

CABS & SPA AUTUMN 2023 BIRD PROTECTION CAMP IN CYPRUS



Blackcap entangled in net before release in the Republic of Cyprus. © Riccardo Mattea

Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS)

1 INTRODUCTION

In this report, we present data collected during CABS & SPA autumn 2023 bird protection camp. In the first chapters we highlight in tables the number of cases of illegal trapping and the number of traps found, divided by jurisdiction (Republic of Cyprus and Eastern Sovereign Base Area). Following this, an evaluation of the response of the authorities to our reports in the field, our findings related to illegal hunting and the final remarks.

2 DURATION, MONITORED AREAS, PARTICIPANTS OF THE CAMP

Each autumn since 2010, CABS & SPA coordinate a 'bird protection camp' in Cyprus to prevent large scale illegal slaughter of protected birds migrating over Cyprus. In autumn 2023, the camp started on the 2nd of September and ended on the 27th of November. Running for a total of 87 days, it was the longest autumn camp compared to previous years. 17 bird protection activists from Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands and Slovenia participated to the camp and monitored the 'poaching hotspots' of the island: Namely - Famagusta and Larnaca District within the Republic of Cyprus, the British Eastern Sovereign Base Areas (ESBA) and part of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

3 TRAPPING IN THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

During CABS & SPA autumn 2023 bird protection camp, 94 active trapping sites were recorded in the Republic of Cyprus. Out of these, 52 had limesticks, 32 had nets and 10 both or an unknown method. The total number of traps used in the sites found active is 2,033 limesticks and 93 nets, of which 1,598 limesticks and 50 nets were seized by the enforcement authorities during the operations or collected when patrols were not available. The rest of trapping paraphernalia could not be dismantled for different reasons.

We would like to stress that the number of limesticks and nets seized at the trapping sites investigated is only a small proportion of the total in the possession of the poachers, since game wardens and regular police officers do not perform premises searches, unlike the former Anti-Poaching Squad (APS), who used to routinely find extra traps stored and killed birds in the fridges.

Furthermore, we need to outline that of the 94 active trapping sites detected, 27 (29%) were not previously known, but likely established for the first time in 2023. Migratory bird trapping keeps showing vitality.

Table 1: Trapping activity recorded during CABS & SPA Autumn Bird Protection Camps 2012-2023 in the Republic of Cyprus.

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Active limesticks trapping sites	65	111	80	66	105	90	71	60	65	73	59	52
Active net trapping sites	33	35	39	50	51	21	33	22	35	42	40	32
Unknown or both methods sites	10	2	5	6	8	5	3	0	1	7	7	10
Total active sites	108	148	124	122	164	116	107	82	101	122	106	94
Limesticks found	-	-	-	-	-	3298	2560	1893	1916	2371	2321	2033
Nets found	-	-	-	-	-	48	38	25	48	110	96	93

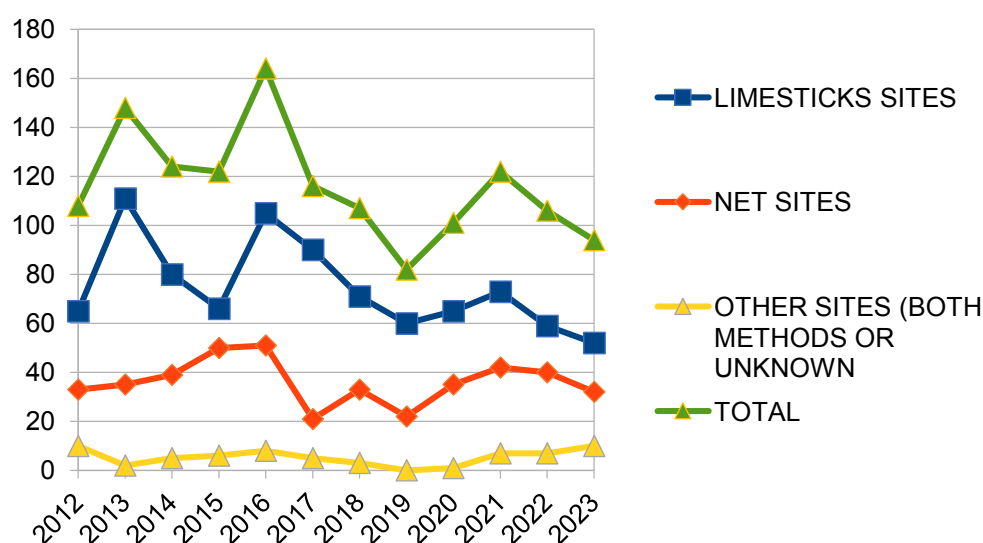


Figure 1: Trapping sites recorded during CABS & SPA autumn bird protection camps 2012-2023 in the Republic of Cyprus.

