

Assessment of the latest enforcement-related measures and outcome of the 2021–2022 autumn hunting season.

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Wild Birds Regulation Unit

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Annex I - Game Reporting Data Report 2021

Annex II - Monitoring study on the influx of Turtle-dove and Common Quail in Autumn 2021.

1. Introduction

This report has been prepared on the basis of past practices whereby the Maltese authorities publish, following the closure of the autumn hunting season, a detailed report on the implementation and monitoring of the season. This report will consider various relevant aspects of the season, including:

- i. An overview of the legal and policy basis covering the autumn/winter hunting season;
- ii. Updates to the innovative game reporting system;
- iii. An overview of the decision-making process leading to the opening of a limited autumn hunting season for European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), including legislative changes related to the reduction of the national quota, obligatory immediate reporting of Turtle-doves caught and reporting of hunting effort;
- iv. A summary of the enforcement effort deployed by the Maltese authorities for the monitoring of the season, as well as the relevant enforcement statistics and description of other measures related to Malta's effort to fight the illegal killing, trapping and trade of wild birds (IKB).

This report is the latest in a series of similar enforcement reports previously published by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU), available at:

<https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Pages/WBRU/Reports-and-Statistics.aspx>.

2. Legal and policy measures for the 2021–2022 autumn hunting season

The 2021 autumn hunting season followed the same legislative parameters as the 2020 season, which parameters were set in March 2016 by virtue of Legal Notice 69 of 2016 of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42)¹.

The Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations declares all species of naturally occurring birds as protected [Regulation 4(1)] and establishes general parameters regulating hunting and taking of birds, lays down general prohibitions, lists avian species subject to the highest level of

¹ Conservation of Wild Birds (Amendment) Regulations, 2016. Available at: <http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=27449&l=1>

protection (Schedule I and IX species), areas where hunting is not allowed and other restrictions. Almost identical conditions as those applicable to bird hunting on land also apply to rabbit hunting during the autumn period, which is regulated through the Protection of Wild Rabbit Regulations (S.L. 549.90)².

During the 2021 autumn hunting season, the hunting of birds on land was permitted between 1 September and 31 January, from two hours before sunrise until two hours after sunset on any day between Monday and Saturday, and from two hours before sunrise to 1pm on Sundays and Public Holidays. However, the hunting of birds on land between 15 September and 7 October (inclusive of both dates) was not permitted from Monday to Saturday from 7 pm to two hours before sunrise of the following day. The same time restrictions also applied to the hunting of wild rabbit, which was permitted until 31 December.

The hunting of birds at sea was permitted between 1 October and 31 January during the same times as those applicable to hunting on land, whilst between 1 October and 7 October, inclusive of both dates, hunting at sea was not permitted from Monday to Saturday from 7 pm to two hours before sunrise of the following day.

Hunters were only permitted to hunt the species for which they were licensed according to their licence category and were legally required to report game caught via the game reporting system prior to leaving the hunting area, in accordance with the instructions as stipulated in the information booklet distributed together with the hunting licences.

Hunting of Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) was discontinued in 2016, by virtue of regulation 10 of Legal Notice 69 of 2016. Moreover, according to Legal Notice 341 of 2021³, hunting of European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) was permitted only during the month of September, subject to maximum national quota of 500 birds as detailed in the section on the legal and policy measures for the opening of a limited autumn hunting season for European Turtle-dove. Targeting of the European Turtle-dove outside this period was prohibited.

² Protection of Wild Rabbit Regulations, 2014. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/549.90/eng/pdf>

³ Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration of the Autumn Hunting Season for Turtle-dove) Regulations, 2021. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2021/341/eng>

As has always been the case, only those hunters who were in possession of a valid general licence to hunt birds on land were authorized to participate in the season. Hunters were required to carry with them the general licence card and the hunting booklet at all times whilst hunting. In 2021, there were 9,611 general licences to hunt birds on land, 252 general licences to hunt birds at sea, 2,870 general licences to hunt wild rabbit and 61 general licences to capture wild rabbit with nets (ferreting).

