

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

15th December 2016, WBRU, 1630 - 1930

Minutes

Attending members:

Prof Mark Anthony Falzon – Chairman
Mr Sergei Golovkin - Secretary
Mr Mark Sultana – Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Nicholas Barbara - Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Stephen Saliba – ERA
Mr Lino Farrugia – FKNK
Mr Frank Vassallo– Hunting and Trapping Expert
Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government
Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna Expert

Excused: Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKNK; Mr George Coleiro - Member nominated by Government,

Absent: Dr Josef Masini Vento - Member nominated by Government

Other contributors present: Mr Richard Lia, Senior Manager, Wild Birds Regulation Unit

(1) Adoption of the agenda

1.1 The agenda was adopted, however discussion on proposed item 7 (bird ringing) was postponed to future sessions upon request from Lino Farrugia.

(2) Approval of the minutes

2.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 2nd November 2016 were approved.

(3) Matters arising and matters to report

3.1 Sergei Golovkin informed the Committee that the Wild Birds Regulation Unit has recently commissioned a study on breeding and wintering birds of Malta, which is expected to commence within the next few weeks and be completed in 2018. The findings of the study will constitute the main input to Malta's reporting obligations under Article 12 of the Birds Directive. The study was commissioned to a foreign company following competitive open service tender procedure and follows a format that would allow compilation of relevant data in accordance with Article 12 reporting checklist. Whilst meetings between the consultants and various stakeholders including BLM and FKNK are in the process of being set for early January, it would also be useful for the study to be presented at some point to the Ornis Committee. It is highly desirable that all stakeholders cooperate with the commissioned consultants to facilitate the execution of the study, and in particular, identification of any data that is already available.

3.2 Lino Farrugia said that thousands of Maltese hunters are also keen bird observers. Collectively the hunters and trappers possess a wealth of local knowledge on breeding birds. He stressed that it is

important that this local traditional knowledge is tapped as part of the study. Sergei Golovkin confirmed that this is precisely the intention behind meetings that are being set with the various stakeholders, including hunting organisations. He also referred to wealth of ornithological data gathered by Birdlife Malta through various projects and schemes, which will also benefit the project.

3.3 The Committee took note of and welcomed this development.

(4) Update on autumn hunting season

4.1 Sergei Golovkin circulated a table indicating catches of huntable species as reported by hunters through telephonic game reporting system since the start of the season to date:

Species	Reported	Species	Reported
Gamiema	123	Kuluvert	9
Summiena	246	Kuluvert Griz	0
Malvizz Hunting	8693	Silfjun	2
Malvizz Iswed	146	Silfjun Ewropew	7
Malvizz tal-Qtajja	10	Palettuna	0
Malvizz Ahmar	3	Pluviera	
Malvizzun Prim	18	Hunting	58
Alwetta	965	Pluviera	
Sturnell	2132	Pastarda	5
Girwiel	5	Venewwa	12
Wizza tal-Ful	1	Gallina	132
Wizza Griza	1	Bekkacc	24
Brajmla	1	Cinkonja	8
Brajmla tat-Toppu	0	Gallozz Iswed	7
Sarsella	6	Tigiega tal-	
Sarsella Hamra	0	Bahar	1
Rabbit Trapping	77	Gallozz tax-	
		Xitwa	5
		Tudun	9
		Tudun tal-Gebel	2
		Rabbit Hunting	170

4.2 The table excludes reports of species caught under derogations. The latter data will be included in relevant derogation reports after the end of the derogation season.

4.3 Sergei Golovkin stressed that the data reported to the Committee today is still preliminary, constituting a simple extract from game reporting system, and was not yet subjected to quality checks. Final data on the season together with relevant analysis will be published in a detailed report after the end of the season.

4.4 Chairman referred to the report of a bagged Bean Goose and asked whether WBRU has ascertained the veracity of this report given that the presence of this species in Malta is extremely rare. Upon performing an internal check, Sergei Golovkin confirmed that this particular report listed in the table originated from an internal testing account used periodically by the Unit to test the functions of the reporting system. Such internal checks will subsequently be filtered out as part of QA/QC process that will be performed at the end of the season. He also noted that in comparison with the old Carnet de Chasse system, the fact that one can extract a variety of data in real time constitutes

a huge advantage for decision making process. Under the old system, one had to wait several months for the booklets to be physically collected and the data to be manually extracted.

4.5 Nicholas Barbara asked to clarify what is meant by the entry under the heading of “pluviera hunting”. He also asked whether the trapping quota for golden plovers has already been reached, given that significant migration of this species was observed.

4.6 Sergei Golovkin clarified that the heading of “pluviera hunting” was introduced in the system for internal purposes to be able to distinguish between reports of plovers shot and reports of plovers captured under derogation. The trapping quota for golden plovers has not yet been reached.

