

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

**Wednesday, 16th May 2018, WBRU, MESDC, Sta Venera
1630 - 1800**

Minutes

Participants:

Magistrate (retd.) Dr Denis Montebello – Chairman
Mr Richard Lia – Secretary
Mr Nicholas Barbara – BirdLife (Malta)
Mr Mark Sultana – BirdLife (Malta)
Mr Lino Farrugia – FKKN
Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKKN
Mr Joseph Tabone – Member nominated by Government
Mr Marco Falzon – Member nominated by Government
Mr Horace Micallef – Member nominated by Government
Mr Frank Vassallo – Hunting and live-capturing expert
Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna expert
Ms Maria Attard – Representative of the Environment and Resources Authority

1. Approval of the agenda

1.1 Agenda was approved.

2. Matters arising and matters to report

2.1 The Secretary updated members on Ombudsman case ES 0024 and tabled the Committee's reply dated 27 April 2018 and Ombudsman's latest correspondence received on 16 May 2018. The Ombudsman maintained that since the project proposer was not present during the 25 April 2018 Ornis Committee meeting, the Committee should hold a meeting afresh, hear the proposer's submissions and after considering the recent correspondence and the Final Opinion, decide whether the study can proceed using geo-tagging without ringing and if not, why ringing is essential, thus against Ombudsman's Final Opinion. The Ombudsman stated that he would be available to attend the same meeting as an observer. Given that all issues related to this study were already discussed with the proposer on 18 October 2017, the Chairman disagreed with hearing the proposal afresh and he shall be sending a final correspondence to the Ombudsman.

3. Approval of the minutes of the meeting held on 25/04/2018

3.1 BirdLife Malta requested an amendment to paragraph 2.2 of the draft minutes, removing reference to the word "motion". The Chairman confirmed that BirdLife Malta's request to shift enforcement responsibilities from WBRU to ERA should be discussed during this sitting rather than put to the vote as a motion. The minutes were approved, as amended.

4. Enforcement issues

4.1. Inspector Sheldon from the Administrative Law Enforcement was invited to the meeting to provide an overview of the previous spring hunting season and on enforcement in general. Inspector Sheldon pointed out that the 2018 spring hunting season had the highest enforcement

complement on record, not only in terms of deployment but also in relation to spot-checks and road checks. A total of 52 areas were inspected daily during the season, covering all of Malta. An overview of the infringements detected and total number of persons arraigned was provided. Lino Farrugia asked Inspector Sheldon whether all alleged trapping illegalities occurred during the trapping closed season, how many alleged hunting illegalities involved Turtle-doves and how many of these were allegedly committed during the closed season. Inspector Sheldon stated that there were 28 persons caught trapping during March and April, that is, during the trapping closed season, and that a total of eight persons were apprehended for breaching the hunting laws during the spring hunting season. Half of these cases related to shooting at Turtle-dove. Lino Farrugia further asked Inspector Sheldon whether police officers are paid extra whenever they are requested by BirdLife or CABS to accompany them on inspections of suspected illegalities. Inspector Sheldon replied that they respond to all calls, from whichever quarter, in the shortest time possible.

