

**Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee
(Video Conference)**

**Monday, 29th March 2021
1500 – 1900**

Minutes

Participants:

Dr Joseph Grech – Chairman
Mr Richard Lia – Secretary
Mr Nicholas Barbara – BirdLife (Malta)
Mr Joseph D’Emanuele – Member nominated by Government
Mr Lino Farrugia – FKNK
Mr Mark Gauci – Avifauna expert
Mr Horace Micallef – Member nominated by Government
Mr Lucas Micallef – Hunting and live-capturing expert
Mr Joe Perici Calascione – FKNK
Mr Darrin Stevens – Representative of the Environment and Resources Authority
Mr Mark Sultana – BirdLife (Malta)

Excused:

Mr George Borg – Member nominated by Government

1. Approval of the agenda.

1.1 The agenda was approved.

2. Matters arising and matters to report.

2.1 There were no additional matters to report.

3. Approval of the minutes of the meeting held on 17/03/2021.

3.1 No requests for amendments to the previously-circulated minutes were submitted. However, one of the members requested an extension of time. The Committee agreed to approve the minutes of the previous meeting at a later stage.

4. Proposed amendment to the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42): geo-tagging, bird-ringing training programme (eligibility criteria/criminal record) and penalty points system (Schedule VIII).

Related documents:

- *Items 9 and 13 of the minutes of Ornis meeting held on 17 March 2021.*

Revised draft legal notice circulated in advance of the meeting. Item subject to a vote.

- 4.1 This item was brought forward from the previous meeting as agreed by the Committee. The Secretary suggested that the vote is split into three distinct sub-votes: one on geo-tagging, a sub-vote on bird-ringing trainee licences and the third sub-vote on the proposed penalty points system (Schedule VIII). The Committee agreed that the legal amendments should be presented and voted individually as three separate sub-votes.

Geo-tagging

- 4.2 The Secretary explained that the original proposal on geo-tagging as presented during the previous meeting was refused by the Committee and that during the following item, Chairman had requested a more holistic proposal to be tabled during this meeting to include the material considerations that were discussed by the Committee before the vote was taken.

- 4.3 The Secretary explained that the revised proposal will allow a person who is not licensed as a bird-ringer in accordance with regulation 23(2)(a) to capture certain birds for the purpose of geo-tagging, followed by their immediate release back into the wild, insofar as that person satisfies the following requirements:

(a) the submission of an application to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, not later than two (2) months prior to the commencement of the geo-tagging activity, which application must be accompanied by a detailed explanation of the objectives of the proposed research and the reasons therefor, the alternatives considered, the proposed quantity per species to be captured for the purpose of geo-tagging, the proposed methodology, details of the persons who will be entrusted with the management of the geo-tags' software, data collection and analysis, the proposed research dates for geo-tagging, the proposed duration of the data collection and analysis and the date when the report on the outcome of the research is expected to be submitted to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, together with the sites where geo-tagging is proposed to be carried out in the format prescribed in regulation 23(3)(c);

(b) the submission, together with the application referred to in paragraph (a), of a signed declaration, either:

(i) by the applicant, confirming that he has proven experience in bird-handling and affixing geo-tags on avian species, including knowledge of the geo-tags' software, data collection, management and analysis, supported by a biography that lists his previous ornithological research conducted by means of geo-tagging, including the research period, outcome of the research and a link to each publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals; or

(ii) by the applicant's trainer, who has proven experience in bird-handling and affixing geo-tags on avian species, as supported by the trainer's biography, which shall be submitted together with the declaration and shall contain all the information specified in sub-paragraph (i), confirming that he has trained the applicant who is knowledgeable about all aspects related to geo-tagging, including affixing of geo-tags on the target avian species and, if the data will also be managed by the same applicant, a confirmation that he is conversant with the geo-tags' software, data collection, management and analysis;

(c) the recommendations of the Ornis Committee, in accordance with regulation 10(6); and

(d) the conditions specified in the licence issued for the purpose of geo-tagging by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, including reporting obligations:

Provided further that in the event that the applicant fails to submit a detailed report on the outcome of his research as referred to in sub-paragraph (i) of paragraph (b) within

the deadline stipulated by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit in the licence conditions, the applicant shall be rendered ineligible to apply for any other research permit or renewal.

- 4.4 Mark Sultana request confirmation whether the information requested at application stage will be presented to Ornithology Committee. The Secretary confirmed, pointing out that all derogations must be presented to Ornithology Committee for its recommendation and conditions. Mark Sultana added that BirdLife Malta's reservation for not including a bird-ringing component was not the scientific ring only but the experience behind bird-ringing, including bird-handling and the taking of biometric data. Mark Sultana added that if it can be ascertained that the applicant has acquired the necessary experience and training in bird-handling and geo-tagging then there are no foreseen issues, adding that BirdLife Malta would have preferred that the specimens are fitted with a scientific ring.
- 4.5 The Secretary remarked that although the legal amendment on geo-tagging does not replace bird-ringing, and that there may be future projects that include both geo-tagging and bird-ringing, it allows geo-tagging projects to be considered by the Committee even if they do not include a bird-ringing component. Mark Sultana pointed out that all geo-tagging projects carried out by BirdLife Malta include a ringing component as a scientific standard, adding that whilst understanding that there may be instances where only geo-tagging is proposed, there should still be a level of collaboration to combine geo-tagging with bird-ringing—as was the case when BirdLife Malta had offered its bird rings to the proponent of the geo-tagging project on the Blue Rock Thrush—such as enrolment of live-catchers to the bird ringing training programme.
- 4.6 The Secretary pointed out that certain species, like Golden Plover, cannot be captured using the mist-net system. Mark Sultana remarked that the main issue is not the use of the clap-net system per se, since bird-ringers can legally use any type of net, but in the use of live-decoys since, as a matter of principle, bird-ringers do not use live-decoys.
- 4.7 Darrin Stevens did not object to the proposed amendment but wanted to clarify whether it allows for a geo-tagging application to be submitted by both the trainer and the trainee and whether the trainee is also required to submit an application if the geo-tagging project is proposed by the trainer, considering that paragraphs (i) and (ii) are separated by the word “or”. The Secretary explained that if the application is submitted by a person well-versed in geo-tagging, he is required to submit his biography. If not, the applicant must submit a written declaration by the trainer together with the trainer's biography¹. Darrin Stevens also asked whether training in geo-tagging should be considered valid on an indefinite basis or whether a refresher course should be considered in view that geo-tagging technology is constantly changing.
- 4.8 The Secretary explained that the proposed legal amendment requires training to be species-specific and, if the applicant will also be responsible for data collection and analysis, specific to the particular geo-tags and associated software that will be used.
- 4.9 Replying to Darrin Stevens' question whether such training exists, Mark Sultana pointed out that academic training on geo-tagging does not exist, but can be carried out by those who have prior experience. Mark Sultana agreed with Darrin Stevens that geo-tagging technology is always improving. He pointed out that bird handlers need to be trained and then remain committed. In fact, in the case of bird-ringing, ringers will even have their licence suspended if they do not meet the pre-set criteria on ringing effort. Darrin Stevens remarked that ideally a