4.7 Chairman, Mark Gauci and Mark Sultana remarked that there have been multiple reports of golden plover influxes and sizeable flocks of the species were observed at certain areas, such as at the airport. It is therefore surprising to see that the quota has not yet been reached. Sergei Golovkin replied to these remarks that apart from a few sporadic and localised sightings, the WBRU is not aware of any information pointing to a particularly unusual influx of this species. An independent migration study is presently underway which would allow to assess the extent of migration on the basis of systematic scientific observations as opposed to anecdotal evidence and hearsay.

4.8 Mark Sultana asked whether there is any indication of how many hunters have actually made use of the reporting system during the season. Sergei Golovkin replied that out of approximately 10,400 persons licensed to hunt during autumn of 2016, around one thousand hunters have made reports of catches during the season so far. The total number of birds bagged during the season to date was 12,629 and therefore this works out at an average bag of 12.6 birds per hunter who made use of the reporting system. These preliminary statistics will be further updated as the season progresses. The above statistics does not include reports made by live-catchers under derogations.

4.9 Mark Gauci said that the fact that only about 10% of licensed persons made use of the system to date seems to be abnormally low. He asked whether there is any data concerning hunting effort in the sense that the authorities are aware of the number of active hunters on any particular day irrespective of whether these hunters reported any bags. He furthermore asked to compare reported catches with those reported in previous years through Carnet de Chasse and to explain the reasons in case of substantial differences.

4.10 Sergei Golovkin replied that under the old Carnet de Chasse system since 2002, the authorities collected huge volumes of data on the presence of hunters in the field on any given day. Possibility of integrating an additional reporting module to capture data on hunters going out in the field was explored for the new system but was ruled out for technical reasons, and due to the fact that such overall hunting effort is not expected to vary significantly from one year to the next. The fact that a relatively low percentage of licensed persons actually reported catches during this autumn season is broadly consistent with similar metrics reported for past years. It cannot therefore be assumed that all licensed persons actually took active part in the hunting season. Moreover, those who did practice hunting had done so with a varied intensity. Some hunters may have gone out only once or twice and did not bag anything. Others may have been practicing regularly throughout the season, with a varying degree of success, which depends on a variety of factors. The numbers of bagged birds appear to be considerably lower this season than those reported through carnet de chasse in the past years, despite similar levels of overall hunting effort. This can be explained with reference to biological and non-biological factors. For example in the case of the turtle dove, this is evident from the fact that migration was extremely poor and the lowest in several years, as confirmed also through migration study. Moreover, this year government has imposed new rules for turtle dove hunting, including shortening the season to the month of September only. Quail migration was also extremely poor, and quail hunting opportunities were reduced further as a result of bad weather that was prevalent on the days when quail presence was observed. On the other hand, whilst starlings and song thrushes were relatively abundant, the somewhat lower numbers reported this year could be explained by the change in the reporting system, which now has a greater sense of immediacy, as opposed to the system where

hunters routinely filled in their *carnet de chasse* booklets at the end of the season “from memory”, possibly resulting in exaggerated reports.

4.11 Nicholas Barbara dismissed the above explanation as “justification of the simple fact that the electronic reporting system is still in its infancy and did not produce an accurate carnet de chasse reporting in 2016.” He added that “this is to be acknowledged (instead of having) a whole array of theoretical explanations covering this simple fact”. He furthermore echoed the comments expressed by Mark Gauci and asked regarding measures being undertaken by WBRU to ensure credibility of the reporting system. Sergei Golovkin replied by stating that in comparison with game reporting deployed in other EU member states, Malta’s system is certainly amongst the best, both in terms of the legally-binding nature of reporting which is enforced through spot checks in the field, and also in terms of the technical aspects that allow for real time collection of multiple data. Therefore the data that is being gathered is the best available data that we have. On its part, WBRU has engaged closely with the hunting organisations to promote the use of the new system. The Unit has produced and disseminated to all hunters an information booklet listing huntable species and instructions on the use of the reporting system. The Unit also produced an informational video clip explaining the rationale behind the system and its use. This clip was also widely shared amongst hunters. Questions concerning game reporting have also been included as part of the mandatory syllabus for preparation of applicants for new hunting licenses. This knowledge is tested during theory examinations administered by WBRU. The fact that the system is already legally binding, its use is enforced in the field, is technically simple to use, and the information concerning its use is widely available, leaves not much scope for further measures in this regard.