For logistical reasons every autumn operation varies in length, number of participants and modus operandi, in an effort to adjust to the available enforcement conditions. Therefore, in order to compare the results between years, we consider the percentage number of sites found active out of those checked.

As in autumn 2022, during autumn 2023 the total number of active trapping sites detected in the Republic was lower than the previous year, but considering the percentages, this autumn confirms the emerging trend since 2019 - of a slow steady increase.

Table 2: Ratio between checked and active sites during the period 2012-2023 in the Republic of Cyprus.

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Duration of field investigations (days)	17	24	28	40	47	60	75	84	77	70	71	87
Total no. of activists	13	15	14	22	28	28	29	24	11	14	17	17
No of trapping sites checked	197	226	176	220	350	277	273	231	230	290	237	206
No. of trapping sites confirmed as active	109	148	124	122	164	116	107	82	101	122	106	94
Percentage of active sties	55.3	65.5	70.5	55.5	46.9	41.9	39.2	35.5	43.9	42.1	44.7	45.6

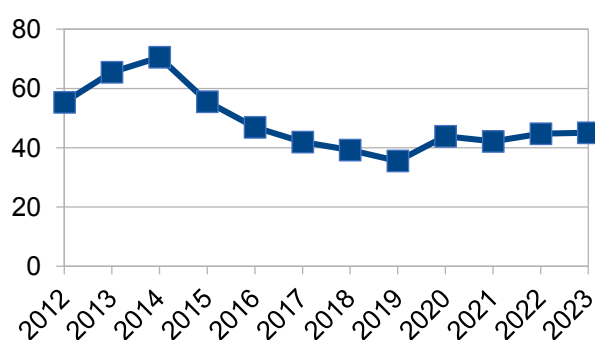


Figure 2: Trapping trend in the Republic of Cyprus based on the comparison between active and checked sites during autumn 2012-2023.



Picture 1:

Willow warbler caught on a limestick. CABS & SPA autumn BPC 2023 (Photo: CABS).

4 TRAPPING IN THE BRITISH EASTERN SOVEREIGN BASE AREA

During CABS & SPA autumn bird protection camps, the international teams also monitor the situation in the Eastern Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia, especially during the night to investigate professional trapping with nets. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of fieldwork is conducted within the territory of the Republic of Cyprus and only limited days in the British base. Therefore, the findings in the ESBA undoubtedly represent just a partial picture of the true scale of trapping activity. For the same reason, the percentages of the active sites out of the checked ones are not calculated as they would not reflect the trends. In autumn 2023, 26 trapping sites were active and 69 nets and 20 limesticks were detected, out of which 35 nets were seized by the authorities.

Table 3: Trapping activity recorded during CABS & SPA autumn bird protection camps 2012-2023 in the British Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) in Cyprus.

Autumn Bird Protection Camp	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 *	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Active limesticks trapping sites	3	0	2	4	7	5	1	2	7	4	0	1
Active net trapping sites	22	14	6	32	115	59	19	13	8	11	11	25
Unknown or both methods sites	3	1	1	1	15	5	2	1	0	3	3	0
Total active sites	28	15	9	37	137	69	22	16	15	18	14	26
Limesticks	-	-	-	-	-	134	36	76	71	102	0	20
Nets	-	-	-	-	-	90	12	13	2	29	20	69

* Only in Autumn 2016 CABS started a serious monitoring of trapping in the ESBA. Data from 2012-2015 are anecdotal and do not mirror the reality on the field.

5 EVALUATION OF THE ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS IN THE REPUBLIC

5. 1 THE GAME AND FAUNA SERVICE

The cooperation with the wardens of the Game and Fauna Service has been growing since 2019, when the Anti-Poaching Squad of police was dismantled, and joint operations delivered successful results in autumn 2023: 35 prosecutions. Nevertheless, the main problem remains unsolved. The working schedule of the patrols is still inadequate to deal with the scale of illegal bird trapping. Often in the day there is no patrol available in Famagusta and Larnaca districts (the primary poaching hotspots), whereas during the night there is never a patrol available.

The evaluations do not consider the lack of patrols in the night as it is the norm, but we must stress the fact that most of the callers for trapping are used in the night, so reaching the sites unseen in the dark and waiting for the poachers to arrive would allow the wardens to catch most poachers red-handed and would deescalate the risks posed to civilian CABS teams.

