

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

4th March 2015, Hexagon House, MEPA, 1630 - 1745

Minutes

Attending members:

Prof Mark Anthony Falzon – Chairman
Mr Sergei Golovkin - Secretary
Mr Nicholas Barbara – Birdlife (Malta)
Mr. Geoffrey Saliba - Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKKNK Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna Expert
Mr Gwido Baldacchino - Member nominated by Government
Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government
Mr Frank Vassallo – Hunting and Trapping Expert

Excused: Mr Lino Farrugia – FKKNK; Mr Stephen Saliba – MEPA

Absent: Ms Emeline Fenech – Member nominated by Government

Other contributors present: Mr Richard Lia, Manager of Policy Branch of WBRU

1. Adoption of the agenda

1.1 The agenda was adopted, subject to change in the order of the items requested by the FKKNK.

2. Adoption of the minutes of the meetings held on 21st January 2015

2.1 Minutes were adopted subject to corrections made by Birdlife (Malta) and the FKKNK.

3. Outcome of the 2014 autumn hunting season

3.1 Sergei Golovkin gave an overview of the process of CdC collection and data extraction. In 2014 there were 10,811 persons licensed to hunt birds on land. Some 10,242 hunting licences were returned by the legal deadline of 13th February 2015, whilst a further 626 persons were subject to an administrative fine of €75 for late return. Of these, 459 have returned their booklet during the period between 14th February and 3rd March after paying the fine. Thus the total number of hunting CdC booklets from which data was extracted is 10,701, which represents 99% of all bird hunting on land booklets in circulation.

3.2 The process of extracting turtle dove and quail data commenced immediately upon return of the general licences, that is, on 2 February. As was the case last year, the process was subject to quadruple quality checks, which involved three quality checks by data operators, and one physical random sample check by WBRU, which reviewed data entry for 1,000 booklets or circa 9.8% of the total number collected. The final checked count stood at 1,717 Turtle Doves and 1,666 Quail. A further 789 entries pertained to undetermined species (either TD or Q). The “undetermined species” count is apportioned in proportion to the number of turtle doves and quail, at the ratio of 1.0306 TD (766) to 1 Q (23). Thus, the final figure is 2,483 TD and 1,689 Q.

3.3. Chairman referred to the large number of “undetermined species” entries and asked whether the format of CdC can be improved to simplify recording procedure for hunters to avoid such entries.

Sergei Golovkin replied that the format of the CdC evolved over many years and hunters became accustomed to it. Whilst the format may be improved further, there will always remain the possibility for human error. Although there were 789 entries where it was not possible to determine which of these represented TD or Q, it was nonetheless certain that the entries represented either of the two species and hence these were added to global count and apportioned in accordance with the TD:Q ratio. Also, in the past years, the number of such entries was considerably higher.

3.4 Sergei Golovkin continued to explain that the number of hunters who did not declare shooting either TD or Q during the season was 6,897, which is fewer than in 2013 (7,904) and in 2012 (7,703). Nonetheless there remains to be a consistently high percentage, hovering around 65% - 75% of hunters who did not bag TD or Q. This figure is consistent throughout the years, indicating that around three quarters of hunters do not have sufficient hunting opportunities in the autumn. This issue was also considered by the ECJ in its 2009 ruling.

3.5 Sergei Golovkin also presented a graph listing TD and Q catches during all autumn seasons since 2002. Whilst the catches in 2014 were lowest ever, high variability from one year to another was also noted. The low catches can be explained by two principal factors: low extent of migration and the fact that the hunting season was suspended between 20th of September and 11th October, which coincided with several TD and Q migration peaks recorded through the independent migration study. This study, which was conducted between 1st September and 30th October, indicated TD peaks on 22, 26 and 28 September and Q peaks on 23, 24, 25, 27 September and on 2 and 6 October, when the season was closed. The study also contrasted 2014 autumn observations with observations made in 2008 and 2009 autumn seasons using similar methodology. This analysis indicates that the extent of TD and Q migration in 2014 was considerably lower than that in 2008 and 2009. Unfortunately no autumn migration data is available for other years, to enable a more extensive analysis.

3.6 Nicholas Barbara said that Birdlife (Malta) has consistently contested the veracity of CdC reports, and therefore on the basis of the data presented, one could not definitively conclude that the low CdC reports in 2014 were due to low migration or due to suspension of the season. This is why Birdlife (Malta) has requested a daily breakdown of CdC reports for 2014 autumn season, to enable a detailed comparison and correlation with observations carried out through migration study.

3.7 Chairman said that one could not directly correlate hunting figures with the numbers of observed birds. It is possible that on certain dates migration peaks may have been recorded through the study, and yet few birds may have actually been bagged by the hunters in case such birds may have been flying high. There would probably be a very broad correlation in the overall trends, but no direct correlation, especially in magnitude. He also said that Birdlife (Malta)'s request for daily figures is legitimate, and the WBRU should provide these figures to Ornis as otherwise one may question transparency of the process.