¹ A joint application by the trainer and the trainee(s) is also possible, provided that the trainer lists the names of the individuals on whom a licence shall also be issued, provided the trainer confirms that they acquired the necessary training as specified in the legal amendment.

geo-tagging training programme is in place beforehand. Mark Sultana replied that, whilst in agreement with setting up a training programme *a priori*, in the absence of an accredited certificate on geo-tagging, the legal amendment allows assessment of an application on the basis of prior geo-tagging experience and supporting documentation.

- 4.10 Lucas Micallef referred to BirdLife Malta's position on affixing scientific rings on specimens fitted with a geo-tag for inclusion in the EURING database, stating that this could be evaluated by the Committee on a case-by-case basis. Lucas Micallef stated that a similar procedure for acquiring a falconry licence could also be adopted, whereby trainers well-versed in falconry evaluate the technical component to ascertain that the trainee has acquired the necessary skills, including bird-handling, adding that the actual method of affixing a geo-tag is standard even if the technology itself changes. The Chairman remarked that the proposed legal amendment will set up a framework that allows the necessary technical criteria to be implemented and evaluated.
- 4.11 Joe Perici Calascione remarked that whilst continuous training, including refresher courses, are integral components to continuous professional development, in the case of geo-tagging the procedures are more of a practical nature rather than science, including software knowledge. Joe Perici Calascione further added that FKNK were never against affixing of scientific rings but should not be considered compulsory. Joe Perici Calascione added that the importance of geo-tags in research projects should not be underestimated, adding that the key factor should be bird-handling.
- 4.12 Mark Sultana remarked that bird-handling is one of the main concerns, stating as an example, geo-tagging of raptors by individuals who never handled such specimens. The Secretary pointed out that, as in the case for all derogations, the proposed legal amendment specifies that geo-tagging proposals have to be assessed by the Ornis Committee following submission of a detailed application and associated documentation to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, adding that if the Committee will not be convinced of the proposed methodology it will have every right not to recommend it.
- 4.13 Mark Gauci provided a comparison between geo-tagging and bird-ringing, stating that affixing of a scientific ring is the most relatively straightforward component of bird-ringing since the main training component is on bird identification, the safe removal of birds from nets, bird-handling in general, sexing, ageing and the procedures involved in collecting other biometric data. Mark Gauci further stated that without an appropriate yardstick to assess geo-tagging proposals against proper training, and in the absence of training certificates, the evaluation of such proposals will be rendered subjective.
- 4.14 The Secretary asked Mark Gauci whether bird-ringers who affixed geo-tags on Turtle-doves from the Comino ringing station had received prior training and whether they were knowledgeable in the associated software. Mark Gauci replied that geo-tagging was carried out in partnership with German ringers who were stationed on Comino, adding that in the case of LIFE projects, BirdLife ringers had to include experience in geo-tagging in their CVs to be considered part of the LIFE team on geo-tagging, and that in all cases where geo-tagging has been carried out, there were always bird-ringers on site with prior experience in geo-tagging. Mark Sultana added that Maltese bird-ringers with experience in geo-tagging are currently training ringers from Croatia as part of the LIFE programme.
- 4.15 The Secretary asked whether these trainers would be willing to train individuals who wish to carry out geo-tagging. Mark Gauci replied that geo-tagging can be trained within a week or so, adding that the main problem is whether the individual has prior experience in bird identification and bird-handling. Mark Sultana added that requests for academic research involving geo-tagging entails students to liaise with bird-ringers who have experience in geo-tagging and that the actual tagging is carried out by the bird-ringers in the presence of the students.

- 4.16 The Secretary remarked that the proposed legal amendment purposely makes a significant emphasis on prior experience in geo-tagging, adding that one of the concerns expressed by the majority of Committee members is the issue of bird-handling, which will also be specifically catered for in the legal amendment.
- 4.17 Nicholas Barbara suggested considering a legal exemption that limits geo-tagging without a ringing component to all huntable species listed in Schedule II of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations whilst retaining geo-tagging and ringing for the rest of the species.
- 4.18 Darrin Stevens emphasised on the need to have a set of standard criteria in place, adding that whilst such criteria should not necessarily be included in the legal amendment, they are necessary to ensure applications are assessed objectively and coherently in a transparent manner. The Secretary agreed, adding that experts in the field can be engaged to prepare and publish the necessary guidelines. Joe Perici Calascione also agreed with the publication of criteria and guidelines on geo-tagging, adding that the most important criterion should be the safe handling of birds. The Secretary asked FKNK whether they would consider liaison with foreign experts to train local individuals on geo-tagging. Joe Perici Calascione confirmed.
- 4.19 Mark Sultana reiterated that the national ringing scheme does not decide who will carry out research by means of geo-tagging, but since BirdLife ringers have trained to meet certain international standards, such standards would have preferably also been part of any geo-tagging project, adding that even foreign bird ringers can be engaged to train individuals on geo-tagging. Mark Sultana agreed with the earlier suggestion to exempt affixing of scientific rings on Schedule II species, adding that even FKNK are willing to include a bird-ringing component in their geo-tagging projects.
- 4.20 The Secretary asked Mark Sultana whether limiting the exemption on bird-ringing to Schedule II species would meet the recommendations of the Ombudsman, specifically to the recommendation specifying that the law should be amended to allow a pluralistic approach to research. Mark Sultana replied that, initially, the applicant of the geo-tagging project on Blue Rock Thrushes had agreed to engage a foreign bird ringer, adding that although BirdLife agreed to provide the rings, the applicant subsequently stated that engagement of a foreign ringer would be prohibitively expensive. Mark Sultana remarked that whilst the Ombudsman has to ascertain that recommendations and decisions are not subjective or discriminatory, he cannot specify what standards need to be in place in research projects. Mark Sultana further remarked that the only instance when a refusal is considered discriminatory is when a similar request by another applicant is approved without requesting the same criteria to be met. Ombudsman's case should be considered as a request for a level playing field for all applicants wishing to engage in scientific research, whilst ensuring that all applicable standards continue to be met.
- 4.21 Mark Gauci reiterated that geo-tagging will never replace bird-ringing, which is why both should be amalgamated together, adding that, unlike scientific rings, geo-tags cannot provide data on longevity. The Secretary pointed out that whilst it is true that geo-tags will provide data bound by the lifespan of the battery, they nonetheless provide precise spatial data, in real-time if transmitted through a satellite system, including migratory routes, foraging areas and breeding sites, which a ring cannot possibly provide.
- 4.22 Lucas Micallef remarked that if there is a concern that there will be a surge in applications following approval of the legal amendment, the fact that geo-tags are very expensive is a limiting factor in itself, adding that this type of research is not accessible to everyone. Regarding the suggested exemption of Schedule II species from the ringing requirement, Lucas Micallef remarked that the Committee should consider each application on a case by case basis and recommend a bird ringing component rather than setting a blanket requirement to all non-Schedule II species.