2.1. Legal and policy measures for the opening of a limited autumn hunting season for European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*)

The European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) was uplisted as Vulnerable on the IUCN global Red List of Threatened Species and, on the basis of Member States' reports under Article 12 of the Birds Directive, it was classified as Near Threatened within the territory of the European Union. The species has undergone rapid decline in much of its European range thus the European Commission urged Member States to apply an overarching precautionary principle approach to safeguard the European Turtle-dove population.

An “International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the European Turtle-dove 2018-2028” (ISSAP) was prepared in the context of the LIFE EuroSAP project. It was recommended for implementation by NADEG members in May 2018 and then adopted at COP 12 (October 2018) of the Convention on Migratory Species.

After discussing the issue through workshops and ad-hoc meetings, the European Commission requested Member States forming part of the Central-Eastern Flyway and that hunt this species, to implement a compliance system if a hunting season of the Turtle-dove in 2021 is foreseen. Malta has committed towards implementing the measures recommended by the European Commission in relation to the hunting season of Turtle-dove in 2021, which requested countries intending to open a season for the species to:

- Take the necessary measures to limit the annual bag to a maximum 50% of the average off-take between 2013–2018 (autumn hunting, no spring hunting).
- Implement a mandatory game reporting system.
- Ensure that the authorities carry out the necessary on-site verifications of reported bag data.
- Ensure controls are strategically planned and effectively implemented.

- Have an appropriate enforcement system in place (official warnings, administrative and/or criminal proceedings, deterrent and dissuasive sanctions, etc.).
- Make reports on inspections publicly available.
- Seriously tackle illegal killing of birds.
- Collect the necessary data (population size, survival, harvest, age structure of hunting bags).
- Take the necessary measures to ensure that habitat is managed across the country according to the ecological requirements of the species.

2.2. Legislative changes leading to the opening of a limited hunting season for Turtle-dove

Malta took into consideration the measures recommended by the European Commission and enacted the legislative framework for the 2021 Turtle-dove autumn hunting by virtue of Legal Notice 341 of 2021 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration of the Autumn Hunting Season for Turtle-dove) Regulations, 2021⁴.

This legislation reduced the autumn national quota of the Turtle-dove from 7,000 to 500 birds, hutable in September only (from 1 to 30 September, inclusive of both dates). This reduction is in line with the Commission's request to limit the annual bag to a maximum 50% of the average off-take between 2013–2018 as reported in the Article 12 reports (autumn hunting only, excluding spring hunting as specifically requested by the European Commission). When calculating the national quota as presented in Article 12 report, the average bag for the year 2013–2018 stood at 4,099, so it was declared that the quota would be reduced to 2,050. However, it transpired that this average also included Turtle-doves that were hunted under derogation in spring 2013–2016, as shown in Table 1 - Bag data pertaining to the Turtle-dove for the period 2013–2018 including average and bag reduction.. The average for autumn 2013–2018 is 2,331 Turtle-doves, which means half this average is 1,166. Nonetheless, following further discussions with stakeholders and hunting organisations and following Ornis recommendation during its meeting held on 18 August, the autumn 2021 national quota was set at 500 Turtle-doves, equivalent to a reduction of 78.6% of the autumn bag average for the year 2013–2018.

⁴ Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration of the Autumn Hunting Season for Turtle-dove) Regulations, 2021. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2021/341/eng>

Table 1 - Bag data pertaining to the Turtle-dove for the period 2013–2018 including average and bag reduction.shows how these figures were calculated.

Table 1 - Bag data pertaining to the Turtle-dove for the period 2013–2018 including average and bag reduction.

Year	Autumn and Spring	Autumn	Spring
2013	10,609	7,434	3,175
2014	6,614	2,483	4,131
2015	5,709	3,695	2,014
2016	1,406	123	1,283
2017	101	101	0
2018	152	152	0
Average	4,099	2,331	
50% of autumn bag	2,050	1,166	
<i>National bag limit (September)</i>		500	
Equivalent to a reduction of:	78.6%		

Legal Notice 341 of 2021 introduced a mandatory requirement to immediately report Turtle-doves caught in order to monitor the uptake of the national quota in real-time and thus to ensure the hunting season for Turtle-dove is closed as soon as such quota is reached. During previous autumn hunting seasons, hunters were legally required to report all game caught, including Turtle-doves, *before* leaving the hunting area. The reporting requirement for all other huntable species remained unchanged. Licensees had the option to report the birds caught either through the telephone reporting system, or by means of a mobile application that was launched in the beginning of 2021.

