

Illegal Bird Hunting in the EU: Discrepancy Between Written Words and Effective Action

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Fig. 1: European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* caught in a snare in Sardinia / Photo: STIFTUNG PRO ARTENVIELFALT, Bielefeld.

Introduction

There is hardly any ornithological journal that does not report the decline of breeding bird populations. The causes are of such extent and multitude that humanity is apparently resigned to the consequences: Multinational companies promoting unsustainable chemical agriculture, erosion of the food pyramid due to the increasing use of herbicide and pesticide cocktails, habitat loss, soil degradation, excessive CO₂ emissions, eutrophication, wind farms even in nature reserves and woodland, greed of consumption, wastefulness, investment decisions without consideration of the possible ecological consequences, insufficient protection of flora and fauna in coastal waters and oceans, predation, and other causes. Occasional reports of small success stories are not enough in this overall situation. If we consider the goals of biodiversity conservation that were outlined for the year

2020, it is already clear now that they will not be reached anywhere on Earth because the corrections that are recognized as necessary are being ignored or implemented half-heartedly.

Facts and Taboos

More than 25 million birds are illegally killed or trapped each year in the Mediterranean region. About half are slaughtered in the European Union (see Table 1). This shocking fact is often concealed or even actively denied – especially among scientists. The report by FRANZEN & GUTTENFELDER (2013) about the hunting pressure on migrating birds in Egypt and the documentary film by J.-U. HEINS & H. SCHULZ (Bavarian State Television, Report Munich of 18 June 2013) caused widespread outrage and protest in the United States and Western Europe addressed to the Government of Egypt. What is taboo, however, is the fact that the number of birds trapped in the EU is far greater than the number of birds trapped in Egypt (see Fig. 2).

The data from national BirdLife teams indicate even higher numbers of victims than in Table 1 (e. g. for Greece over 1,000,000 birds per year). Particularly scandalous is the fact that today’s hunters use modern audio equipment to attract birds, using bird songs that were recorded by scientists for the purpose of field guides to allow

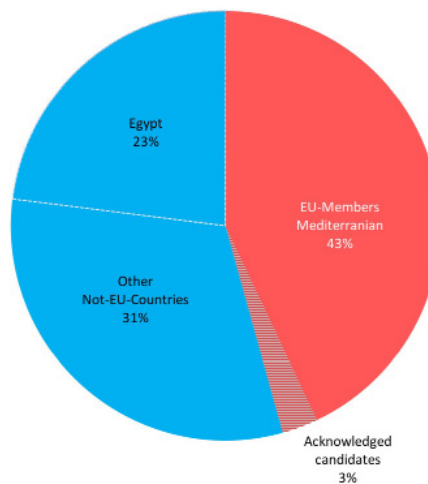


Fig. 2: Number of birds illegally killed or taken in the member states of the EU and in other parts of the Mediterranean. Egypt is very often accused of one of the highest rates of individuals illegally killed. That the leading country in terms of illegally killed birds belongs to the EU, and that the total of illegally killed birds in the member states of the EU is nearly twice as high as the Egyptian total is mostly suppressed (details BROCHET et al. 2016)

Table 1: Estimated numbers of individual birds illegally killed/taken per year in each assessed country/territory in the Mediterranean (BROCHET et al 2016; order of succession of countries/territories altered; see also www.birdlife.org/sites/default/files/attachments/01-28_low.pdf)