4.12 Mark Sultana asked regarding any updates concerning enforcement.

4.13 Sergei Golovkin informed the Committee that a steady presence of around 25-27 officers is being maintained on patrols in Malta during each shift, whilst the enforcement complement in Gozo varies between 5 and 9 officers in each shift. This excludes WBRU enforcement officers who also conduct own surveillance operations and inspections. Detailed statistics concerning enforcement of trapping derogations will be published in due course as part of derogation reports. However very preliminary data, which is subject to further updates as appropriate reports are being gathered on an ongoing basis, includes the following breaches detected so far: legal action is being taken against 4 persons accused of illegal targeting of protected species, one person prosecuted for hunting without a valid license, one person prosecuted for abandonment of ammunition, one person for trapping during closed season, 11 cases of use of bird caller whilst trapping (data on bird-caller related breaches whilst hunting was not included), one case of hunting within prohibited distances, three cases of leaving trapping sites unattended, four cases of exceedance in the number of live decoys, three cases of trapping on unregistered sites and several other firearms and trapping irregularities.

4.14 Sergei Golovkin also informed the Committee that since 1st September and to date, WBRU received reports of just over 100 injured or stranded birds, for which necessary veterinary care and rehabilitation was provided in collaboration with Birdlife Malta and the contracted veterinarian. About 50 of these birds were confirmed to have been shot illegally. This is twice more than the number of illegally shot birds recovered by the authorities during the whole of 2015, and approximately the same as the number of illegally shot birds in 2014.

4.15 Chairman thanked Sergei Golovkin for the information provided and asked the Committee to proceed to the next agenda item.

5. Outcome of the 2016 autumn migration study for turtle dove and quail

5.1 Chairman invited Sergei Golovkin to present this item.

5.2 Sergei Golovkin recalled that a digital copy of the study report was circulated to Ornis members in advance of the meeting. The report is also available online. The study followed identical methodology to that adopted in the autumn of 2014 and 2015. Six observer stations were manned daily during specified hours between 1st of September and 31st October. Observers recorded turtle dove and quail counts, which were then extrapolated for the entire territory of the Maltese Islands using the same assumptions and methodology as deployed during similar migration studies conducted since 2008.

5.3 The report estimated a total migratory influx of the Turtle Dove at 6,868 individuals over a two-month period, most of which was recorded in the first two weeks of September. Estimated quail migration was relatively more pronounced at 69,915 individuals, mostly observed between the 3rd week of September and 3rd week of October. Notwithstanding this, grand mean of observed quail counts in the autumn of 2016 was more than twice lower than corresponding counts in 2008 and 2009, but marginally higher than in 2014 and 2015.

5.4 Chairman asked whether this study is useful and whether its benefits outweigh the costs involved. Sergei Golovkin replied that despite its limitations the study results in the build up of a longitudinal dataset that allows comparison and analysis of migration trends for these two huntable species which are subject to EU management plans. Malta appears to be the only EU member state that conducts studies on a nationwide basis. The findings of the study also help to validate reports made by hunters. Moreover, the findings of such studies appear to have directly challenged the entrenched popular myth, occasionally fuelled by other published papers that claim Maltese hunting bags run into hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of birds. Autumn and spring migration studies for these two species conducted over the years represent the best available scientific and structured effort that has proven that millions or even hundreds of thousands of turtle doves and quails simply do not migrate over Malta, even if several years' data is added together.

5.5 Lino Farrugia referred to the recent paper published in April 2016 that claimed that Maltese hunters kill over 4% of the European population of the turtle dove each spring, which amounts to over half a million of birds. He also referred to studies published in 1980s that claimed that over 200,000 turtle doves were shot annually. He said that the fact that Maltese hunters "bag" turtle doves in such increasing numbers "year after year" should indicate that the species is indeed a very abundant one. But the opposite is actually the case and both the migration study data and hunters' reports to the authorities show that such claims are totally untrue.

5.6 The Committee took note of the report presented.

6. Updates on the conservation status of Quail

6.1 Nicholas Barbara asked whether this item is being introduced in view of the possible spring hunting derogation for quail. He asked WBRU to clarify whether such derogation is already being discussed, and whether any special measures are being planned in view of the moratorium on spring hunting of the turtle dove. He emphasized that Birdlife Malta did not request WBRU to present conservation status update on quail..

6.2 Sergei Golovkin made reference to email correspondence with Birdlife Malta in advance of the Ornis meeting, which was also copied to Ornis members for their information. Birdlife Malta originally requested to "table measures WBRU envisages for the spring hunting derogation, if Turtle Dove hunting is to be banned in spring" but was advised in reply that no such measures are being considered at this stage. In response to subsequent request by Ornis Chairman to the Secretary to "table what he has, and what he can table", the Committee was offered to consider migration study monitoring report, hunting bag data to date, and conservation status assessment of quail. The fact that the above reports are now being tabled in response to these requests should not be construed as any direction to consider a quail season. However it is up to the Committee and its members to come up with any proposals.. He also drew the Committee's attention to the ongoing work being carried out

at EU level under the umbrella of EU LIFE-funded EUROSAP project which will result in a new EU management plan for the species.