In 2021, the game reporting system was also upgraded to a freephone service. Reporting of hunting effort through the game reporting system was also introduced in 2021—hunters who did not manage to bag any birds whilst hunting were legally required to report their hunting effort before leaving the hunting area. Hunting effort was required throughout the month of September for all huntable species including the Turtle-dove and wild rabbit.

All hunters in possession of a hunting licence were also periodically reminded of their legal obligations through separate text messages (SMS) sent on the mobile number registered with the Wild Birds Regulation Unit as well as through posts on the Unit’s Facebook page.

2.3. Involvement of hunting organisations

Hunting organisations are also actively contributing to Malta's efforts towards the conservation and sustainable harvest of the Turtle-dove. Following approval by the Malta Ornis Committee⁵ on 12 May 2021, Saint Hubert's Hunters (KSU) initiated a satellite-tagging project of Turtle-doves, with a total of 20 satellite-tags co-financed by the Government's Conservation of Wild Birds Fund. The tagging project ran from the 21st of May until 31st of May 2021 (inclusive of both dates). On the 28th of May, a Turtle-dove was captured and fitted with a tag prior to release. Unfortunately, the tag stopped transmitting data some 500 metres south-east of the release site and neither the tag nor the specimen could be traced. KSU submitted a request for renewal of the project in order to utilise the remaining 19 tags during the period 1 April – 30 May 2022, but the request is still subject to a recommendation by the Malta Ornis Committee. The aim of satellite-tagging projects on Turtle-dove is to allow the gathering of information on this species' migratory routes and breeding grounds.

Additionally, since this species does not breed in the wild in the Maltese Islands, the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK) has implemented a captive-breeding program to augment the wild population through the release of captive-bred specimens. This is considered a tangible contribution that Malta can provide towards the conservation of the Turtle-dove. With the help of local funding, the project was initiated in 2017 by several members of the FKNK from around Malta and Gozo. The officials from the FKNK Council who were in charge of the project together with veterinarians, monitored the breeding birds at the respective breeding stations, prescribed the appropriate fodder and medicine as necessary and tested each specimen for any disease that could be present. The veterinarians re-test all specimens right before the release in order to ascertain that the birds are in a good state of health and strength to be able to migrate once released. All measures were taken in compliance with IUCN guidelines. Between 2017 and 2019 approximately 1,500 captive-bred Turtle-doves were released into the wild. No Turtle-doves were released in 2020 in view of Covid-19 measures at the time. In 2021, the FKNK also fitted eight GPS satellite tracking transmitters on first-year

⁵ Minutes of Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee (Video Conference). Available at: <https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/Ornis%20Committie/Minutes%202021/oMinTwelMay21.pdf>

Turtle-doves hatched (that same year) as part of their captive-breeding program. Prior release, weight and wing measurements were recorded, and a split-ring was also fitted. Through this project, further research and better movement and behaviour monitoring of the released Turtle-doves could be conducted. The GPS satellite tracking transmitters only weighed 5 grams and charge through solar energy. Similar to other satellite-tagging projects, the GPS satellite trackers provide data on the bird's behaviour and movements, speed of flight, altitude of flight and location, besides other useful information. Thus, similar projects will be again implemented in the near future to shed further light on the migration routes as well as habitat and breeding preferences of the Turtle-dove.

FKNK has also been actively involved in the collection of data on the age structure of bagged Turtle-doves through the use of a separate mobile app - *MyHunt*. This application enables hunters to upload a photo of the wing of the hunted Turtle-dove to identify its age. Through this system, between the 1st and 11th September 2021, hunters identified the age of 95 Turtle-doves being 61 juveniles and 34 adults (Figure 1) The collection of this information is essential because it will shed light on the age structure of the locally hunted bags and will in turn provide data on the Turtle-dove population migrating over the Maltese Islands.

