

Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee

Wednesday, 29th March 2023

16:30 pm - 19:30 pm

Minutes

Members Present:

Dr. Joseph Grech - Chairman
Mr. Jean Paul Portelli - Secretary
Mr. Nicholas Barbara - Birdlife Malta
Mr. Anthony Caruana - Member nominated by Government.
Mr. Mark Gauci - Avifauna expert
Mr. Joseph Grech - Member nominated by Government.
Mr. Joe Perici Calascione - FKNK
Perit Andrew Psaila - FKNK
Mr. Darrin Stevens - Representative ERA
Mr. Mark Sultana - Birdlife Malta
Dr. Gaynor Saliba - Member nominated by Government.
Mr. Lucas Micallef - Hunting and live-capturing expert.

1. Approval of Agenda

- 1.1. The Chairman asked for the approval of the agenda and asked for some of the items to be deferred to the next meeting.
- 1.2. All Committee members were in favour and this agenda was approved and signed.

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta	1		
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr. Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
D.r Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA	1		
Chairman	1		
Total	7		

2. Approval of Minutes

- 2.1. The Chairman asked for the approval of minutes dated 05th October 2022 and 16th November 2022 and asked for those who were for, against, or who will abstain.
- 2.2. the Minutes of the 5th of October 2022 and of the 16th of November 2022 were both approved. All Members present voted in favour.

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta	1		
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr. Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA	1		
Chairman	1		
Total	7		

3. Matters arising and matters to report.

- 3.1. BirdLife Malta inquired about Item 6. This item was originally asked to be on the agenda to have ample time for discussion. BLM did not ask for any vote but for on discussion on the status of the Turtle Doves. Birdlife said that since the meeting was postponed more than once, the time has run out, and hence item 6 on the agenda is to be removed. At this stage, FKNK wanted to propose item 6 themselves.
- 3.2. The Chairman made it clear that FKNK was proposing Item 6.
- 3.3. ERA suggested that the agenda be sent at least two weeks before the meeting.

4. Outcome of spring hunting season 2022. The tabling of the report – Document circulated in advance of the meeting (Doc Item 4) (Item not subject to vote)

- 4.1. This report includes an overview of the number of special licenses issued; the number of turtle dove and quail caught; the number of turtle dove and quail observed on migration, the enforcement deployment and spot-checks on individual licensees; the illegalities detected, and court action is taken. The full report will be forwarded to the European Commission and will be made available on the website of the WBRU under the sub-heading ‘Reports and Statistics’.

5. Conservation Status of Turtle Dove and Quail. The tabling of the report – Document circulated before the meeting (Doc Item 14) (Item not subject to vote).

5.1. Common Quail (*Coturnix Coturnix*)

The EU population status for Common Quail is unknown, as the data reported were not sufficient to assess the population status of the species (EEA, 2020). The Common Quail has an IUCN Least Concern classification at a global level but at European Level; it was placed in a higher risk Red List category from Least Concern (2015) to Near Threatened (2021) (BirdLife International, 2021: 19). At EU level, the breeding population status is Unknown (EEA, 2020). This species is not included in the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme. 3.2 During the current (2013–2018) Article 12 reporting period, the Italian population (95% of Malta’s reference population) registered an increase in the long-term trend from the previous (2008–2012) status of unknown. However, the Hungarian population now stands at 5,000–10,000 fewer calling males than previously reported. Malta’s reference population retained a stable short-term trend status in the maximum number of calling males and improved the short-term trend status in the minimum number of calling males from declining to stable. The long-term trend of the reference population remains unknown.

5.2. European Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia Turtur*).

This species is listed as Vulnerable at the European and global levels and Near Threatened within the territory of the European Union (BirdLife International, 2015a). A ten-year (2018–2028) international single-species action plan is in place *to restore the European turtle dove to a favourable population status so that it can be safely removed from the Globally Threatened categories of the IUCN Red List* (Fisher *et al.* 2018).