Accession	Country	Estimated number individual birds illegally killed / taken per year		
		Average	Minimum	Maximum
Member states of the EU				
1958	France	522,000	149,000	895,000
1958	Italy	5,600,000	3,400,000	7,800,000
1981	Greece	704,000	485,000	922,000
1986	Spain	254,000	103,000	405,000
1986	Portugal	82,400	32,400	132,000
2004	Cyprus	2,300,000	1,300,000	3,200,000
2004	Malta	108,000	5,800	211,000
2004	Slovenia	8,000	200	15,700
2013	Croatia	510,000	166,000	855,000
	Total	10,088,400		
Acknowledged candidates				
	Albania	265,000	206,000	325,000
	Macedonia FYR	2,100	600	3,700
	Montenegro	130,000	64,000	197,000
	Serbia	133,000	104,000	163,000
	Turkey	71,200	25,000	117,300
	Total	601,300		
Potential candidates				
	Bosnia & Herzegovina	34,700	22,400	46,900
North Africa				
	Morocco	74,400	23,400	125,000
	Algeria	28,900	17,500	40,300
	Tunisia	139,000	50,500	227,000
	Libya	503,000	325,000	680,000
	Egypt	5,400,000	302,000	10,600,000
	Total	6,145,300		
Near East				
	Syria	3,900,000	2,900,000	4,900,000
	Lebanon	2,600,000	1,700,000	3,500,000
	Jordan	17,300	13,000	21,600
	Palestina	89,700	70,000	109,000
	Total	6,607,000		
Mediterranean total		23,500,000	11,500,000	35,500,000

the identification of bird songs in the field. In Northern Sinai, hunters use MP3 players and nets to catch 3,300,000 “Common” Quails (not so common anymore now) and 500,000 other birds during autumn migration each year from 2008 to 2012 (EASON, RABIA & ATTUM 2016). Broken down to individual species, BROCHET et al (2016) estimate that more than 1,000,000 Song Thrushes, Blackcaps, House Sparrows and Chaffinches, respectively, are killed or trapped each year in the Mediterranean region.

Even Curlews, Ferruginous Ducks and Rock Partridges fall prey to the hunters in considerable numbers. Since the efficiency of hunting methods is continuously increased, bird hunting and trapping has become an essential cause of population decline in numerous bird species.

Public Outcry

An increasing number of EU and world citizens do not accept anymore that little or nothing is done to change the present situation. This change

of public opinion was clearly visible in the increase of awareness campaigns during the World Migratory Bird Days: Around the 10th of May 2016, more than 300 registered events in 85 countries were devoted to the topic of illegal bird hunting, which means 50% more events and 20% more involved countries than in the year before).

Although illegal bird hunting is only one of the reasons of population decline, in many bird species it may be now among the gravest ones. Activists of nature protection organisations are trying their best on the ground to reduce the extent of damage, travel reports by ornithologists contain an increasing amount of information on perceived hunting pressure, international conferences praise progress and announce new action plans (most recently the African Eurasian Migratory Landbirds Working Group in Abidjan from 25 to 27 November 2015).

Distracting Arguments

I also ignored bird hunting as a cause of bird population decline for much too long. I was distracted by other causes (habitat loss, herbicide-pesticide cocktails, changes in habitat quality and other “home-made” problems). Although health-damaging issues are urgent concerns, economic interests obscure the issues, so that vital decisions are protracted again and again. In the latest example surrounding the herbicide glyphosate, produced by Monsanto, the possible carcinogenic effect of this herbicide in humans is now widely discussed; what is not discussed, however, is that glyphosate in combination with other environmental toxins that are used in agriculture in very large quantities may be jointly responsible for the erosion at the basis of the food pyramid, i. e. that glyphosate may be among the main causes for biodiversity decline.

To postpone decisive action against the massive illegal extermination of



Fig. 3: European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* caught in a net on Cyprus / Photo: COMMITTEE AGAINST BIRD SLAUGHTER (CABS)

birds in view of other unpleasant socio-political problems (see interview in the ornithological journal “Der Falke” 63, 2016, 30–31) or to limit criticism unilaterally to the countries outside of the European Union (Egypt, Libya, Syria) is no longer acceptable. In countries outside of the European Union, poaching is partially caused by poverty (see e. g. DUFFY et al 2015). However, in countries of the European Union, poverty is unlikely to be the cause of illegal bird hunting, although social inequality (e. g. unemployment) can play a role and together with technological advances may be jointly responsible for an increase of the prosecution of birds. The transitions between pastime, amusement, hunting instinct, to the earning of pocket money or lucrative income may be blurred (BHATTACHARYA 2016), but real economic hardship as a motivation for bird hunting will hardly be of any weight in Europe.