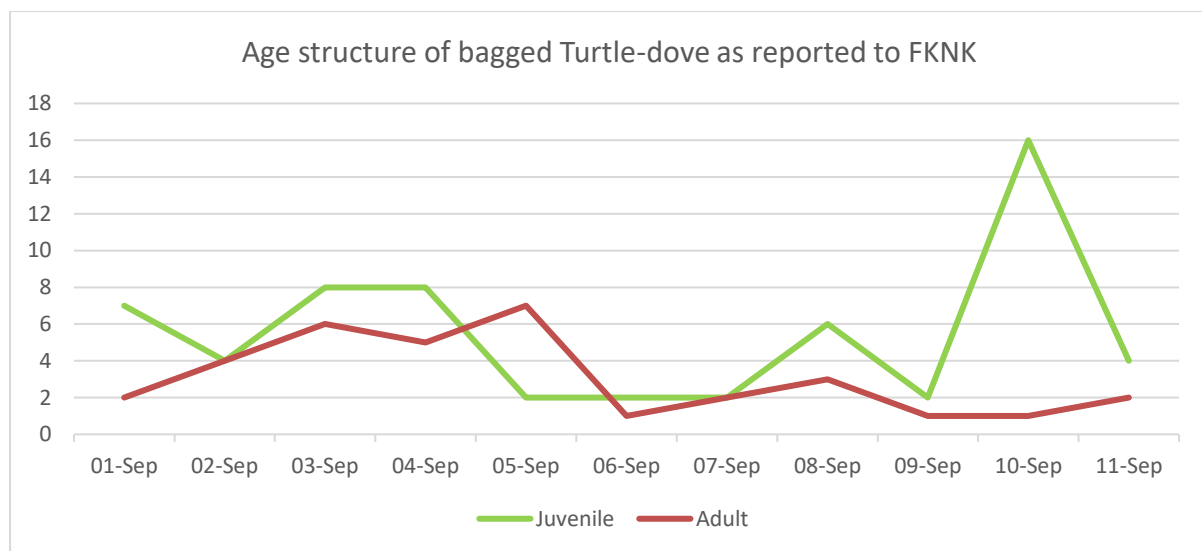


Figure 1 - Turtle-dove age structure as reported by hunters. Data provided by FKNK 2021.

3. Updates to the game reporting system (GRS)

As an integral part of the licensing procedure, hunters are obliged to provide WBRU with their mobile phone number which, apart from contact purposes (for the bulk text messaging service), is used for the purpose of reporting game caught during each season. Malta has again implemented the mandatory and legally binding game reporting requirement utilising a state-of-the-art telephonic game reporting system which entails the reporting of game caught through a toll-free phone call which guides the user through automated voice prompts. Each telephonic report is registered in the database of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit in real time and the hunters receive an SMS confirmation of a successful report. The system allows hunters in possession of a valid hunting licence to report game caught via the mobile number registered by the individual licensee and no duplicate mobile numbers are allowed by the system to ensure that each hunter reports his catch from his own number for enforcement and cross-verification purposes during spot-checks. Additionally, the system does not receive reports from numbers which are not registered on licensees to ensure that the system is only utilised by licence holders.

In 2021, the telephonic Game Reporting System was enhanced further by making all calls completely free of charge irrespective of the licensees' service provider. The system was also enhanced to feature a new component to gauge hunting effort on a daily basis. In this regard, before leaving the hunting area, licence holders were required to confirm that they were practicing hunting even if they did not manage to hunt any birds. Game reported through the system automatically features in the hunting effort module—hunters who already reported game caught were not required to also report hunting effort before leaving the hunting area.

In addition, early in 2021, the telephonic game reporting system was further improved through the introduction of a game reporting mobile application. This app is linked to the same central database used for the telephonic Game Reporting System which hosts details of licensees and reported game caught. Users are required to login to this app through the government's eID system which allows the app to identify the person and relay their respective licences (Figure 2). Through the app, authorized users can report any game caught (Figure 3) in order to fulfil their legal obligations and allows the users to view all their past game reports which are also used as proof of reporting to enforcement authorities during field inspections.