The European Bird Census Council (2021 update; 2019 base year) has shown that at the Pan-European level, the *turtle dove* declined by 85% when compared with the 1980 baseline data and by 17% during the 10-year trend (2012–2021). Compared with the previous EBCC update, the *turtle dove* declined by an additional 3% in the long-term trend [from -82% to -85%] and declined by 5% in the short-term (10-year) trend [from -12% to -17%].

Based on the latest Article 12 reporting cycle (2013–2018), the Turtle-dove reference population improved its short-term trend status from Decreasing to Stable (Min. Pairs: -0.27%;

Max. Pairs: -0.26%) and remained Stable in the long-term trend (Min. Pairs: -0.28%; Max. Pairs: -0.32%). During the previous reporting cycle (2008–2013), the decrease in the short-term trend of Malta’s reference population was as follows: Min. Pairs: -13.02%; Max. Pairs: -10.61%. Thus, in the short term, the reference population increased by 12.75% (Min. Pairs) and 10.35% (Max. Pairs). However, it should be noted that more than half the reference population (55%) is decreasing in the short-term trend. In the long-term, the majority of the reference population (81%) is either decreasing (36%) or has an unknown trend (45%), but the overall trend remained stable at -0.28% in the minimum number of breeding pairs and -0.32% in the maximum number of breeding pairs. When compared with the previous trends (for Article 12 reporting period 2008–2012), this equates to an increase of 11.77% [(-0.28%) – (-12.05%)] in the minimum number of breeding pairs and an increase of 15.35% [(-0.32%) – (-15.67%)] in the maximum number of breeding pairs.

- 5.3. A discussion was held between the Committee about the subject matter.
- 5.4. The Chairman pointed out that whenever members have questions in relation to a matter to be discussed in a meeting, s/he shall liaise with the Secretary prior to the meeting to be able to invite individuals knowledgeable in the specific area to the said meeting and answer any questions asked by the members.
- 6. Discussion as to the Derogation permitting Hunting for Turtle Dove and Quail in spring 2023. (Item proposed by FKNK) (Item is subject to a vote).**
 - 6.1. FKNK re-caped some important points on the document entitled: “Document Memorandum Re-Derogations Application to permit the hunting of turtle doves and quails and live-capturing of turtle doves for research purposes in spring of 2023”.
 - 6.2. Mr. Mark Gauci pointed out that FKNK concluded that there are more young doves in the fall than in the spring. Mr. Gauci pointed out that 80% of the birds that are ringed are young, and only 20% are adults. Mr. Gauci continued that this does not mean a good population; instead, he attributed it to natural selection.
 - 6.3. A discussion was held between FKNK and BirdLife Malta about the population size of young doves.
 - 6.4. FKNK proposed the opening of the hunting season in spring 2023 as follows:
 - (i) From the 10th of April until 30th of April – Quails – maximum amount = 2,400; and
 - (ii) From the 17th of April until 30th of April – Doves – maximum amount = 1,500.In addition, FKNK proposed that hunting time shall start from two hours before sunrise and until noon.
 - 6.5. BirdLife Malta pointed out that they have not yet received the outcome of the Task Force on the Recovery of Birds (TFRB). It emphasized that what is being produced by the task force at the European Commission is different from what is being produced by this Committee. Moreover, the WBRU is inconsistent with the Committee and the task force.
 - 6.6. The Chairman highlighted that WBRU does not form part of the Committee. Mr Jean Paul Portelli, Secretary of the Committee, works for the WBRU. However, he does not represent the WBRU.
 - 6.7. BirdLife Malta declared that the task force had singled out Malta for permitting the hunting of Turtle-dove in spring last year. Malta answered that it still had to be discussed at this Committee. However, it is their understanding that a decision has already been taken. BirdLife

Malta also declared that the Committee is not informed about the task force for which WBRU attends, and from now on, they would like to be informed.