- 4.23 Joe Perici Calascione pointed out that the Committee should not restrict tagging to Schedule II species. Mark Sultana clarified that the suggestion made by Nicholas Barbara was not to limit geo-tagging to Schedule II species but to exempt such species from being fitted with a scientific ring when fitted with a geo-tag and that all other species not listed in Schedule II are fitted with both a geo-tag and a scientific ring. Nicholas Barbara added that the wording of the legal amendment should specify that preferably all geo-tagging projects include a bird-ringing component whilst allowing an exemption to Schedule II species.
- 4.24 The Committee agreed to proceed to take a vote on the proposed legal amendment on geo-tagging as presented and a separate vote on the suggestion to exempt a ringing component to Schedule II species.
- 4.25 The proposed legal amendment on geo-tagging was approved with five votes in favour. BirdLife Malta abstained. ERA's vote in favour was subject to inclusion of the associated vetting criteria as discussed prior to the vote.
- 4.26 The suggestion to revise the wording of the legal amendment to specify that, whilst all geo-tagging projects should include a bird-ringing component, projects involving Schedule II species can be exempted (albeit still encouraged) was approved, with one vote in favour (BirdLife Malta) and five abstentions.
- 4.27 Some members sought clarification whether this means proposals for geo-tagging of Schedule II species should still be referred to the Committee for evaluation and recommendations and whether they would still need to follow the legal parameters specified in the legal amendment. The Secretary clarified that all geo-tagging requests must follow the criteria set out in the approved legal amendment, that is:
1. Submission of an application to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit and the relevant documentation, including proof of experience in bird-handling and geo-tagging.
 2. A bird-ringing component, with a proviso specifying that Schedule II species may be exempted.
 3. Referral to Ornithology Committee and, if approved, issuance of the geo-tagging licence(s) by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit.
- 4.28 The Committee agreed that the text of the legal amendment reflecting both sub-votes is circulated to the members via e-mail for finalisation.

Bird ringing trainee licence/Ordinance Act (CAP.77)

- 4.29 The Secretary presented the revised legal amendment on bird ringing trainee licence stating that, following legal advice, only entities listed in the Sixth Schedule of Chapter 77 of the Ordinance Act can request the Commissioner of Police for a full criminal record. This means that whilst NGOs are not authorised to ask for the full criminal record of applicants, WBRU can only do so after it is included in the Sixth Schedule of the Ordinance Act, adding that on the basis of the legal advice sought, the amendment on bird-ringing trainee licences and the amendment to the Sixth Schedule should preferably be processed concurrently.
- 4.30 The Secretary explained that the revised proviso to regulation 23(3)(a) specifies that:

“...the applicant shall only be considered eligible to enrol in a bird ringing training programme leading to the award of a training certificate after the Wild Birds Regulation Unit has issued the relevant trainee licence:

Provided further that, prior to enrolling in any such programme, the applicant shall submit a signed application form to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit for the issue of a

trainee licence, which form shall authorise the Wild Birds Regulation Unit to request the Commissioner of Police to provide it with a complete record of the applicant's criminal convictions:

Provided further that the Wild Birds Regulation Unit shall not issue a bird ringing trainee licence if the complete record of criminal convictions relating to the applicant lists offences committed against regulations 4, 6, 18, 19, 21, 23 and 24".

- 4.31 Darrin Stevens did not agree that a person with a previous conviction should be banned from enrolling in a bird-ringing training programme, more so considering that the proposal includes all convictions under regulations 4 and 6 and thus may not be considered proportional. He also added further that this amendment should be coherent as it is specific to one specific licence (bird-ringing) and does not cater for other licences, including those linked with geo-tagging discussed earlier. The Secretary replied that the concern of Darrin Stevens was the same concern of WBRU and that of the State Advocate, particularly since it is not yet clear which criminal convictions are deemed by BirdLife as serious enough to render an applicant ineligible to enrol in the bird-ringing training programme. The Committee agreed that the current proposal does not necessarily ensure proportionality.
- 4.32 Mark Sultana remarked that it is not the intention of BirdLife to set a blanket prohibition but to ensure there is legal certainty on who should be considered ineligible to enrol in the training programme especially in the case of recidivism, adding that the addition of a schedule could be considered to specify the type of convictions and associated time barring. The Committee agreed that there is a need to set universal criteria against which individuals can be vetted prior to enrolling in a bird ringing training programme, not only to ensure proportionality but also in order to assess applications objectively.
- 4.33 Following a lengthy discussion on criminal records and previous convictions, the Committee agreed that BirdLife Malta should investigate whether enrolling in a bird-ringing training programme can be processed through the Police similar to the current procedure for issuance of hunting permits. The Committee also agreed that this item should be removed from the current draft legal notice with the possibility of further discussions during another meeting.

