

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

21st October 2013, Casa Leoni, Sta Venera

Minutes

Attending members:

Dr Louis F. Cassar – Chairman

Mr Sergei Golovkin - Secretary

Mr Lino Farrugia - FKNK

Mr Nicholas Barbara – BIRDLIFE (MALTA); (BLM)

Mr Gwido Baldacchino - Member nominated by Government

Ms Emeline Fenech – Member nominated by Government

Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government

Mr Frank Vassallo – Hunting and Trapping Expert

Mr Darrin Stevens – MEPA

Excused: Mr. Joe Perici Calascione (FKNK), Mr. Joseph Mangion - BIRDLIFE (MALTA), Mr .Mark Gauci – Avifauna Expert

(1) Introduction

1.1 Dr Louis Cassar introduced the session as being a continuation of the session held on the 8th October. The draft minutes for both sessions shall be circulated for approval at the next meeting.

(2) Enforcement during autumn hunting season

2.1 Sergei Golovkin said that an overview of the enforcement effort deployed since the start of the 2013 autumn hunting season has been published in October. The published report indicated that over 95 enforcement personnel from various entities, including the ALE, district police, the AFM and the Wild Birds Regulation Unit have been deployed to oversee the hunting season since the 1st of September 2013, which is double the strength deployed in the same period last year. Until 7th October, officers carried out 4,170 field inspections, contributing around 10,000 man hours on the beat, which is 40% more than the number of hours contributed during the same period in 2012. Field inspections carried out during the period between 15th September and 7th October 2013 resulted in the disclosure of 40 offences of various categories, including one case of illegal shooting of a protected bird, one case involving suspected targeting of protected birds at sea (presently under investigation) and 5 cases of trapping of protected birds. The most common type of offence disclosed during this autumn period was illegal use of pre-recorded bird calls (15 cases), followed by possession of a shotgun holding more than 3 cartridges (7 cases), followed by hunting within prohibited distances from roads and inhabited areas (5 cases) and illegal trapping (5 cases). There were no disclosed cases involving hunting in bird sanctuaries or during unpermitted hours. No incidents of illegal targeting of birds of prey from 15th September up until 7th October were disclosed after 1500 hrs. Some 24 persons are being prosecuted with respect to the above-mentioned offences. Last year, a total of 32 offences were detected during the same period, of which 4 incidents involved illegal shooting of protected birds. The most common type of disclosed offence during this period in 2012 was hunting within prohibited distances (9 cases), followed by possession of a shotgun holding more than 3 cartridges (5 cases) followed by shooting of protected birds (4 cases) and hunting and trapping without a license (4 cases). Between 15th and 30th September 2012, a total of 49 injured birds suffering gunshot wounds have been recovered. During the same period in 2013, 18 birds suffering gunshot wounds have been recovered, of which 11 succumbed to their injuries or were euthanized by veterinarians due to the nature of their wounds. Seven birds are being rehabilitated. This indicates that

whilst the number of illegally targeted birds has markedly gone down, the issue of illegal persecution of protected birds still remains to be of concern and needs to be tackled with further measures.

2.2 Nicholas Barbara said that the statistics given does not tally with the number of cases of alleged targeting of protected birds reported by Birdlife, which registered 111 such cases between 1st September and 7th October 2013.

2.3 Sergei Golovkin explained that the official published statistics refers to disclosed cases, which means that sufficient factual evidence was gathered for these cases in order to prosecute offenders in court. All cases of alleged illegalities reported by Birdlife have been investigated by the police, which conducted 4,170 field inspections. It should be noted that some of these inspections were conducted as a direct response to the alleged illegalities reported by Birdlife.

2.4 Lino Farrugia draw the Committee's attention to the leaflet, disseminated by CABS during this period, which leaflet contained incorrect information about legal and illegal practices. He said that this leaflet possibly resulted in a number of incorrect reports lodged by the members of the public who were misinformed by the leaflet, and thus lodged their reports on the basis of incorrect understanding of what is legal and what is illegal. This results in wastage of police effort. He asked whether the police can be asked to provide a breakdown of such false reports.

2.5 Sergei Golovkin said that the police will probably be unable to provide a breakdown of such reports, since the police investigate each and every report lodged. However he is aware that the Commissioner of Police also expressed concern over such incorrect information which translated into wastage of police effort. He also said that upon becoming aware of the leaflet, he had written to Mr David Conlin of CABS and pointed out the incorrect information given.

2.6 Nicholas Barbara asked for information regarding enforcement effort during live capturing derogation for Song thrush and Golden Plover, which was opened on the 20th of October. This information will be provided at the next Ornis meeting.