- 6.8 BirdLife Malta also reminded the committee that for a decision/vote to permit a spring hunting season, the framework law mandates consideration of the autumn catch of last year. BLM enquired WBRU for such data, which it could not present at the time of the meeting. The figure for Turtle-dove was confirmed as being a maximum of 500; however, the carnet de chasse figures for autumn for the Common Quail were not provided. The Committee nonetheless proceeded to vote.
- 6.9. FKNK’s proposal is discussed in Item 6.4. above was put to the vote. Five members voted in favour (FKNK, Mr. Anthony Caruana, Mr. Joseph Grech, Dr. Gaynor Saliba, and Chairman), BirdLife Malta voted against, and ERA abstained. The proposal was approved.

Vote for quail hunting in spring :

FKNK proposal suggested that hunting in spring shall open for quails from the 10-30 of April 2023 the limit is to respect the small numbers criteria set in S.L549.42, and the hunting time starts at 2 hours before the sun rises to noon.

Quail:

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta		1	
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr. Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA			1
Chairman	1		
Total	5	1	1

Vote for Turtle Doves hunting in spring :

Hunting for doves from the 17th to the 30th of April 2023, the limit is to respect the criteria of the minor number set in S.L549.42 the hunting time starts at 2 hours before the sun rises to noon.

Turtle Doves :

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta		1	
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA			1
Chairman	1		
Total	5	1	1

7. Taxidermy Collections

FKNK's proposal was submitted in conjunction with the Malta Taxidermy Federation (Doc Item 5). Item discussed during ad hoc workshops. Item subject to a vote.

7.1. The Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

8. Salvage Permit/Road Kill

Proposal submitted by MTF (Doc Item 7). Item brought forward from previous meeting. Item subject to a vote.

8.1. The Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

9. EURING - Birdlife Malta Monopoly

Proposal submitted by FKNK (Doc Item 8). Proposed legal amendment (Doc Item 7.4) was drafted by the Secretary and circulated to the Committee as a basis for discussion.

9.1. The Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

10. Proposed new Schedule XI – internal ring sizes.

Documents circulated in advance of the meeting (Doc Items 7.5A – 7.5C).

Item to be discussed after review of internal ring sizes by CITES Office and feedback from ERA. (Item subject to a vote)

10.1. The Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

11. Article 9(1)(b) research project: Request for sampling of blood and feathers from up to fifty (50) Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapa Striata* (Mediterranean Flycatcher – *Muscicapa Tyrrenica*) in Malta for laboratory analysis abroad.

11.1. Research period – Outcome of Phase 1 (Doc Item 10.A): May–August 2022 (blood sampling and geo-tagging) | Phase 2 (proposed continuation of the project – Doc Item 10B): May–August 2023 (feather sampling upon retrieval of the devices). Proposal circulated in advance of the meeting. Proposal submitted by Head of Ringing Scheme on 11 September 2022. *Item subject to a vote.*