3.8 Sergei Golovkin explained that indeed the study report itself mentions methodological limitations. Whilst a direct comparison is not possible, the study is still useful as an additional verification mechanism because one would reasonably expect at least a very broad correlation in the trends. As regards Birdlife's request for daily breakdown figures, he explained that this was not an issue of transparency, but of logistics. The migration study report was completed in February, at a time when CdC data was still in the process of being extracted. Hence the report could not have included a comparison between the two. This comparison will be performed but appropriate time must be allocated to this task. He also pointed out that Ornis is legally bound to consider global data and Ornis has never previously discussed daily data or any autumn observations. Indeed this is the first time ever that such detailed statistics are being compiled and presented to Ornis.

3.9 Sergei Golovkin also explained that the daily data has been extracted and aggregated literally over the past few hours. At the time of reply to Nicholas Barbara's email he was not sure whether the WBRU will be in time to compile this for the meeting, but some extra effort was invested into this and the data had been extracted on time. He presented a graph which depicts daily CdC trends for

both species. Daily numerical data was also provided for scrutiny. The data shows TD catches peaking towards mid-September, which also correlates with Ecoserv's observations. Much lower TD peaks are recorded after suspension elapsed. The graph also shows Quail reports peaking just before suspension of the season, and then resuming in much lesser magnitude after the period of suspension elapsed, trailing off by the end of the year.

3.10 Referring to Birdlife (Malta)'s doubts over veracity of CdC figures, Sergei Golovkin presented statistics concerning enforcement and disclosure of hunting violations during the 2014 autumn season. These statistics have been published today. Statistics show that the number of inspections performed during the season was more than double the number performed in 2013, which increased the rate of disclosure for minor administrative violations such as non-reporting in CdC. On the other hand, the increase in penalties coupled with increase in inspections have led to a sustained reduction in serious incidents, such as shooting of protected birds, hunting during closed season, hunting in protected areas, or hunting without a license. The drop in these incidents was particularly profound. He also noted that these positive trends were also indicated in reports by NGOs, including by Birdlife Malta.

3.11 Nicholas Barbara said that observations by NGO volunteers indeed registered a drop in observed incidents, however this did not translate into a reduction in the number of injured birds recovered by the NGO. He questioned why these figures are not reflected in WBRU reports.

3.12 Sergei Golovkin replied that statistics pertaining to injured birds is always reported to European Commission. It did not feature in enforcement reports because these reports deal with enforcement effort deployed and statistics pertaining to number of disclosed violations. He asked Birdlife (Malta) to publish their autumn reports, and to confirm whether there has been an improvement or deterioration of the situation.

3.13 Nicholas Barbara said that improvement has been registered, particularly in comparison with 2012 which was one of the worst years.

4. Assessment of the conservation status of TD and Q

4.1 Richard Lia was invited to present the assessment. The assessment considered latest available scientific literature with regards to the conservation status of both species at the global, pan-European and EU levels. The analysis also delved into conservation status at the level of reference populations which are proven to migrate over the Maltese Islands through ring recoveries from other EU Member States. The assessment indicates that both species are characterised by extremely large populations and geographical range. Whilst some countries in the EU have registered a decline in the population of both species, populations within countries from which Turtle Doves and Quails migrate over Malta is stable and is actually marginally increasing. Whilst there has been a further decline in the long term trend by a further 3% over the previous update to a total of 77% decline since 1980, the short term trend assessment indicates a marginal improvement of 9% over the last year's EBCC update, with an overall decline in the short-term trend of 21% since 1990.

4.2 Sergei Golovkin noted that this can be interpreted as the rate of long term decline slowing down. Chairman disagreed with this interpretation, saying that this would only be the case if the short term increase is sustained.

4.3 Chairman also made reference to the section of the assessment which deals with breeding records. In particular, he referred to the sentence on page 8 which states that Quail "only occasionally visits the Maltese Islands in limited numbers during migration". He disagreed with the use of the words "occasionally" and "in limited numbers". Richard Lia said that he will double check with the literature source. Chairman also questioned the assertion of no recent breeding records. He said that the fact that a hunting season takes place in spring is the factor that contributes to this. Sergei

Golovkin noted that the remit of the assessment report was to present the facts, and not to delve into analysis of the factors that may give rise to these facts.

4.4 Chairman furthermore asked whether in WBRU's assessment, there are no factors concerning conservation status that may prejudice the application of derogation. Sergei Golovkin replied that it is not up to WBRU to recommend any derogation, but up to Ornis to discuss and come up with recommendations. WBRU's role is limited to conducting an assessment and presenting updates on the basis of the latest scientific literature.

5. Recommendations on potential derogation

5.1 Chairman proposed that following the discussion of the material presented, the Committee may vote on the recommendation to apply derogation. However if any member feels that further discussion is needed, appropriate time can be allocated.

5.2 Geoffrey Saliba said Birdlife (Malta) would appreciate to be given some time to assess the materials presented and come up with a reaction, prior to any vote.

5.3 It was agreed that a follow-up meeting to discuss this reaction shall be scheduled for Tuesday 10th March.

6. Any other business

6.1 Nicholas Barbara suggested that the Committee should also discuss enforcement arrangements during potential spring hunting season, preferably with the representative of the ALE being present. Chairman agreed and asked members to come up with suggestions to improve enforcement.

6.2 Nicholas Barbara also requested discussion on the outcome of live-capturing derogations. Sergei Golovkin replied that for such discussion to be substantive, it would ideally take place once the relevant data and reports have been compiled, possibly towards the end of April.

6.3 The meeting was adjourned at 1745 hours.