In 33 cases out of 68, the response was negative, meaning that there was no patrol available, wardens did not perform appropriate ambushes, did not take any action against the offenders, the operations failed or only the trapping equipment was seized. In most of the 35 cases with positive response, CABS teams monitored the trapping sites, collected the evidence to identify and report the suspects and game wardens reached the sites in order to seize the illegal traps.

Table 4: Quality of the response by the Game and Fauna Service, autumn 2023.

	Positive response	Negative response/operation
Prosecution	35	
Patrol not available		9
Inappropriate response*		6
Operation failed**		8
Only confiscation***		10
TOTALS	35	33

* cases of late arrival to the site, not appropriate search of the trapper's equipment resulting in no evidence gathered, short ambushes, poorly performed ambushes, no action taken against offender...

** cases where the ambush fails for no clear reason nor responsibility. Traps can be not found or seized.

***No attempt done to perform any action aimed at identifying the offender, but only traps are dismantled

5.2 THE CYPRUS POLICE

In the absence of the game wardens patrol, CABS may refer to the local police. All 4 cases investigated by CABS and reported to the police ended in a prosecution.

To note, all cases refer to liaison with local police stations, despite the reinstatement of the specialised Anti-Poaching Squad in 2023. Unfortunately, although we obtained an official meeting with the Unit in their office, the officials from the APS refused to liaise with us in the following months and ignored all our reports of trapping, even for cases of dangerous and professional trapping.

Table 5: Quality of the response by the Cyprus Police, autumn 2023.

	Positive response	Negative response/operation
Prosecution	4	
Patrol not available/no action		0
Inappropriate response*		0
Operation failed**		0
Only confiscation***		0
TOTALS	4	0

* cases of late arrival to the site, not appropriate search of the trapper's equipment resulting in no evidence being collected, short ambushes, poorly performed ambushes, no action taken against offender...

** cases where the ambush fails for no clear reason nor responsibility. Traps can be not found or seized.

***No attempt done to perform any enforcement action aimed at identifying the offender, but only traps are dismantled

5.3 ESBA POLICE

Within the ESBA, CABS teams report the cases of wildlife crime to the special unit of the Sovereign Base Area Police – the Crime Action Team 'CAT' team, and when the patrol is not available to the local police stations. The table refers to both enforcement bodies.

The cooperation with SBA police is good and the joint operations can be very successful. Unfortunately, in autumn 2023, the CAT team was severely understaffed, and its patrols minimised. Out of 11 cases of active trapping reported, only 2 yielded prosecutions and both cases required the support of the regular police.

Table 6: Quality of the response by the ESBA Police, autumn 2023.

	Positive response	Negative response/operation
Prosecution	2	
Patrol non available		0
Inappropriate response*		2
Operation failed**		4
Only confiscation***		3
TOTALS	2	9

* cases of late arrival to the site, not appropriate search of the trapper's equipment resulting in no evidence collected, short ambushes, poorly performed ambushes, no action taken against offender...

** cases where the ambush fails for no clear reason nor responsibility. Traps can be not found or seized.

***No attempt done to perform any action aimed at identifying the offender, but only traps are dismantled



Picture 2: Blackcap released from a net by SBA police. CABS & SPA autumn BPC 2023 (Photo: CABS).

6 ILLEGAL HUNTING

Illegal hunting is an exponential phenomenon in the south-east of Cyprus, but it remains mainly unchallenged by the authorities. Illegal hunters regularly target protected species, shoot in areas where hunting is not allowed, and use forbidden electronic decoys that dramatically increase their kill rate.

Despite the massive impact on wildlife that illegal hunting has, CABS teams can dedicate only marginal time investigating illegal shooting, as trapping is still high. Therefore, the figures do not reflect the magnitude of the problem.

In autumn 2023, 95 cases of illegal hunting were investigated by the activists and 21 hunters were prosecuted, following CABS reports to the authorities. Out of the total, 12 were prosecuted in the Republic of Cyprus and 9 in the ESBA.

Table 7: Cases of illegal hunting dealt with by CABS volunteers in autumn 2023

	REPUBLIC	ESBA	TOTAL
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded quail calls	24	2	26
Hunting of protected bird species with electronic caller emitting recorded blackcap call	23	1	24
Hunting of protected bird species	11	0	11
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded song thrush calls	18	6	24
Hunting with electronic caller emitting recorded skylark calls	8	2	10
Hunting in a protected area	0	0	0
TOTAL CASES	84	11	95
NUMBER OF PROSECUTIONS	12	9	21

7 CABS & SPA PARTICIPATION IN THE OVERALL ENFORCEMENT RESULTS AGAINST BIRD TRAPPING

According to data published by BirdLife Cyprus¹, in the period from August to end of October 2023, 45 prosecutions were secured by Game Wardens in Larnaca and Famagusta District, by the Anti-Poaching Squad of Cyprus police and by the special unit of ESBA police. In the Republic of Cyprus, 78% of the prosecutions secured by game wardens were possible because of CABS teams reports and investigations (87% if including cases with police as first responder). Data confirm that the newly re-established APS is willingly ignoring bird poaching as a whole, probably for political reasons: only one operation was carried out by the APS against the dangerous trapper of Maroni – who traps hundreds of protected birds every day - and with a limited success.