Penalty Points System (Schedule VIII)

- 4.34 The Secretary presented the proposed revisions to Schedule VIII and the penalty points system, explaining that it sets a threshold of ten points with each offence category assigned a number of points, ranging from two to five. Once an individual accumulates an aggregate of ten points he will no longer be subject to the penalties set out in regulation 27A (administrative fines) but to Court referral, at which point the criteria set out in regulation 27 apply.
- 4.35 Darrin Stevens pointed out that, subject to legal vetting, the wording in the Schedule should specify "First offence" rather than "First conviction". The Secretary took note. Mark Sultana asked whether the penalty points system is time barred or indefinite. Joe Perici Calascione remarked that FKNK is proposing the penalty points system to be capped at two years, after which the individuals' accumulated points revert back to zero. The Committee agreed with FKNK's proposal.
- 4.36 Mark Sultana remarked that the introduction of a penalty points system per se will not change anything since this is ultimately linked to enforcement effort and asked the Secretary to explain the rationale behind the proposed revision to Schedule VIII. The Secretary explained that whilst the original amendment presented during the previous meeting sought to render bird-callers subject to Court referral for first time offenders, during the same meeting, the Committee had floated the idea of setting up a tier system for bird-callers. The current proposal introduces a holistic tier system for all administrative fines to serve as a higher level of deterrent for repeat offenders. The Secretary further explained that the fines pegged to each offence category

remained the same, except for the one on bird-callers, which, as discussed during the previous meeting is just below the minimum fine set out in regulation 27.

- 4.37 Chairman suggested to introduce a stepped increase in fines followed by Court referral. Joe Perici Calascione remarked that FKNK had suggested the introduction of a penalty points system four years ago but never materialised, adding that it is time to commit ourselves to add a higher level of deterrent.
- 4.38 Following a discussion by the Committee members on the illegal use of bird-callers outside hunting and trapping hours, the Secretary clarified that the law does not prohibit enforcement officers from seizing the bird-callers. Lino Farrugia added that the first step in ensuring effective enforcement is the introduction of the proposed penalty points system. Mark Sultana reiterated that the proposed penalty points system is not the answer to effective enforcement but if it is perceived as a deterrent then the Committee should proceed accordingly.
- 4.39 The Secretary remarked that enforcement should continue to be proactive to ensure that illegalities are not carried out in the first place and to ensure swift apprehensions when they do occur, adding that the proposed penalty points system is a contribution towards combatting illegal activities related to hunting and trapping. The Secretary added that those who do not intend to break the law will remain unaffected by this amendment and that judging by those who pay the fine without any form of repentance, the current administrative fines system seems to serve as an incentive to break the law rather than a deterrent.
- 4.40 The proposed revision to Schedule VIII, including the penalty points system, was unanimously approved.
- 4.41 The Committee agreed to re-issue the proposed Conservation of Wild Birds (Amendment) Regulations, 2021 for public consultation, except the component relating to bird ringing trainee licences, which was deferred to another meeting.

5. Article 9(1)(b) derogation: satellite-tagging of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes. Proposed methodology.

Related documents:

- *Satellite-tagging of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes – proposed methodology*
- *Item 5 (Q3) of Ornithology Committee minutes of meeting held on [31 July 2019](#).*
- *Item 7 of Ornithology Committee minutes of meeting held on [29 July 2020](#).*
- *Item 2 of Ornithology Committee minutes of meeting held on [26 August 2020](#).*

The proposed methodology was circulated in advance of the meeting. Item subject to a vote.

- 5.1 The Secretary explained that during its meeting held on 29 July 2020, the Committee unanimously approved the application of an Article 9(1)(b) derogation to study the migratory routes of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes through satellite tracking, subject to approval of the proposed methodology. The in-principle approval was published via Government Notice 1415/2020².

² G.N. 1415/2020 available at: <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/DOI/Government%20Gazette/Documents/2020/12/Government%20Gazette%20-%201st%20December.pdf>

- 5.2 The Secretary presented the methodology prepared by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit in November 2020.

Objective of the research and in-principle approval of the Ornis Committee

The objective of this research is to improve the knowledge base of Malta's reference population of Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* by means of satellite tracking, as requested by the European Commission during a bilateral meeting with the Maltese authorities in November 2019. The key objective is to determine the geographical locations of the breeding grounds of the tagged specimens. The proposed research will also analyse temporal migratory trends both during pre-nuptial and post-nuptial periods throughout the lifespan of the tags and will also help determine whether there are noticeable shifts in the geographical location of the breeding grounds or whether there is high site fidelity.

Deployment of tags and activation

Once the proposed schedule (rules that control the number and duration of fixes) is programmed, it is saved in each tag, which can be stored as inactive or activated immediately. Schedules for Golden Plover tags will differ from schedules for Song Thrush tags considering that the latter can only last for a period of twelve months. To avoid unnecessary data charges³, tags are ideally activated just before affixing on specimens using the DLC interface/Lotek software. However, this invariably creates logistical issues given that only individuals who have access to the DLC interface/Lotek software can activate the tags. Thus, in order to address this issue, once the proposed research period during which satellite-tagging will be carried out has been approved by Ornis Committee, WBRU can supply tags already programmed (scheduled) **and activated**, on condition that these are immediately returned to WBRU to deactivate them if not used within the validity period of the licence. Expenses related to activate tags that remain unused during the validity period of the licence would still be borne by WBRU, but such costs should be kept to the barest minimum.

It should be noted that the software will allow WBRU to monitor the location of all active tags, but the precise location will only be known if the tag has unobstructed views of the sky. **The PinPoint Argos tags should never be too close to each other while activated (not less than ~1m) as they are tuned on the same frequency.** The Argos signal is so strong that it can damage the electronics of other PP-ARG tags close by, as they are tuned the same and will absorb much of that energy (source: Lotek UK Ltd).

Research period and participants (licensees) — who will carry out tagging and under which conditions?

During Ornis Committee meeting held on 29 July 2020, FKNK stated that they are willing to participate in satellite-tagging, whilst BirdLife Malta pointed out that this project is an opportunity for BirdLife Malta and FKNK to work together. WBRU recommends that the majority of Song Thrushes are tagged at the ringing station in Comino by licensed bird-ringers using the mist-net system, from 01 September 2021 to 31 March 2022 whereas tagging of Golden Plovers is proposed to be carried out from 01 November 2021 to 31 March 2022 outside hunting and trapping hours, by licensed trappers using the clap-net system. The number of licences issued for the clap-net system is proposed to be capped at 15, whereby each licence will be pegged to two tags. Individual licences for period 2021–2022 will be rendered invalid as soon as the last tag has been used and all licences will be automatically rendered invalid after 31 March 2022, with the possibility of renewal for 2022–2023.

