

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

25th February 2016, WBRU, 1600 - 1900

Minutes

Attending members:

Prof Mark Anthony Falzon – Chairman
Mr Sergei Golovkin - Secretary
Mr Mark Sultana – Birdlife (Malta)
Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKNK
Mr Lino Farrugia - FKNK
Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government
Mr Gwido Baldacchino - Member nominated by Government
Ms Emeline Fenech – Member nominated by Government
Mr Frank Vassallo– Hunting and Trapping Expert
Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna Expert
Mr Stephen Saliba – MEPA

Excused: Mr Lino Farrugia – FKNK; Mr Nicholas Barbara - Birdlife (Malta)

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

(1) Adoption of the agenda

1.1 The agenda was adopted.

(2) Approval of the minutes

2.1 Minutes were approved.

(3) Matters arising and matters to report

3.1 No matters arising were reported.

(4) Consideration of turtle dove and quail bag statistics for previous autumn season

4.1 In conjunction with this item, Sergei Golovkin circulated a number of documents containing statistics pertaining to turtle dove and quail hunted in the autumn of 2015. The documents furthermore contained analysis of this statistics in comparison with the reported bags in previous years. A detailed comparison between bag statistics reported and daily observations conducted by Ecoserv during September and October of 2015 was also presented.

4.2 Sergei Golovkin explained that 2015 there were 10,537 persons licensed to hunt birds on land. Some 10,466 general hunting licences (carnet de chasse) were returned by the legal deadline of

13th February 2015, whilst a further 71 persons were subject to an administrative fine of €75 for late return of their 2015/2016 carnet de chasse booklets valid for hunting of birds on land. Thus the total number of hunting CdC booklets from which data was extracted is 10,466, which represents 99% of all bird hunting booklets in circulation. Further late returns (subject to €75 fine) are expected over the next two weeks by the final deadline of 14th March.

- 4.3 The process of extracting turtle dove and quail data commenced immediately upon return of the general licences, that is, on 18th January 2016. 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 **3,545 Turtle Doves** and **1,877 Quail**. A further 283 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 1.8887 TD (150) to 1 Q (133). Thus, the final figure is **3,695 TD** and **2,010 Q**. A total of 7,384 licensed hunters did not report catching either a turtle dove or a quail during 2015 autumn season, which is consistent with the proportion of hunters who did not report such catches in previous years (e.g. 7,904 in 2013; 6,746 in 2014). The total bags reported in 2015 were marginally higher than in 2014 (2,483 turtle doves and 1,689 quails respectively were reported caught in 2014) however in general the 2015 season was still amongst the poorest since 2002, especially for quail. Detailed account of the reported catches by day and by each month of the season were also presented, together with the comparison of bag statistics with the observed and estimated extent of migratory influx as compiled through Ecoserv study. The latter comparison shows a generally strong correlation between the number of catches reported by hunters and independent observations of migration.
- 4.4 Mark Sultana observed that around 16% of all reported quail catches fell in the period between November and December. He said that it would have been interesting to also continue migration study observations during this period to estimate the total influx during autumn. In Birdlife Malta’s view, the fact that quail migration trails off well into December indicates that the migratory influx continues beyond the period of the migration study, which calls into question the assumption that autumn hunting is not a satisfactory alternative to spring. He said that the fact that some hunters opt not to participate in the autumn hunt, out of their free will, should not be construed as lack of a satisfactory alternative.
- 4.5 In response to Mark Sultana’s comment, Sergei Golovkin explained that the migration study coincides with peak migration period. Extending this study beyond October would be prohibitively expensive and is ultimately not necessary since the peak migration period captured by the study provides sufficient data to validate or otherwise the reported catches. He also noted that the intensity of migration of these two species in the autumn is significantly lower than that in spring and this fact was registered consistently in all migration studies performed to date.

(5) Conclusion of the debate on spring hunting

5.1 Chairman proposed for Committee's consideration the following voting procedure. He felt it was necessary on this occasion to divide voting procedure into two parts. The first motion concerns whether the Committee recommends to government to apply a derogation for the opening of a limited spring hunting season for turtle dove and quail in 2016. The second motion would only be necessary if the result of the first vote is a "yes". The second motion would therefore be that, in view of the recent reclassification of the Turtle Dove as a 'vulnerable' IUCN Red List species and a 'near-threatened' species at EU27 level, government should apply special measures to further reduce the potential impact of spring hunting on the population of that species.

5.2 Sergei Golovkin asked whether a member voting on the first motion would be bound in principle to vote in the same manner in consideration of the second motion. Chairman clarified that members should be free to vote in both motions as they deem fit.

5.3 The procedure and the motions proposed by the Chairman were agreed by all members. Chairman invited the members to express any final comments prior to the voting procedure.

5.4 Mark Sultana referred to responsibility of the members nominated by the government to consider the situation of the conservation status of turtle dove thoroughly before casting their vote.

5.5 Mark Gauci said that if the Committee votes to recommend opening of the season, as well as the "special measures to reduce impact", ideally the Committee should also specify what these measures should be. Chairman responded to this comment by referring to responsibility of the government to consider Ornis recommendation and to decide upon specific measures.

5.6 Joe Perici Calascione said that the final decision which rests with the government should be a political one.

5.7 Prior to proceeding to the first motion, Chairman explained that, due to the divisive nature of the vote and the fact that Chair's position depends on the confidence of the two parties in conflict (BLM and FKNK) he would be abstaining and will only vote in case of a tie demanding a casting vote.

5.8 The first motion was passed with five votes in favour (MEPA, FKNK and three members appointed by the government), one against (BLM) and one abstention (Chair). Recommendation to apply derogation for the opening of a limited spring hunting season for turtle dove and quail was thus adopted.

5.9 The second motion, namely that the Committee recommends to government that, in view of the recent reclassification of the Turtle Dove as a 'vulnerable' IUCN Red List species and a 'near-threatened' species at EU27 level, government apply special measures to further reduce the impact of spring hunting on the population of that species, was adopted unanimously (6 members + Chair voting in favour).

(6) National enforcement priorities

6.2 Chairman summarized suggestions received from BLM, FKNK, MEPA and from Mark Gauci. He noted that evidently the priorities suggested represent an enforcement situation that evolved considerably since only few years ago. It was notable that the “illegal shooting of raptors” which would have been expected to top the list of priorities only a few years ago is no longer seen as a priority, whilst the relatively recent phenomena such as illegal trapping of waders in summer have now emerged to be a priority.

6.3 Further to Chairman’s introduction, Sergei Golovkin circulated a summary listing priorities suggested so far, including those proposed by the ALE and WBRU. The list contains several common elements, such as the illegal trapping of waders in summer, illegal use of bird callers especially during the night, illegal shooting in the period following spring season, and illegal trapping in general (i.e. outside of derogation parameters). Other issues, such as illegal trapping sites on protected habitats, as well as illegal importation of protected birds and illegal unregistered collections of stuffed protected birds were also mentioned. On the basis of the above suggestions, WBRU will be formulating a single priority list, which will also propose the relevant action on issues identified. This list may subsequently serve as a rolling strategy that would help the authorities to prioritise enforcement effort accordingly.

7. Any other business

7.1 The Committee did not discuss any other business.

7.2 The meeting was adjourned at 1900 hrs.