As far as we know the trapping gang was caught solely with one net. This operation, carried every year at the end of the season, has no deterrent effect at all and it resembles by close those fake operations performed by enforcement units as “greenwashing manoeuvres”, often in agreement with the offenders, and only serve to show to other authorities that “something has been done”, whereas this something means nothing.

1 BirdLife Cyprus, Update on illegal bird trapping activity in Cyprus, 03/2024

In the ESBA, CABS teams could report their findings mainly to the regular police, as CAT team was understaffed and therefore often not on duty. Three operations with the regular police, with the environmentalists as witnesses, led to successful prosecutions.

Table 8: Prosecutions for bird trapping in the period August-October 2023

	GAME WARDENS	APS	ESBA CAT	ESBA POLICE
Total number of prosecutions ²	41	1	3	UN**
Number of prosecutions secured with CABS assistance	32*	0	0	3

* The number does not include the cases that have been reported to local police, not being clear if they have been included in the official number of game wardens.

** Unknown

8 DISCUSSION

- Illegal trapping remains a major issue for bird conservation on the island and the situation recorded in autumn 2023 during CABS & SPA Bird Protection Camp showed a worsening. Even if numbers of seized paraphernalia decreased during our Camp, the time and personnel invested by CABS in every prosecution increased (investigation, ambushing, statements at police stations, preparing and handing over of evidence, participation to court cases) and consequently less time was devoted to field work. The proportion between searched sites and active sides was the highest since 2016.
- In the Famagusta and Larnaca districts of the Republic of Cyprus the problem is not seriously challenged by the authorities and lacks proper enforcement: The Game and Fauna Service is understaffed for dealing with the current levels of illegal trapping and hunting; with no patrols during the night and unreliable availability during the day, as priority is often given to other duties.
- On various occasions the game wardens were unprepared to deal with dangerous gangs, leaving the criminals untouched and exposing CABS teams to more risks. CABS teams suffered 2 serious physical attacks and 2 dangerous attacks to their cars with just 1 month of fieldwork.

- The reinstatement of the 'Oulamos', the Anti-Poaching Squad (APS) of police, seemed an important step moving forward, especially for the fight with dangerous professional trappers. In reality, the refusal from the Squad to receive any report and to act against known dangerous trappers, confirmed the initial fears that the unit is not dealing with bird poaching, not even with professional bird poaching.
- As in the previous year, despite the promises of several police operations starting in August, only one operation was conducted against the biggest trapper of the island, Akas, who, along with an organized criminal gang, trap and sell thousands of protected birds every year. Again, the operation was carried out towards the end of the trapping season and gave poor results (like every year, as expected).
- Another significant threat to bird conservation is illegal hunting. Political reluctance to deal with the issue, lack of proactive enforcement and low sanctions result in common and widespread illegalities. The high number of illegalities and the increasing use of sites with loud callers for blackcaps, where groups of poachers target protected species every day, are seen as a sign that poachers might move from trapping to illegal hunting. Together with the conservationists, more operations are carried out by game wardens against illegal shooting and lead to successful prosecutions, but hunting remains unchallengeable for many, regardless of the legality or illegality of the practice.
- In the ESBA the situation is increasingly problematic, especially regarding illegal trapping. Given the limited time spent in the ESBA, figures of the findings can just about show the reality on the ground. During some monitoring in the blackspot areas in the base, CABS activists found numerous large trapping sites active in the same night and the entrances to the countryside patrolled by the cars of poachers. It's been clear for years now that in the British territory professional trappers quickly react to the presence of enforcement. As soon as police stop performing regular checks in the night and conducting anti-poaching operations, poachers use the opportunity to construct large-scale trapping installations. It is not understandable therefore the inappropriate enforcement displayed this year again, with the specialized unit reduced at its minimum and the agents with considerable expertise gained in years, transferred elsewhere, for at least the first half of the trapping season.



Picture 3. Long-eared owl freed from glue trap. CABS & SPA autumn BPC 2023 (Photo: CABS).