Following approval of the proposed methodology, WBRU will request BirdLife Malta and FKNK to submit, within a reasonable timeframe, a list of individuals willing to participate in

³ Daily data charges apply immediately a tag is activated through the DLC interface/Lotek software even if not used.

the project, inclusive of site plans delineating the precise boundary where satellite-tagging will be carried out. In turn, WBRU will vet the lists of individuals and clap-net locations and invite applicants to attend a mandatory training session on satellite-tagging, organised by WBRU with the active collaboration of BirdLife Malta and FKNK. The practical training session shall be delivered by local or foreign personnel with proven track record on geo-tagging, nominated by either BirdLife Malta or FKNK.

A satellite-tagging licence will only be issued after WBRU, BirdLife Malta and FKNK representatives have ascertained that the applicant understood the legal and reporting obligations set out in the licence (theoretical component) as well as all the procedures involved in affixing of satellite-tags on Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes (practical component). Draft licences for the clap-net component and for the mist-net component were included in the proposed methodology for Ornithology Committee's approval.

Data monitoring and reporting

WBRU will be responsible for monitoring the location of tagged specimens in real-time using Argos satellite data repository. Annual summary reports will be drawn by the Unit and presented to the Ornithology Committee as part of the conservation status reports on Golden Plover and Song Thrush. A final report to the Committee will be prepared by WBRU once the last tag ceases to transmit data.

- 5.3 Replying to a question from Mark Gauci regarding the possibility of including biometrics as part of the reporting obligation, the Secretary explained that the licence conditions for bird-ringers and live-catchers include, apart from the need to adopt a safe and standard procedure for the capturing, handling, affixing of satellite-tags and immediate releasing of the specimens, the following data collection and reporting obligations:

Prior to the release of each specimen fitted with a satellite-tag, the licensee is required to record the following information and to submit it to the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, by not later than one (1) working day after each satellite-tag has been affixed, via e-mail on wildbirds@gov.mt, quoting "Satellite-tag GP|ST" in the subject title:

- a. *the satellite-tag's unique serial number and decimal ID;*
- b. *details of the specimen on which the corresponding satellite-tag has been fitted, namely:*
 - *species*
 - *age (adult or first-year) [as shown in the pictorial guide annexed to the licence]*
 - *sex (if known)*
 - *scientific ring number (in case of a ring recovery)*
- c. *a good quality photograph showing the specimen fitted with the satellite-tag.*

- 5.4 The Committee took note of the proposed methodology and proceeded with a discussion on the research period. Following a request for clarification whether the study is expected to be carried out during subsequent years, the Secretary clarified that the research will terminate as soon as the last tag has been used and that each individual licence will also expire as soon as the licensee has affixed the second tag. The Secretary added that if the number of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes affixed with a satellite-tag during the first year of the study is below the number of tags procured, a request to extend the research period for another year may be submitted for the Committee's deliberation. All unused tags are to be returned to WBRU in April.

- 5.5 There was a general consensus that since both species are huntable from 1 September to end-January and that a live-capturing derogation is usually applied for Song Thrush from 20 October

to 31 December and for Golden Plover from 1 November to 10 January, geo-tagging should be carried out during February and March during pre-nuptial migration, also in view that by doing so, data related to breeding sites and reference populations would be collated earlier than originally proposed.

5.6 The Committee proceeded to take a vote on whether the project should be carried out in February and March 2022 and to proceed with site selection during a dedicated working group. The Secretary informed the Committee that the approved sites will be forwarded to the Police for enforcement purposes. The proposed geo-tagging study was unanimously approved.

5.7 Darrin Stevens remarked that regulation 8(2) of SL 549.42 may likely apply since both species are subject to Framework Regulations; this may need to be checked further with legal officials to ensure legal clarity. The Secretary remarked that SL 549.74 refers to a framework for allowing a derogation for opening an autumn live-capturing season for Song Thrush and Golden Plover in terms of regulation 9(1)(f) of SL 549.42, that is, an Article 9(1)(c) derogation to permit the *keeping* of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes caught. The Secretary further explained that the geo-tagging project is subject to the application of an Article 9(1)(b) derogation in terms of regulation 9(1)(e) of SL 549.42.

6. Outcome of the 2020 live-capturing season for Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) and Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*).

Related document: Annex A - Summary report to Ornis Committee (circulated in advance of the meeting).

6.1 The Secretary asked members whether they have any questions related to the summary report on the outcome of the Golden Plover and Song Thrush derogation. No questions related to this item were asked. The Secretary informed the Committee that a full report on this derogation prepared by WBRU is in the process of being reviewed by PREU and that it will subsequently be available on WBRU's website. The Committee proceeded to the next item.

7. Outcome of the 2020 research project on the seven finch species.

Related document: Annex A - Summary report to Ornis Committee (circulated in advance of the meeting).

7.1 The Secretary asked members whether they have any questions related to the summary report on the outcome of the finch research derogation. No questions related to this item were asked. The Secretary informed members that during the two-month finch research period, data pertaining to ten ring recoveries were submitted to WBRU by the trappers, seven of which were confirmed by EURING. The Secretary also informed the Committee that a full report on this derogation prepared by WBRU is in the process of being reviewed by PREU and that it will subsequently be available on WBRU's website. The Committee proceeded to the next item.

8. Game reporting data: 2020 autumn hunting season.

Related document: Annex A - Summary report to Ornis Committee (circulated in advance of the meeting).