(3) Procedure for handling of injured birds

3.1 The Chair asked Sergei Golovkin to present this item.

3.2 Sergei Golovkin explained that at present, the procedure for the recovery, handling, rehabilitation and release of injured birds recovered by the public in Malta's countryside is characterised by considerable uncertainty over which entities are responsible for responding to public reports and conducting the recovery, handling and rehabilitation of injured birds, uncertainty over the legal basis, given that the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations expressly prohibit possession of "any bird, whether alive or dead, or part of any bird, the hunting or taking of which are prohibited by these regulations", lack of specially equipped facilities and trained personnel for the handling of injured birds, lacunae in the provision of timely veterinary service to attend to birds' injuries, and lack of public information regarding recovery and reporting of the discovery of injured or dead birds. As a result some recovered injured birds may suffer additional trauma during the handling process, which trauma may result in the bird's death or complications during rehabilitation and recovery process. Non-governmental organisations, particularly Birdlife (Malta) have over the past years provided a range of services concerning recovery, treatment, rehabilitation and release of injured birds, thus partially addressing some of the gaps in the service provided by government entities. However the procedure as applied to date is clearly insufficient and calls for a radical overhaul. The proposed procedure therefore aims to address the above deficiencies by laying down a standard method for action to deal with injured and stranded wild birds in the most effective and timely manner so as to maximise every possibility for eventual successful recovery of the bird.

3.3 Discussions were held with the Commissioner of Police, the Animal Welfare Directorate, MEPA and the Veterinary and Phytosanitary Regulation Department. As a result of these discussions, a draft procedure has been proposed for consideration by the Ornithology Committee. The draft procedure was circulated to Committee members. Essentially, the procedure involves the extension of the Animal Ambulance Service, which shall cater for the cases involving birds. The public will be advised to call this service on freephone 1717 and the birds in question will be picked up by the ambulance. In order to address lacunae in the provision of 24/7 on call veterinary service to handle acute treatment and prescribe long term rehabilitation programme, the WBRU intends to contract such service from the private sector. The contracted veterinary service will be responsible for providing the necessary facilities which will be licensed for this purpose. This function will also include appropriate records keeping and reporting.

3.4 Dr Louis Cassar expressed concern over the large number of recovered injured birds that are being euthanized by the veterinarians commissioned by Birdlife Malta. He suggested that the new procedure should contain a clear protocol regarding euthanasia.

3.5 Nicholas Barbara said that the veterinarian is highly experienced in avian cases and one has to rely on his professional judgement on whether a particular bird can be rehabilitated or should be euthanized. He said that there is a moral issue as well – birds that cannot be rehabilitated to the extent of being able to successfully survive in the wild should be euthanized since “we do not want a situation of caged birds”.

3.6 A discussion on the above point ensued, with Mr Lino Farrugia, Mr Darrin Stevens, Mr Sergei Golovkin and Dr Louis Cassar expressing reservations about this approach, arguing that although not all rehabilitated birds can be released back into the wild, some may be used for other purposes, such as for scientific research and for reintroduction programmes. It was agreed that the proposed tender for commissioning veterinary service should include a protocol regarding post-rehabilitation stage, whereby the veterinarian may be able to recommend whether the bird can be used in a particular programme or should be released.

3.7 Mr Darrin Stevens said that it is important that the Animal Ambulance Service staff take details on who called or the location and circumstances in which the bird was found, as these may be needed by the Police for their investigations (should this be required). Coordination with the police should be retained in all cases. He also noted that if an ambulance be unavailable when called for by the public, such a service would also be unavailable if called for by the district police in the same instance. It may be more appropriate for the Police to take the bird directly to the Luqa Quarantine Facility if the ambulance is unavailable. He also asked whether a member of the public or NGO go directly to the Luqa Quarantine Facility with an injured, stranded or dead bird. If this happens, the staff at the Facility should need to take appropriate details and thus the procedure must cater for this. The contracted veterinarian must be appropriately licensed by the competent authority which is understood to be WBRU. It is also very important to provide clear guidance to the public on what to do when encountering an injured bird.

3.8 Mr. Sergei Golovkin said that all of the above points have been noted and the procedure will be revised accordingly. He appealed to Committee members to provide concrete suggestions with regards to the guidance to the public on what to do in case of discovery of an injured bird.

3.9 Mr. Sergei Golovkin referred to the letter, received from Dr Gabrielle Fumia and addressed to the Ornithology Committee, in which Dr Fumia refers to her work in conjunction with the treatment and rehabilitation of injured birds, and in which Dr Fumia is requesting that an appropriate license be granted for such an activity.

3.10 Mr. Darrin Stevens mentioned requests of this nature that have been made in the past to the Ornis Committee, including past requests by Dr Fumia. It is understood that whilst the handling of protected species other than birds is already subject to an existing permitting procedure, there is no such procedure in the case of wild birds.

3.11 Mr Sergei Golovkin said that he has emailed Dr Fumia and advised her that at this stage licensing procedure in relation to handling of wild birds is not in place, however such a process will be put in place by the time veterinary service mentioned in the proposed draft procedure for handling of injured birds will be contracted. The contracted service provider will have to be licensed by the WBRU to carry out such an activity.

(4) Any other business

4.1 Mr Sergei Golovkin and Mr Darrin Stevens suggested that the next Ornis session should be dedicated to discussion on Article 12 report, which has to be submitted to the EU by the end of the year.

(5) Date of the next meeting

5.1 The next meeting was proposed to be held on 21st November. However due to unavailability of some of the members this was subsequently change to Monday 25th November at 1730 at Casa Leoni.