

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

Wednesday, 22nd November 2017, WBRU, MESDC, Sta Venera
1630 - 1800

Minutes

Participants:

Magistrate (retd.) Dr Dennis Montebello – Chairman
Mr Sergei Golovkin - Secretary
Mr Mark Sultana – Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Nicholas Barbara - Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Lino Farrugia – FKNK
Mr Joseph Tabone - Member nominated by Government
Mr Frank Vassallo– Hunting and trapping expert
Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government
Mr Horace Micallef - Member nominated by Government
Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna Expert
Ms Maria Attard – Representative of the Environment and Resources Authority

Excused: Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKNK

(1) Approval of the agenda

1.1 Agenda was approved

(2) Matters arising and matters to report

2.1 Sergei Golovkin informed the Committee that as a result of negotiations at the Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention for Migratory Species that took place in Manila in October, the Maltese delegation was instrumental in overcoming certain reservations by specific States and in securing international agreement on an important Resolution concerning the fight against illegal killing, trapping and trade in wild birds (IKB). The Resolution reports on the work performed by the Intergovernmental Task Force on IKB in the Mediterranean (MIKT), which is presently chaired by Malta, and promotes, amongst other, the use of the international Scoreboard to assess countries' progress in addressing the problem of illegal killing, trapping and trade in protected birds. The Scoreboard was proposed by Malta as an objective, internationally-recognised set of indicators that allows an impartial assessment of the countries' efforts in combating IKB. The tool was subsequently developed in a joint effort between the Bern Convention and CMS Convention Secretariats, with significant inputs from Malta and other state parties and observer organisations in both Conventions. The Scoreboard initiative came to fruition in June this year in Malta, which hosted and chaired an important joint session of the bird conservation expert groups from both Conventions that brought together over 80 experts, scientists, government representatives and NGOs from over 30 countries. The new CMS Resolution encourages 124 state parties to CMS to make use of this international tool, and promotes the establishment of a similar task force for the East Asian – Australasian Flyway region.

2.2 The Committee took note of this report and expressed regret that this positive development was not yet reported in the media.

2.3 Nicholas Barbara made reference to BLM's previous request to provide a copy of the letter sent to trappers in June 2017 as well as special license application form. Sergei Golovkin reiterated that he does not see these internal administrative documents as being relevant to Ornis; however if the Committee as a whole deems these forms important, these would be tabled accordingly. The Chair ruled that these documents should be tabled. This ruling was adhered to and both documents were tabled accordingly.

(3) Approval of the minutes

3.1 Minutes were approved.

(4) Blue Rock thrush research proposal: follow-up from discussion on 18/10/2017

4.1 The Chairman recapitulated the conclusions of the previous discussion on this item and invited the Members to express their views with regards to two cardinal points: (a) whether the Members agree that scientific marking of the specimens caught constitutes good practice, and if yes, (b) whether Ornis can approve the project subject to scientific ringing being incorporated in the study design.

4.2 Frank Vassallo and Mark Gauci confirmed that scientific ringing of caught specimens constitutes good practice and is desirable.

4.3 Marco Falzon noted that Ornis previously refused to grant its endorsement to the proposal because the Proposer refused to engage in collaboration with BLM to ensure that specimens are ringed. However since the Proposer subsequently agreed that scientific marking can be carried out by a foreign qualified bird ringer, and given that the previously expressed difficulty in collaborating with the national ringing scheme run by BLM due to objections from land owner has now been solved by the possibility of engaging a foreign ringer, the research proposal should be recommended for approval of a derogation.

4.4 Lino Farrugia noted that the purpose of the proposed research and its precise design is irrelevant to Ornis, and it is up to the researcher to propose any method of study that suits his objective. He furthermore registered an abstention on the issue of whether scientific ringing would necessarily constitute good practice in this case.

4.5 The Chair noted Lino Farrugia's abstention, but confirmed that the rest of the Committee has agreed that ringing in this case constitutes good practice and should be incorporated in the project design. The Chair furthermore registered the fact that in this case, the Proposer was deemed to be a scientifically competent person to execute the project design, whilst the bird ringing component shall be performed by a foreign qualified bird ringer.

4.6 Mark Gauci explained that a foreign bird ringer will require a license from WBRU, and must utilise scientific rings bearing Malta's unique designation as approved by EURING. He confirmed that Birdlife Malta can provide these rings to the Proposer free of charge.