No More Excuses

Excuses that we first need to gain more precise knowledge on the effect of hunting on population ecology should not be taken seriously, because the time and expense to gather the required data is unrealistic. Unfortunately, there are too little scientists who devote their research to topics of socio-political relevance. This is very annoying, but on the other hand it is understandable,

when nothing or little is done in society and politics in spite of convincing, precise data. One example for such political inaction is the spring hunting of Turtle Doves and Common Quails on Malta. Although the European population of Turtle Doves is decreasing rapidly (2012 only 21% of the population estimate of 1980 remain), since 2012 it is now allowed on Malta to shoot or capture up to 11,000 Turtle Doves and 5,000 Common Quails as a form of leisure activity! During autumn migration, hunting of both these species and of a further 39 bird species is not restricted at all.

It is estimated that on Malta alone, between 108,000 and 264,000 Turtle Doves and between 8,000 and 11,000 Common Quails are killed each year. A comparison of these numbers to the overall breeding population of all EU countries does not make sense to me because the effective area of origin of the birds migrating through Malta is much smaller. Although the prerequisites for an exemption permit that would allow spring hunting do not exist in EU legislation (CARUANA-GALIZIA & FENECH 2016), 50,44% of Malta’s voters (330,000 voters, among them 10’000 licensed hunters) have voted in a referendum for the perpetuation of spring hunting. Further statistics are supplied by illegal killing of birds of prey in Central and Western Europe (e. g. BIJLSMA et al 2002–2015 and NABU, Natur in Nordrhein-Westfalen 1, 2016).

Disproportionate Action

It is intolerable that so many birds are eliminated illegally in addition to the many other reasons behind the decline of bird populations driven by political and socio-economic (i. e. profit-oriented) factors is not tolerable anymore in our present time. It is also ironic that Germany aspires to protect 98% of habitats that are important to migrating birds, when on the other hand these efforts are undermined because less than 13% of these migrating bird species are protected sufficiently in their yearly home range (RUNGE et al 2015). It is not sufficient to protect hot spots of biological diversity in Germany within the framework of a national strategy for biodiversity and to support bird species of national responsibility within the federal biodiversity programme when at the same time the EU Commission in Brussels, which is increasingly seen as helpless and without real leadership qualities, takes no effective efforts to put an end to the massive and illegal killing of migrating birds inside the boundaries of the European Union.

It is sheer madness that Germany requires a special permit to pick up and preserve a moult feather (§7, section 2, paragraph 1c of the German Nature Protection Law; §5, section 2, appendix 3 of the German Species Protection Act, both taking reference to the Bird Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Union), while the



Fig. 4: Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* caught on a lime-twig on Cyprus / Photo: COMMITTEE AGAINST BIRD SLAUGHTER (CABS)

German Government undertakes nothing significant to push the European Commission to finally implement §11 of the Bird Directive 2009/147/EC, issued by the European Parliament and the European Council on 30 November 2009, which concerns the protection of wild bird species, in the Mediterranean countries of the EU. Similar discrepancies, although less blatant, could be listed for other European countries, including Switzerland. One of the most grotesque examples is the fact that, in spite of the bird-loving nature of British people, a British military base on Cyprus accounted for 900,000 and 800,000 killed birds in the years 2014 and 2015, respectively, in spite of slight improvements compared to previous years.