11.2. Related item: Meeting held on the 13th of October 2021 (Item 6)

- 11.3. The Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa Striata*) was first recorded breeding in the Maltese Islands in 1971 in Buskett and has been recorded breeding annually since 1974. The population has been gradually increasing with new sites being colonized by the species and discovered regularly. The population is now estimated to be of c.40 pairs. Whilst in 2009, a pair of *Muscicapa* flycatchers breeding in Mdina was identified as ‘Mediterranean’ Flycatchers (*Muscicapa striata tyrrhenica*), it was generally accepted by local ornithologists that the breeding population of *Muscicapa* flycatchers in the Maltese Islands was of the nominate subspecies *striata*. This subspecies passes in large numbers during its annual migrations (more common in Spring) and uses the Maltese Islands as a migration stop-over on its way to breed in continental Europe.
- 11.4. After making detailed field plumage observations, sound recordings and taking biometric measurements (including wing formula) of a number of breeding specimen from the Maltese Islands in 2020, the undersigned concluded that against what was the de-facto understanding, the Maltese population of *Muscicapa* flycatchers is most likely entirely made up of birds of the *Muscicapa striata tyrrhenica* (‘Mediterranean’ Flycatcher) lineage.
- 11.5. Initial and intermediate results obtained from the samples collected in 2022 are very exciting, confirming the above hypothesis and revealing even more intriguing results. Mitochondrial DNA (mother lineages) has been extracted and sequenced for 12 birds so far. 2 lineages were found. 8 birds with *tyrrhenica* (Mediterranean Flycatcher) mDNA and 4 birds with *striata* (from the north African clade) mDNA. No nominate (Continental Europe) lineage was found (although the african *striata* is not considered a subspecies yet). Nuclear DNA will now be sequenced to determine if there are hybrids (quite likely since 2 pairs sampled were *tyrrhenica* x *striata*).
- 11.6. One possibility is that the Maltese population became established from both *tyrrhenica* and African *striata*, X years ago and today we have mostly hybrids that vary in their resemblance to Tyrrhenica or African *striata*.
- 11.7. What's interesting and exciting is that these results have expanded the range of 2 lineages (*tyrrhenica* and African *striata*) and also discovered the first place where these two lineages meet (and possibly they also interbreed).
- 11.8. The subspecies *Muscicapa striata tyrrhenica* is endemic to the Mediterranean basin and currently only known to breed in the Mediterranean islands of Corsica, Sardinia, the Tuscan archipelago, and now the Maltese Islands. It possibly also breeds along a narrow band of the Tyrrhenian coast (west Italy) but this still needs to be confirmed. The African *striata* clade was previously only known from North African and parts of Southern Spain.
- 11.9. Therefore, through more sampling proposed in this document, more studies will continue with a focus on testing a number of hypotheses regarding pre- and post-zygotic isolating mechanisms that should restrict gene flow between these two lineages, which diverged around 1 million years ago.
- 11.10. This study will also be part of a genetic and migration study (through geolocation) of the *Muscicapa* flycatcher populations across Europe, continuing studies by Jean-Marc Pons et al. in 2015.
- 11.11. Furthermore, whilst the Spotted Flycatcher is currently classified as ‘least concern’ by the IUCN since it has a pervasive geographical range, the conservation status of the ‘Mediterranean’ Flycatcher is very much restricted. It should possibly be therefore revised accordingly to determine its ability to cope with environmental changes within its region.
- 11.12. Item was put to the vote. All members voted in favour. The proposal was approved.

All members present voted in favour of item 11.

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta	1		
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr. Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr. Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA	1		
Chairman	1		
Total	7		

12. Dove Satellite Tagging: (Proposal from KSU regarding Turtle Dove satellite tagging study in Spring 2023) (Doc 11A,11B,11c,11D,11E,11F, and 11G) *Item subject to a vote.*

- 12.1. KSU representative Mark Mifsud Bonnici pointed out that the scope of the project is to satellite tag wild captured turtle doves spread during the best part of the spring migration season. Through this substantial sample of birds, taken over a defined span of time, much-needed data will be gathered. A better representation of the different references. The study under derogation will be licensed to and under the direction and coordination of the same Kaċċaturi San Ubertu (KSU) Committee members, who will be the licensed project purposely trained site officials. The project is a scientific study on the Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) carried out under Derogation 9(1)(b) of Directive 79/409. The tags are the same purchased through the Conservation of Wild Bird Fund 2019 and are at hand. Originally, we had 20 tags but one has already been used in 2021 and 12 in 2022, one of which was retrieved from a dead turtle dove, so we have eight tags left to fit on turtle doves in spring 2023.
- 12.2. The project involves fitting Turtle Doves captured from the wild with satellite trackers to monitor and study their migration routes and patterns. As explained further under the section “Methodology” below, birds would be captured under strictly supervised conditions from pre-established WBRU-approved locations. The satellite trackers would be fitted, and the birds subsequently released in the presence of one of the KSU-appointed licensed officials who will be present on the site used on the day during the study. Each approved site is registered and has been inspected by KSU representatives prior to the commencement of the study to ensure full compliance with the project requirements.
- 12.3. BirdLife Malta highlighted the fact that last year doves were caught from Kuncizzjoni and released in Floriana. MMB answered that this was done to give a better chance for the doves to survive since the hunting season was open. BLM wanted to know if the WBRU gave permission to transport the doves from one place to another. WBRU was not present to answer, so that Ornis Secretary would be asking WBRU accordingly.
- 12.4. The Chairman pointed out that any problems that might arise from researching these doves should be dealt with by having protective stipulations the researcher must agree to follow in order for the permit to be issued.
- 12.5. Item was put to the vote. Three members voted in favour (Mr. Anthony Caruana, ERA, and Chairman), BirdLife Malta voted against it, and three abstained (FKNK, Mr. Joseph Grech, and Dr. Gaynor Saliba). The proposal was approved.