6.3 Lino Farrugia said that the position of the FKNK has been made clear on several occasions, including in FKNK's submission to EU Commissioner Karmenu Vella, wherein FKNK has stated that Malta's moratorium on spring turtle dove hunting would not make any difference whatsoever to population status of the turtle dove at any level - European, pan-European or global, due to insignificant numbers that used to be hunted on the Maltese Islands. Moreover, he said it has been clearly established that the main pressure on the turtle dove does not come from hunting, but from agriculture. Therefore no restrictions on hunting in Malta would "ever" make a difference to the status of the species in Europe. Although the FKNK would never propose hunting bans or restrictions on hunting in any EU country, it is hard to believe that Malta continued to be at the focus of efforts to ban hunting at the same time that other EU member states allow hunting of this species in incomparably larger numbers, without any problems from the European Commission. This highlights "Commission's two weights and two measures approach" when dealing with Malta. He moreover asked to clarify whether an update on the conservation status of quail will also be followed by a similar update on the conservation status of the turtle dove. He also stated that hunters are primarily interested in the turtle dove during spring season.

6.4 Mark Sultana made reference to the fact that quail migration occurs earlier than that of the turtle dove and asked whether there are any discussions on the timing of a potential season for quail. Sergei Golovkin replied that at this stage this issue has not yet been discussed. He reiterated that it is up to the Committee and its members to make any proposals and recommendations. With reference to the question concerning conservation status update for turtle dove, Sergei Golovkin said that since a moratorium on future spring hunting derogation for turtle dove is presently in place "until the maintenance of the population of the species at satisfactory level is scientifically ascertained at EU level", and the WBRU is not aware of any major updates to such population status at EU level that would warrant a wholesale reassessment of the situation at this stage, no status report for the turtle dove has yet been compiled. He stressed that this is also an issue of prioritising limited resources and that should Ornis members request compilation of such a report for the turtle dove, WBRU would then consider compiling it

6.5 The Chairman invited Richard Lia to present the report on the conservation status of quail.

6.6 Richard Lia said that as was also the case in previous years, WBRU reviewed all latest available scientific sources to determine the status of quail at reference population, EU and pan-European levels, as well as the relative trends. He then proceeded to outline the main findings of this updated assessment.

6.7 According to this assessment, the European Environment Agency continued to categorise the breeding population trend of the Common Quail at EU27 level as "Decreasing" in the short-term and "Unknown" in the long-term. The EU population status for Common Quail remained "Unknown", as the data reported were not sufficient to assess the population status of the species. The Common Quail has continued to enjoy an IUCN "Least Concern" classification at both the EU27 and European scale, whilst the population of Common Quail within EU27 is estimated by Birdlife International (2015) to constitute 41% of the total European population. This species is not included in the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme. However the assessment carried out as part of this present update has shown that, on the basis of Article 12 reports (EEA, 2014) at EU28 level (EU27 Article 12 reports + Croatian data for 2004), the Common Quail is "Increasing" in the long-term trend (Min. Pairs: +23.49%; Max. Pairs: +27.40%). However, this percentage increase should be interpreted with caution given that it is based on data pertaining to only 74% of Common Quail population within EU28—the remaining 26% have an "Unknown" long-term trend. In the short-term, the EU28 population of Common Quail has a "Stable" maximum number of calling males (-9.23%) but a "Decreasing" minimum number of calling males (-13.65%). Similarly, Malta's reference population of the Common Quail has a short-term trend classification of "Stable" in the maximum number of

calling males (+6%) but “Decreasing” in the minimum number of calling males (-11.73%). The long-term trend of the reference population is “Unknown”.

6.8 Chairman referred to table 4 in the assessment report and asked regarding the reason why long term population trend is classified as “Unknown” for Malta’s reference population when the short-term trend is known to be either “Stable” or “Decreasing”, and the reason behind these latter seemingly conflicting classifications. Richard Lia explained that a wide margin between the minimum and maximum estimates of calling males is the reason behind such classification. The difference between minimum and maximum population size estimates at EU and at reference population levels is greater than the margin for triggering re-classification of the trend. Regarding the long-term trend, both Italy and Hungary had reported an “Unknown” classification, hence the corresponding long-term trend of “Unknown” at reference population level. In the short-term, two separate trend classifications are presented: one on the basis of minimum and one on the basis of maximum population estimates.

6.9 The Committee took note of the above information.

7. Any other business

7.1 The Committee did not discuss any other business.

7.2 The meeting was adjourned at 1900 hrs.