- 4.2. BirdLife Malta remarked that before the spring hunting season opened, there was a surge in the importation of devices that could act as sound suppressors to firearms. Inspector Sheldon confirmed that such modification is in breach of the Arms Act.
- 4.3. Regarding enforcement in general, BirdLife Malta discussed the issue of tagging of stuffed birds, maintaining that such tagging should resume with the same intensity of previous years. BirdLife Malta also made reference to hunting trips abroad. The Secretary informed members that WBRU enforcement officers tag all lawfully-acquired specimens at point of entry, that is, either transported from other Member States or imported into Malta from non-EU countries, unless also huntable in Malta (Schedule II of SL 549.42). To date, thousands of specimens have been tagged by WBRU at point of entry.
- 4.4. Chairman thanked Inspector Sheldon and the discussion then focused on whether WBRU enforcement function should be shifted onto ERA.
- 4.5. BirdLife Malta noted that ERA already carries out inspections at points of entry as the competent authority for CITES regulations, maintaining that if WBRU's enforcement function is shifted onto ERA, double-handling would be avoided and limited resources are used more effectively. BirdLife Malta's criticism at WBRU's enforcement role also stems from the fact that the Unit is responsible for Policy and is the same entity responsible for enforcement. The two roles should thus be split. Lino Farrugia said that he may tend to agree that enforcement be shifted from WBRU elsewhere, explaining that his opinion was based on the reasoning that policy and enforcement should be decoupled. Lino Farrugia then added that, however, he can never agree to have enforcement shifted onto ERA. BirdLife Malta pointed out that the policy role should be retained by WBRU. The Committee did not reach a final conclusion on this matter. FKNK stated that it would have been preferable to have this issue put to the vote.

5. Update on the conservation status of Golden Plover and Song Thrush and the seven finch species

- 5.1. The Secretary informed members that the reports on the conservation status of Golden Plover, Song Thrush and the seven finch species were circulated in advance of the meeting to all members and will be available to the public on WBRU's website under "Reports and Statistics/Other Reports". The Secretary presented a summary of the latest update on the conservation status of the Golden Plover and Song Thrush, followed by an update on the seven finch species, noting that the only scientific body that provides annual updates on the conservation status of avian species at European level is the European Bird Census Council

(EBCC)¹. Thus, given that Member States' Article 12 data for the 2013–2018 reporting cycle are still unavailable, the updates focus specifically on EBCC data for both the long-term (since 1980) and short-term (10-year period) population trends.

- 5.2. The current update shows that both *Pluvialis apricaria altifrons* and *Turdus philomelos* continue to have a Favourable Conservation Status at European, EU and reference population levels. The Secretary pointed out that on the basis of Wetlands International's data on the migratory routes of Golden Plover—which attest that Malta's reference population of this species (at EU level) are the broad-front migratory populations of Finland and Sweden—EBCC updates for Golden Plover (*P. apricaria altifrons*) specifically refer to Malta's reference population. Compared with the last year's EBCC update, the Golden Plover population increased from -9% to +13% (+22% increase) in the short-term trend and from -14% to -6% (+8% increase) in the long-term trend. The Song Thrush population increased from +7% to +22% (+15% increase) in the short-term trend and from -5% to 0% (+5% increase) in the long-term trend. EBCC classifies the Golden Plover as “Stable” and the Song Thrush as “Moderate Increase”.
- 5.3. The Secretary proceeded with an update on the conservation status of the seven finch species. The latest (2017) EBCC update shows that the European population of Common Chaffinch, European Goldfinch and Hawfinch are classified as “Moderate Increase”, the European Greenfinch as “Stable” whereas the Common Linnet, European Serin and Eurasian Siskin as “Moderate Decline”. It was noted that on the basis of the latest EBCC update:
- the Common Linnet declined by 63% in the long-term trend (since 1980) [1% decrease since the previous (2016) EBCC update] and increased by 9% in the short-term (2006–2015) trend [19% increase since the previous EBCC update],
 - the European Serin declined by 42% since 1980 [6% increase since the previous EBCC update] and increased by 12% in the short-term trend [25% increase since the previous EBCC update] and
 - the Eurasian Siskin increased by 25% since 1980 [32% increase since the previous EBCC update] and increased by 40% in the short-term trend [46% increase since the previous EBCC update].

6. Any other business

- 6.1. The Committee agreed to reconvene on 27th June. The meeting was adjourned at 1800 hrs.

¹ Trends of common birds in Europe, 2017 update. Available at: <https://www.ebcc.info/index.php?ID=631> and http://www.birds.cz/pecbm/species_table.php?result_set=Publish2017&in_iframe=1&order_by=alphabet