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK			1
BirdLife Malta		1	
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr Joseph Grech (not the chairman)			1
Dr Gaynor Saliba			1
ERA	1		
Chairman	1		
Total	3	1	3

13. Sampling of Maltese Italian sparrows for transport to Sweden. Proposed by Alex Lawrence (Document Item 12 A-12E) Item subject to a vote.

13.1. The below text is from a report prepared by Profs. A. Lawrence:

“Profs A. Lawrence explains Hybridization is increasingly recognized as an important evolutionary force contributing novel diversity, even in humans, a finding awarded the Nobel Prize this year. The Italian sparrow *Passer italiae* and its parent species the Spanish sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* and house sparrow *Passer domesticus*, are emerging as a role model for studying this process (Hermansen et al. 2011 Mol Ecol, Trier et al. 2014 PLoS gen, Ravinet et al. 2018 Proc Roy Soc B, Runemark et al. 2018 Nature Ecology and Evolution), with one of my studies outlining how different hybridization events on Mediterranean islands, have led to different amounts and combinations of parental alleles (Runemark *et al.* 2018 Nature Ecology and Evolution). Understanding the combinations of coding alleles does not shed light on how the birds get novel morphology and physiology, though. Which genes are expressed, and to what extent is key for understanding how novel adaptations arise? Gene expression is different across each tissue, as the genes coding for an eye are not needed in a finger, for instance. Moreover, it is affected by the environment experienced by the organisms. Gene expression varies depending on the light regime, temperature, time of the year, stress, and social context for instance.

In a study funded by a prestigious European Research Council grant, my lab will disentangle how hybridization contributes to transgressive, extreme compared to both parental species, gene expression in the hybrid Italian sparrow. A pilot study has shown extreme patterns of gene expression in the testes of the Italian sparrow (Yazdi et al., 2022 Molecular Ecology). In this project, we will uncover general patterns of how gene expression evolves in hybrid species, and the Maltese Italian sparrow population is key for understanding this because it has a unique genomic composition, with a high proportion of Spanish sparrow DNA and studying it jointly with the other Italian sparrow populations will enable us to understand general patterns.

To make studies of gene expression general, it is absolutely necessary to investigate gene expression across a number of tissues. Gene expression is most conserved between species in brain and most diverged between species in gonads. As tissues are not homogenous but contain many types of cells, each with a different gene expression, entire tissues need to be sampled. This means that Replacement is not possible; the study requires sacrificing birds. As gene expression also varies with the environment, sacrificing organisms in the same common garden setting is absolutely necessary. We, therefore, apply for transporting 30 individuals of the common Italian sparrow to Sweden: 15 males and 15 females to be sacrificed to investigate gene expression. The Italian sparrow has very large population sizes, frequently inhabiting anthropogenic habitats such as dumpsters and farms. Sampling these individuals will therefore have negligible effects on the population.

To reduce the number to the lowest possible, enabling accurate findings, 15 individuals per sex and population will be sampled for gene expression. This number of birds would be just many enough for producing co-expression networks for autosomal genes, a main goal of the study (while the double would be needed for the sex chromosomes, we deem that we should prioritize sacrificing fewer birds instead of producing this extra data).

To refine, that is, reduce the stress for the birds, wild birds will be caught using mist-nets, a standard procedure in the birding community, and transported using a certified shipping courier specialized in shipping animals to the Lund University field station. At the field station, there are specifically built cages with stimulating environments for enabling the birds to thrive and come into the reproductive stage. All Ethical permits for housing the birds in Sweden will of course be in place.