- 8.1 The Secretary asked members whether they have any questions related to the summary report on the 2020 game reporting data, which is already available on WBRU's website⁴.
- 8.2 Mark Sultana asked for WBRU's position on the low participation in the game reporting system, specifically the fact that only 292 licensees out of a total of 10,675 hunters (2.7%) submitted a report during the 2020 autumn hunting season. Mark Sultana also asked whether such data is considered by WBRU as having any meaningful value.
- 8.3 The Secretary made reference to the previous agenda which included a point for discussion on statistical analysis and data extrapolation⁵, adding that out of all administrative fines issued, the ones related to non-reporting or under-reporting have consistently not featured in the Police daily returns. As explained in the statistical analysis, this could mean one of two things: either non-reporting or under-reporting is not being enforced given that 99% of all hunters are, by inference, not reporting what they catch, or that the percentage of those participating in game reporting mirrors the dearth of hunting opportunities on the ground. Mark Sultana replied that upon FKNK's own admission, hunters are not reporting truthfully since the *Carnet de Chasse* data has been used against them, adding that hunting data is there to protect bird populations not to be used against hunters.
- 8.4 The Secretary remarked that hunting bag data throughout the years has consistently shown that the Song Thrush is the most hunted species in autumn; 2020 being no exception. The Secretary further pointed out that although there is no data on hunting effort, WBRU has a robust system in place for gauging trapping effort, adding that almost 93% of all licensed trappers returned their calendars listing the dates when they practiced trapping during the 2020 derogation period. The Secretary explained that, whilst this should not be perceived as an attempt to justify the hunting data, it is still opportune to provide a comparison with trapping effort. The 2020 data on trapping effort shows that although the highest number of trappers⁶ targeting Golden Plover was on 1 November when the season opened, on that particular day, none of the licensees reported a Golden Plover and none were observed by the staff in charge of the migration study.
- 8.5 Mark Sultana suggested the introduction of hunting effort but Lino Farrugia disagreed, stating that it will be used against hunters since, should the data show that the majority of hunters went hunting during morning hours, a decision may be taken to limit hunting during morning hours only. FKNK will not accept that. The Secretary clarified that WBRU does not collate trapping effort to modify or reduce the trapping season or permitted hours. The Secretary concluded by informing the Committee that WBRU is currently working on a solution to provide a game reporting system that is totally free of charge for licensees.

⁴ The 2020 Game Reporting Data is available at:

<https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/Reports%20and%20Statistics/grdReport2020.pdf>

⁵ Point for discussion and statistical analysis as listed in the previous agenda of the Committee meeting held on 17 March 2021: *Should Quail bag data be extrapolated to the entire hunting population (n=10,675)?*

Statistical analysis: "If the majority of hunters caught between 1–4 quail, ignoring the ones that caught more, there would be a total of 63 quail, which when extrapolated would give 17,698 birds between 10,675 hunters. Alternatively, using the modal number (the most common catch is of 2 quail) it would mean that 10,675 hunters would catch 21,350 quail. To extrapolate simply by multiplying would be assuming that all licensed hunters were out all the time during an open season at a location conducive to quail hunting. In addition, if such an extrapolation is scientifically accurate then one could also infer that 99% (38 of 10,675 is 0.36%) of licensed hunters are illegally catching birds and not reporting them. Enforcement data show that of all the spot-checks only ≈1% resulted in an infraction which would not match the 99% mentioned earlier."

⁶ From a total of 1,319 licensees, 639 individuals licensed to trap Golden Plover were out in the field on 1 November 2020, which is almost half the amount of licences issued.

9. Article 9(1)(b) research derogation: satellite-tagging of ten harriers. Proposed derogation period: March–May, August–December 2021.

Request submitted by Natalino Fenech on 03 March 2021. Proposal circulated in advance of the meeting together with biography of foreign researcher. Item subject to a vote.

- 9.1 The Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting and to re-invite the proponent to present his project.

10. Any other business

- 10.1 The Committee agreed to reconvene on 5 May at 1600 hrs. The meeting was adjourned at 1900 hrs.

Annex A: Summary reports to the Ornis Committee

Prepared by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit for agenda items 6 – 8

1. Summary report on the outcome of the 2020 live-capturing season for Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) and Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)

1.1 Introduction

This section has been compiled as a summary of the report on the outcome of the 2020 autumn live-capturing season for Golden Plover and Song Thrush. This summary includes a detailed breakdown of the number of special licences issued, registered clap-net pairs, the number of birds caught, peak migration periods and a comparison with game reporting data, enforcement deployment and spot-checks on individual licensees, illegalities detected and court actions taken. The official report will be forwarded to the European Commission and will be made available on the website of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) under the sub-heading ‘Reports and Statistics’.

1.2 General Information

In accordance with Legal Notice 376 of 2020⁷: *Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for an Autumn 2020 Live-capturing Season for Song Thrush and Golden Plover) Regulations, 2020*, the statutory dates of the live-capturing season were from 20 October 2020 to 31 December 2020 for Song Thrush and from 1 November 2020 to 10 January 2021 for Golden Plover. Live-capturers in possession of a valid live-capturing general licence had to apply for a special licence through MaltaPost from 31 August to 5 September 2020, both dates included. 1,320 applicants applied for a live-capturing special licence. Following necessary checks, one application was considered invalid, as the applicant did not have a valid general licence. Consequently, 1,319 special licences were issued, out of which 1,047 were issued to live-capturers residing in Malta and 272 residing in Gozo, registered on a total of 1,352 clap-net pairs (*mnasab*), out of which 1,062 clap-net pairs were registered in Malta and 290 in Gozo⁸. A total of 700 Golden Plovers and 651 Song Thrushes were caught during the 2020 live-capturing season. The national quota for Golden Plover was reached on 4 January 2021.

The figure below summarises the number of Golden Plovers and Song Thrushes caught between 2014 and 2020.

Year	Golden Plovers	Song Thrushes
2020	700	651
2019	700	722
2018	233	511
2017	167	183
2016	297	230
2015	321	248
2014	418	292

1.3 Migration Study

According to the independent migration study carried out by Ecoserv Ltd between 15 October 2020 and 15 January 2021, the peak migration for Golden Plover was on the 2nd and 3rd December, with the highest daily counts between mid-November and mid-December, whereas the peak migration for Song Thrush was on the 31st October, with the highest daily counts between late-October and mid-November. The results of the migration study and the game reporting data show an almost perfect correlation, as also pointed out in the migration study report.

⁷ Legal Notice 376 of 2020 available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2020/376>

⁸ The coordinates of these clap-nets were published on WBRU’s website and are available here: <https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/autumn%20live%20capture/2020/gpstTraSitCoor2020.pdf>

1.4 Trapping Calendar and Ring Recovery form

Following closure of the live-capturing season, licensed trappers were requested to return the calendar that was included with the 2020 special licence, listing the dates when the licensee was practicing trapping and for which species. A total of 1,207 calendars were returned to WBRU within the deadline, which constitutes nearly 91.5% of the total 1,319 licences issued, corresponding to a margin of error of 0.82 at a 95% confidence level.

According to the survey data, the maximum number of trappers targeting Golden Plover was on 1st November with a total of 639 individuals, whereas the maximum number of trappers targeting Song Thrush was on 25th October, with a total of 508 individuals. Highest amount of licence holders targeting either Golden Plovers or Song Thrushes was on 1st November, with a total of 639 individuals.