Outside the EU

Moreover, unacceptable mass slaughter of birds is going on outside of the Mediterranean region, against which effective action would be required, e. g. the yearly death of at least 1,000 White Storks in the sewage treatment plant of Sharm

El Sheikh (SCHULZ 1988, SCHIMKAT 2011), hundreds of thousands of sea birds killed by fishing nets (not only on the coast of Mauretania but also in waters of the European Union; KRUMENACKER 2014) or the mass trapping of Yellow-breasted Buntings *Emberiza aureola* in China, which has led to a population decline of 84–95% in the years from 1980 to 2013 of one of the most widely distributed and common species of the Palearctic (KAMP et al 2015). In such cases, we Europeans should be in a position to intervene (see e. g. project HEIM 2016). But how can such intervention be justified ethically as long as more than 10 million birds are killed annually in the EU – not out of economic hardship, but mostly for leisure or lucrative profit?

I do not deny that a lot has already been undertaken against illicit bird hunting. National partners of BirdLife International do their best to eliminate illegal hunting. For the last 40 years (!), activists of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter CABS and NABU, the German Nature Protection Union, support these efforts,

along with financial aid from BirdLife International. The foundation EuroNatur has been actively engaged for the last 10 years in protecting important wetlands on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea (SCHWADERER 2016). Scientific journals and popular science magazines report about illicit bird hunting with increasing frequency; however, these reports are often unilateral.

Responsibility of Science

The 86th conference of the German environment ministers on 17 June 2016 decided to intensify the efforts of the German Federal Government and the provincial governments of implementing the fight against illegal bird hunting and bird trade, which is good news. Nevertheless, the current extent of bird hunting makes it clear that in spite of great efforts, all existing measures are insufficient. Except from the example just quoted, the topic of illegal bird hunting has not arrived in mainstream politics, in spite of several attempts. This failure goes partly on the account of science, which has stayed away from this topic for too long – a few exceptions not counted. Science should not only revolve around the creation of breeding atlases or population estimates, but should get actively involved in the investigation of the origins of biodiversity loss, in working out concrete corrective measures and in addressing these solutions to governments and political decision makers. As long as science follows opportunistic lines and directs its findings only to a few selected addressees, all complaints about biodiversity loss are of no avail, in contrary, it can be perceived as pure hypocrisy.

To simply tolerate such grave violation against the Bird Directive of the European Union, or to selectively enforce the Law only in opportunistic cases that serve particular lobbies and interest groups, is one

of the great weaknesses of the EU. In spring this year, within another context, much was talked about a crisis of solidarity. Unfortunately, such solidarity cannot be found when it comes to illegal bird hunting. It is irresponsible that in Northern and Central Europe, substantial financial and personal means, largely on a voluntary basis, are invested into nature protection, which are then annihilated in the Mediterranean region of the EU. In addition, it is dishonest to keep on setting newer and newer biodiversity goals, while being unwilling to tackle root causes of biodiversity loss that are well known and understood. Illegal bird hunting is also revolving around equality of rights, which should be called upon, in particular when the negatively affected partner who is losing large parts of biodiversity within its national boundaries continues to pay large sums in support of countries that are causing the problem of biodiversity loss by hosting illegal hunters. Wrong respect towards countries having to deal with economic problems should not turn into the reason why supporting countries paying large solidarity sums lose substantial parts of their natural heritage.

Conclusion

Ratified conventions must be implemented, and if such conventions turn out to be too vaguely formulated for accomplishing a particular goal, they should be revised. Memorandums of understanding alone are useless, and if letters reminding the parties of their duties lead to no results, more draconic measures must follow. Scientists must understand that in addition to their duty of supporting national BirdLife partners with objective evaluation and education, what is also needed is psychological insight, intimate knowledge of regional sensitivities as well as convincing explanations why continuing the tradition of massive bird trapping in Mediterranean countries becomes intolerable to many citizens in Europe and around the world (see VERISSIMO & CAMPBELL 2015). We should first mind our own business, and therefore, we scientists should finally take upon ourselves the responsibility to drastically reduce illegal hunting in Europe, particularly in southwestern France and in the EU countries of the Mediterranean region.

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Fig. 5: The European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* belongs to the currently most threatened species, but is nevertheless still hunted in the Mediterranean in large numbers / Photo: MATHIAS SCHÄF

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