The birds will be shipped to Stensoffa Ecological Field Station <https://portal.research.lu.se/en/equipments/stensoffa-field-station> by an approved animal transport courier. Birds will be shipped in individual transport boxes of ca. 30*30*40 with food, stick to sit on and loose bottom material, and remain in the same box until they have reached the field station.

The birds will be held in an aviary at the Stensoffa Ecological Field station with a specific ethical permit for this study, Dnr. 5.2.18-5397/16 from the Swedish Board of Agriculture. The birds will be held in groups of max 5 in aviaries are 1.3*3*2.10 meters, and approximately 75% of the aviaries have roofs. The aviaries contain a heated box with the dimensions 80*80*100 cm for roosting and warming. There will also be five nest boxes mounted in the aviaries as roosting sites. The bottom will contain natural vegetation, the aviaries will be enriched with twigs and plants, and food and water will be prepared ad libitum. Only staff that have completed the Lund University animal ethics course, as well as the bird ethics course, are allowed to handle the animals, and there are caretakers and ethics responsible and a university veterinary associated with the project, ensuring that the birds are well.

As soon as the birds enter the reproductive stage, where the first egg is laid, they will be sacrificed under standardized conditions to ensure that the gene expression is comparable between lineages across the Mediterranean. They will be sacrificed on-site by decapitation by authorized personnel to reduce stress as much as possible.”

- 13.2. A discussion was held between Profs Lewrence and the members about the sampling process of the Maltese Italian sparrows.
- 13.3: BirdLife Malta asked A. Lewrence if some genetic testing has been done on the Maltese sparrow.
- 13.4 A. Lewrence said that there have already been some genetic tests that have been done on the genome but there is not enough information from that study.
- 13.5 BirdLife Malta asked how the sampling was done in the past.
- 13.6 A. Lewrence responded that they were taken from blood samples, so the birds were not taken out of Malta. He also explained that for the gene expression study, birds have to be sacrificed.
- 13.7 Birdlife Malta asked if the study was there to see if sparrows in the same breeding conditions would show the same genetic expression.

- 13.8 A. Lewrence wants to account for as many factors as possible that can affect gene expression.
- 13.9 BirdLife Malta pointed out that breeding in captivity and killing the birds might create a stress factor on the R.N.A, which might not be how the gene expression occurs in the natural state.
- 13.10 A.Lewrence pointed out that the goal is to keep the birds over a period of time so that they can acclimatize so the results could be more accurate. When it comes time to kill the birds it will be so quick that they will not show signs of stress.
- 13.11 FKNK asked if he has permission from the other countries to carry out the study
- 13.12 A. Lewrence pointed out that he has the permission and is expecting the permission to be granted in Italy as well.
- 13.13 Birdlife Malta asked if there is any alternative to catching the birds, taking them out of Malta and sacrificing them.
- 13.14 . Lewrence said that in gene expression, there is no other way to study the birds without sacrificing them.
- 13.15 Era asked if what A. lewrence wanted was to catch, keep, and transport a protective species in Malta.
- 13.16 A. Lewrence said that is what they want to do. He also added that they would transport the birds to Sweden and sacrifice the birds there.
- 13.17 Era asked if the previous permits to carry out research in Malta were carried out on live or dead specimens.
- 13.18 A Lewrence said that he does not have that information in hand but he will email that information.
- 13.19 Era asked why he needed a live specimen to carry out the work when WBRU might have specimens of DNA and RNA.
- 13.20 A . Lewrence said that the RNA degrades over time and has to be fresh.
- 13.21 The chairperson pointed out that there should be a vote taken, and all the concerns that the Ornithologists members have on the study should be listed and put forward to the WBRU.
- 13.22 The concerns are as follows :

Birdlife Malta:

‘From our side, BLM has abstained from taking a vote for a number of reasons, mainly that we are not convinced this research is of any direct conservation benefit to the species.

Birds will be trapped to be bred in captivity to see what gene expression will result after a couple of generations – in a simulated environment. While we might understand the need for such conditions for the conclusions required, whether to obtain such a conclusion, one needs to subject live specimens to such hardships is mainly an ethical consideration.