Licensed trappers also had to return the ring recovery form. Out of the total 1,266 forms received, none had reported ring recoveries pertaining to Golden Plover and Song Thrush.

1.5 Enforcement deployed

During the autumn 2020 live-capturing season (20 October 2020 to 10 January 2021), the enforcement authorities deployed a total overall complement of 73 officers to oversee and supervise the parameters of the derogation.

Deployment of enforcement officers during the autumn 2020 live-capturing season

Entity	Number of officers	Duties
Environment Protection Unit (EPU) of the Police	20	Field patrols, surveillance, inspections, investigations, prosecution
District police officers seconded to the EPU	26	Field patrols, surveillance, inspections, investigations, prosecution
Gozo police	12	Field patrols, surveillance, inspections, investigations, prosecution
Armed Forces of Malta	6	Field patrols and surveillance
Environmental rangers	3	Patrols in Terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites, reporting illegal activities to Police
Wild Birds Regulation Unit	6	Verification of compliance with registration conditions; assistance to police in prosecution processes, other expert services
Total	73	

Police (EPU and District) and Armed Forces of Malta officers maintained a daily field deployment that ranged between a maximum of 64 officers and a minimum of 53 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 21:00hrs. This includes all other non-field staff assigned on-duties related to the supervision of the live-capturing season, but excludes field staff on shift rotation. During the derogation period, enforcement officers carried out a total of 2,648 spot-checks (1,458 in Malta [including 83 road checks] and 1,190 in Gozo) on individual licensees.

1.6 Illegalities detected

During the course of inspections carried out by enforcement staff throughout the derogation period, a total of 116 live-capturing infringements were detected (102 in Malta and 14 in Gozo), of which 87 offences were related to Golden Plover and Song Thrush and 29 related to finches, as described in the next section.

Administrative fines – A total of 44 persons were issued with an administrative fine of €250 each, 43 for the illegal use of pre-recorded bird callers whilst trapping for Golden Plover and Song Thrush and one for the use of a cage trap. All illicit devices were seized and destroyed. 40 offenders paid the fine within 21 days from notification whilst four offenders were referred to the police for court action for failure to pay the fine within the stipulated period.

Court cases – Court action is being taken against 22 individuals, inclusive of four related to non-payment of the administrative fine, as mentioned above. The 18 cases unrelated to admin fines are as follows: two cases of trapping for Golden Plover and Song Thrush without special licence, six related to unattended trapping sites, two for trapping during prohibited hours, five for trapping Golden Plover following closure of season, one case of trapping on an unregistered site, one for illegal trapping of Northern Lapwing and one for finch trapping during closed season.

Unknown culprits – No further legal action could be taken in relation to the remaining 25 illegalities since the person/s committing the illegality remained unknown to the police.

<i>Total illegalities detected during the 2020 live-capturing season for Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>) and Song Thrush (<i>Turdus philomelos</i>)</i>	2020		
	(20.10.20-10.01.21)		
	Cases in Malta	Cases in Gozo	Total number of cases
Trapping for protected birds (finches, waders etc.)	3	0	3
Use of illegal means (e.g. cage traps; artificial light; vertical nets; decoys of protected birds; pre-recorded bird calls)	44	0	44
Trapping during unpermitted hours	2	0	2
Trapping on unregistered sites	17	8	25
Trapping using unmarked decoys	0	0	0
Trapping following lapse of seasonal quota	5	0	5
Trapping without licence	2	0	2
Nets left uncovered when unattended	6	0	6
Total offences	79	8	87
Number of persons apprehended	62	0	62

2. Summary report on the outcome of the autumn 2020 research derogation to determine Malta's reference population of the seven finch species

2.1 Introduction

This section has been compiled as a summary of the report on the outcome of the 2020 research derogation to determine Malta's reference population of seven finch species. This summary includes a detailed breakdown of the number of special licences issued, registered clap-net pairs, ring recovery data, peak migration periods, enforcement deployment and spot-checks on individual licensees, illegalities detected and court actions taken. The official report will be made available on the website of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) under the sub-heading 'Reports and Statistics'.

2.2 General Information

In accordance with LN 399/2020⁹: *Conservation of Wild Birds (Framework for Allowing a Research Derogation To Determine Malta's Reference Population of Seven Finch Species) Regulations, 2020* and LN 400/2020¹⁰: *Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation Allowing a Research*

⁹ Legal Notice 399 of 2020 available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2020/399/eng/pdf>

¹⁰ Legal Notice 400 of 2020 available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2020/400/eng/pdf>

Period to determine Malta's Reference Population of Seven Finch Species) Regulations, 2020, the research period was open from 20 October 2020 to 20 December 2020. Applications for the research derogation were received during a 6-day period between 31 August and 5 September 2020. Only those applicants who were at the time of application already in possession of a valid general live-capturing licence for 2020 (5-year general licence card) were eligible to apply.

3,145 individuals submitted applications for a special licence (2,238 in Malta and 907 in Gozo). For the purposes of the 2020 finches research derogation, applicants were required to pass an exam on their understanding of the rules set out and on their ability to record data from scientific rings. Exams were held between the 22nd and 24th September. Re-sits, for those that failed the first exam or failed to attend, were held between the 8th and 10th October. 2,656 applicants passed the first round of exams. 442 applicants passed from the re-sit. 47 applicants failed the resit, did not attend or notified WBRU that they would like to withdraw their application – these 47 individuals were not issued a special licence. The number of special licences issued stood at 3,098, of which 2,202 licences were issued to applicants residing in Malta and 896 to applicants residing in Gozo. For this research, 2,420 clap-net pairs (*mnasab*) were registered, out of which 1,622 clap-net pairs were registered in Malta and 798 in Gozo¹¹.

2.3 Migration Study

An independent migration study was carried out by Ecoserv Ltd, between 15 October 2020 and 15 January 2021. The peak migration dates and the total daily count throughout the study period for each of the seven finch species, is presented below:

Species	Peak migration dates	Total daily count
Linnet	21 st October till 13 th November	312
Common Chaffinch	18 th October till 27 th November	120
Greenfinch	21 st October	35
Siskin	24 th October till 8 th December	48
Goldfinch	No peak migration	4
Serin	November and December (except from 14–22 November)	113
Hawfinch	No peak migration	5

2.4 Trapping Calendar and Ring Recovery form

Following closure of the research derogation, licensees were requested to return the calendar that was included with the 2020 special licence, listing the dates when the licensee participated in the research programme. A total of 2,872 calendars were returned to WBRU within the deadline, which constitutes nearly 92.7% of the total 3,098 licences issued, corresponding to a margin of error of 0.49 at a 95% confidence level.