4.7 Lino Farrugia asked which authority should approve the rings. Sergei Golovkin replied that the law vests this role with WBRU, however in practice WBRU is reliant on applicable EURING-compliant rings nomenclature used by the national scheme (BLM). He furthermore added that in accordance with Regulation 23 of SL 549.42, a foreign bird ringer can obtain ringing license subject to fulfilling the criteria stipulated in the law, namely that he is in possession of a training certificate

from a national scheme affiliated with EURING, and that he is approved by such national scheme. To this latter point Lino Farrugia added that the law also requires that the ringer must not be a licensed hunter or trapper. This was duly noted.

4.8 Mark Gauci furthermore noted that during previous discussions on this item, the Committee also noted a number of other technical issues concerning the proposal, such as the type of the geolocator proposed to be used, the uncertainty with regards to the methods of capture and other issues.

4.9 Maria Attard pointed out that if the activity shall be performed within a protected area, a nature permit from ERA is also required. Sergei Golovkin clarified that any WBRU permit that may eventually be issued will explicitly stipulate that the approval is without prejudice to any other laws or regulations that may apply, including the need for ERA permit.

4.10 The Chairman summed up the debate also noting that the proposal which involved a minimal number of specimens did not present any significant risk.

4.11 Following brief deliberation, the Committee agreed to recommend to the Minister to approve a derogation in terms of Regulation 9(1)(e) of SL 549.42, subject to the following conditions:

- a. That all specimens caught shall be ringed by a qualified and duly licensed bird ringer, using EURING-approved scientific rings for Malta, which shall be provided by BLM free of charge;
- b. A foreign bird ringer shall be required to obtain WBRU ringing license upon presentation of necessary documentation as stipulated in Regulation 23;
- c. All data pertaining to specimens ringed shall be provided to WBRU in a specified format. This data will be reported to the national ringing scheme;
- d. The authorisation shall be without prejudice to third party rights and the requirements to obtain any other permits or authorisations under any other laws or regulations that may apply, in particular – the requirement to obtain ERA permit if the activity is carried out within a protected area;
- e. The permit shall specify precise methods of capture, the timeframe for the activity and location, as well as any applicable conditions of risks;
- f. The permit shall stipulate a reporting obligation.

4.12 Sergei Golovkin explained that in accordance with the law, once the Minister endorses this recommendation, a Notice shall be published in the Government Gazette and WBRU will engage with the Proposer to issue a permit accordingly.

5. Preliminary results of the migration monitoring study for turtle dove and quail in autumn 2017

5.1 Sergei Golovkin presented preliminary results of the migration monitoring study for turtle dove and quail. The study was performed between 1st of September and 31st of October using identical methodology to studies performed in 2014, 2015 and 2016. A total of 21 monitoring sites were strategically positioned around the Maltese Islands. Six of these sites were active on any given day during the study period. Observers manning these sites recorded the passage of migratory quail and turtle dove. An extrapolation methodology was used to estimate the overall migratory influx of both species during the study period. The study had three main objectives: (a) to record migration of both species and to estimate the overall influx; (b) to compare observations with migratory trends recorded in the past years, and (c) to correlate observed trends with the reports of game shot by hunters. A total of 110 turtle doves and 92 quails were physically recorded, resulting in an extrapolated estimate of 9,943 turtle doves and 97,965 quail. Although no major peaks have been recorded, there was a slight increase in observed turtle doves around 13-14 September and quail around 3-4 and 16 October. An analysis of the past trends reveals that the overall influx of the turtle dove in 2017 was slightly higher

than in 2014 and 2016, but lower than in 2008, 2009 and 2015. Quail observations in 2017 were higher than in 2014, 2015 and 2016 but significantly lower than in 2008 and 2009. A near-perfect correlation was noted between reports of quail and turtle doves bagged by hunters, and observed migration trends. This correlation is particularly visible on the graphs. A total of 102 quails and 101 turtle doves were reported hunted during this period, noting also that the season for turtle dove closed at the end of September.

5.2 Mark Sultana asked regarding the proportion of hunters who reported a catch during the present season. Sergei Golovkin replied that he does not have the specific statistics for quail and turtle dove reports only, but overall since the start of the hunting and live capturing seasons, telephonic reporting system registered around 4,100 telephonic reports (calls). Until now, fewer than ten percent of licensed hunters and about half of trappers have reported catches.

6. Any other business

6.1 The Chairman made reference to the recently published legal changes concerning hunting hours within Majjistral Park, and to NGOs criticism of these changes. Whilst noting that in this case, ministerial decision has already been taken, he asked whether the Committee would consider advising the Minister on similar matters in the future, even in the absence of a ministerial request for consultation with the Committee or its opinion. He furthermore asked the Committee for a mandate to discuss this further with the Minister.

6.2 After brief deliberation, which focused on the specific example of the recent changes at Majjistral Park, the Committee granted the Chair this mandate.

6.3 The meeting was adjourned at 1800 hrs.