It appears that the genetics of our sparrow have been profiled through a past study, so the question remains what added benefit does this study contribute to the appreciation/conservation of our sparrow, other than an insight into evolutionary genetics...’

FKNK:

‘To start with, there was a question that remained unanswered by the proposer and this was related to the previous study that had been carried out and whether all permits had been obtained and relative conditions adhered to.

Other questions arose concerning the requirement to kill two (?) of the specimens to gather RNA information and whether this was absolutely a necessity.

As Nicholas stated, there was a discussion about ethics and also about whether the project would render any positive 'new' results that had not already been documented. The proposer was also asked about the position of other countries in which the same project is being proposed since the idea was to understand the behavioral pattern of specimens obtained from different countries when subjected to the same conditions together.

ERA:

‘Whilst ERA has no objection towards scientific research which could assist in terms of taxonomy related to our sparrows, we have three main issues to raise from our end:

1. It was not clear from the discussion what the request for derogation is. We understood that this was for the capture, keeping, and transport of Maltese ‘Spanish sparrows,’ but this was not clear to us. We understand that WBRU will be assessing the aspects and means related to the capture of these birds as well as other issues pertinent to disturbance, keeping, and transport as regulated by SL 549.42. From this end, we trust that the proponent will ensure adherence to all national and international laws (i.e., those issues which are beyond Malta’s jurisdiction).
2. How does Directive [2010/63/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 September 2010 on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes apply to this case? This is noted since this proposal will involve the housing and ‘killing’ of protected species. This Directive address procedures for such experiments and applies until the animals referred to in the Directive have been killed, rehomed, or returned to a suitable habitat or husbandry system. We understand this is led by MAFA as the competent authority regarding animal welfare and veterinary regulation.
3. During the presentation to the Ornis Committee, we were alerted of genetic studies that had already been carried out on Maltese specimens. Were these governed by derogations or permits issued by the relevant Malta competent authorities please?

For completeness, other parties during the Ornis Committee meeting enquired about alternative methods of assessments or procedures which could reduce the number of killed protected species or if the studies can proceed without these being killed, and whether the extant living Maltese birds will be returned to Malta or housed in an appropriate environment/habitat after the experiment. We also understand this matter will be subject to WBRU’s consideration of the application in terms of SL 549.42 and related legislation.’

- 13.3. The Chairman informed the members that any concerns about this sampling should be forwarded to the WBRU.
- 13.4. Item put to the vote. Five members voted in favour (FKNK, Mr. Anthony Caruana, Mr. Joseph Grech, Dr. Gaynor Saliba, and ERA), BirdLife Malta, and the Chairman abstained. The proposal was approved.

The vote was taken for item 1:

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta			1
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA	1		
Chairman			1
Total	5		2

14. Request for sampling of blood and feathers from Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan*, Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* and Yellow-legged gull *Larus michahellis* in Malta for laboratory analysis abroad (Document item 13) (Item subject to a vote)

14.1. Item was put to the vote. All members voted in favour. The proposal was approved.

14.1 All members present voted in favour regarding item 14:

	In Favour	Against	Abstention
FKNK	1		
BirdLife Malta	1		
Mr Anthony Caruana	1		
Mr Joseph Grech (not the chairman)	1		
Dr Gaynor Saliba	1		
ERA	1		
Chairman	1		
Total	7		

15. Any Other Business

15.1. FKNK suggested the following proposal with respect to dove research:

Doves will be caught, and the number of Doves will be subtracted from the total number of Doves that can be hunted. All the Doves that are caught will be taken to the FKNK aviaries to increase genetic diversity. People who choose to trap are not allowed to have a hunting license at that time. Anyone who has suitable trapping grounds for Doves can take part.

15.2. ERA suggested that the abovementioned proposal should have been presented to the Committee much earlier.

15.3. FKNK compromised that such a proposal should be discussed in further detail in the coming meetings, and a vote shall be taken.

15.4. There were no other matters to be discussed.

.16. Next meeting will be held on Wednesday 03rd May 2023 at 04:00pm at the WBRU.

. The meeting was adjourned at 07:30pm.