According to the survey data, the maximum number of licence holders participating in the finches research project was on 25th October, with a total of 623 individuals.

Part of the legal requirements pegged to the special licence conditions was the submission of all ring recovery forms. Failure to do so would render licensees ineligible for a special licence the following year. Out of the total 2,975 ring recovery forms returned, ten reported ring recoveries, as shown below. The data was forwarded to the national ringing scheme for cross-verification. Seven ring recoveries were confirmed as valid. The other three (crossed out in the table below) were deemed invalid.

¹¹ The coordinates of these clap-nets were published on WBRU's website and are available here: <https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/autumn%20live%20capture/Autum%20Live%20Capture%20Derogation/2020/finTraSitCoor20.pdf>

Date of capture	Time of capture	Area name/ Town or Village	Finch Species	Ring details (as written on the ring recovery forms)
20/10/2020	07:15	Bahrija	Siskin (Ekra)	ESPANIA MATSALU CBN1846
28/10/2020	10:20	Wardija	Linnet (Ġojjin)	P291333 BUDAPEST
03/11/2020	11:00	Dingli	Linnet (Ġojjin)	P210546 BUDAPEST
05/11/2020	13:30	Kerċem	Linnet (Ġojjin)	P210483 BUDAPEST
06/11/2020	09:30	Gharb	Linnet (Ġojjin)	K135461 BUDAPEST
08/11/2020	09:35	Mgarr (Skrovit)	Linnet (Ġojjin)	VALLETTA MALTA B 335
12/11/2020	07:30	Mtahleb	Siskin (Ekra)	B653975SEMPAGH HELTIA
14/11/2020	15:45	Bahrija	Siskin (Ekra)	XV05488 MOSKVA
21/11/2020	10:05	Marsaxlokk	Serin (Apparell)	INFS OZZANO BO ITALY 3J3159
26/11/2020	08:30	Mizieħ	Chaffinch (Sponsun)	BIRDLIFE MALTA VALLETTA 351826

2.5 Enforcement deployed

Police (EPU and District) and Armed Forces of Malta officers maintained a daily field deployment that ranged between a maximum of 64 officers and a minimum of 53 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 21:00hrs. This includes all other non-field staff assigned on-duties related to the supervision of the live-capturing season, but excludes field staff on shift rotation.

During the derogation period, enforcement officers carried out 2,377 spot-checks (1,291 in Malta [including 70 road checks] and 1,086 in Gozo) on individual licensees.

Deployment of enforcement officers during the Autumn 2020 finches research period

Entity	Number of officers	Duties
Environment Protection Unit (EPU) of the Police	20	Field patrols, surveillance, inspections, investigations, prosecution
District police officers seconded to the EPU	26	
Gozo police	12	
Armed Forces of Malta	6	Field patrols and surveillance
Environmental rangers	3	Patrols in Terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites, reporting illegal activities to Police
Wild Birds Regulation Unit	6	Verification of compliance with registration conditions; assistance to police in prosecution processes, other expert services
Total	73	

2.6 Illegalities detected

During the inspections carried out by police throughout the finches research derogation period, a total of 29 infringements related to this derogation were detected.

Court action was taken against 12 individuals, seven for illegal trapping of finches, two for trapping without a special licence, two cases of unattended research station and one for the illegal possession of finches used as live-decoys.

Unknown culprits – No legal action could be taken in relation to the other 17 illegalities concerning illegal trapping of finches since the person/s committing the illegality/ies remained unknown to the police.

<i>Offences disclosed during the finches research period</i>	2020		
	(20.10.20 – 20.12.20)		
	Cases in Malta	Cases in Gozo	Total number of cases
Illegal trapping of finches (cases involving multiple offences)	19	5	24
Use of illegal means (e.g. cage traps; artificial light; vertical nets; decoys of protected birds)	0	0	0
Trapping using nets of prohibited mesh size	0	0	0
Trapping during prohibited hours	0	0	0
Trapping within bird sanctuaries	0	0	0
Trapping on unregistered sites	0	0	0
Trapping using unmarked decoys	0	0	0
Trapping without licence	1	1	2
Unattended trapping site	2	0	2
Illegal possession of finches without required rings	1	0	1
Total	23	6	29
Number of persons apprehended	11	1	12

Summary

Out of 116 offences detected from the 20 October to 10 January 2021, legal action was taken against 74 offenders (44 administrative fines, of which 4 referred to court, and 30 court cases) whilst no further action could be taken against the remaining 42 offences because the culprits remained unknown to the police.

3. Game reporting data: 2020 autumn hunting season

The game reporting data¹² pertaining to the autumn hunting season 2020 is summarised below.

Species	Amount reported
Song Thrush	833
Common Starling	794
Skylark	226

¹² The full report is available at:

<https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/Reports%20and%20Statistics/grdReport2020.pdf>

Common Quail	188
Turtle Dove	172
Woodcock	97
European Golden Plover	65
Blackbird	20
Northern Lapwing	19
Fieldfare	10
Snipe	8
Rock Dove	8
Ruff	7
Moorhen	5
Mallard	4
Eurasian Wigeon	3
Grey Plover	3
Jack Snipe	3
Water Rail	3
Tufted Duck	2
Shoveler	1
Pochard	1
Wood Pigeon	1
Coot	1
Redwing	1
Pintail	0
Eurasian Teal	0
Garganey	0
Gadwall	0
Greylag Goose	0
Taiga Bean Goose	0
Mistle Thrush	0
Wild Rabbit (Hunting)	3
Wild Rabbit (Nets/Ferreting)	0

The highest reported species was once again the Song Thrush at 833 birds. During the period September 2020 – January 2021, only 292 individual hunters reported a catch on any given day. On a per month basis, the total number of individual hunters reporting a catch is presented below. The monthly totals do not add up to 437 given that, in any given month, a hunter listed under one particular month may also be listed under another.

Month	Hunters reporting a catch
June 2020	1
July 2020	1
August 2020	0
September 2020	95
October 2020	134
November 2020	150
December 2020	42
January 2021	14