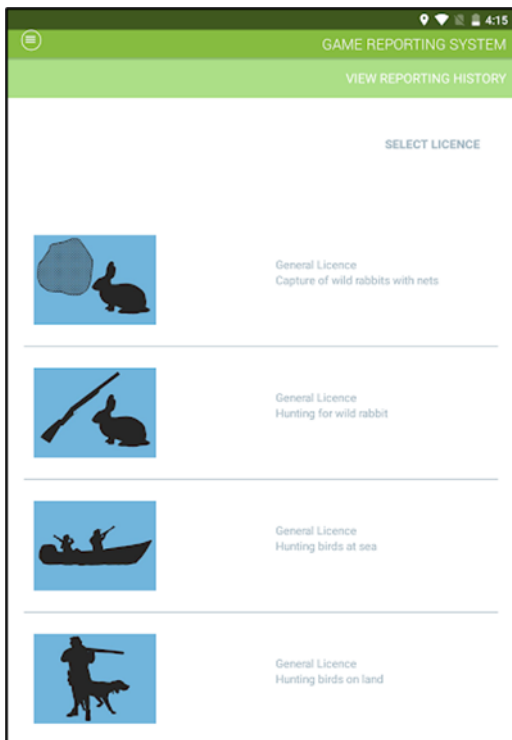


Figure 2 - Game reporting MT app - Licence selection.

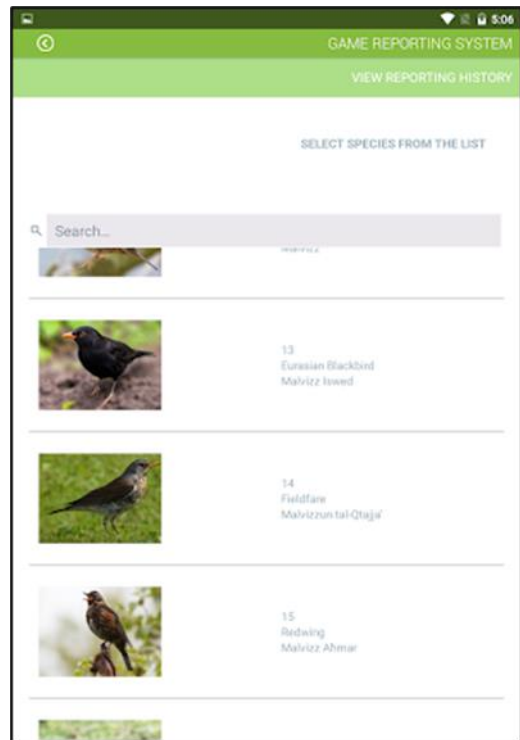


Figure 3 - Game Reporting MT app - Species selection.

All hunters in possession of a hunting licence were periodically reminded of their legal obligations through separate text messages (SMS) sent on the mobile number registered with the Wild Birds Regulation Unit during the season as well as through posts on the Unit's Facebook page.

3.1. Game reported caught during the season

Participation in game reporting has seen some minor improvements when compared to reporting in autumn 2020. Licenced hunters submitted reports under the relevant licence categories as explained below.

- 2 out of 252 (0.8%) hunters licensed to hunt at sea reported at least once.
- 3 out of 61 (4.9%) hunters licenced to capture wild rabbits with nets reported at least once.
- 56 out of 2,870 (2%) hunters licenced to hunt wild rabbit reported at least once.
- 793 out of 9,611 (8.3%) hunters licensed to hunt birds on land submitted a report.

The 2021 report on game reporting is enclosed as Annex I⁶ to this report.

Of all the species hutable during the 2021 autumn season (Schedule II of S.L. 549.42), only the Turtle-dove had a national quota (of 500 birds). The open season for this species was set to open from 1st September to the 30th September. However, the quota was reached on 11th September (Figure 4) which subsequently prompted an immediate (and early) closure of the season for this species. Licensed hunters were informed of the closure of the season via an SMS, through a notice published on WBRU's social media page, as well as through Government Notice No. 1,270 of 2021, published in Government Gazette No. 20,702⁷.

The statutory hunting effort requirement was promoted through various social media posts and also disseminated through hunting organisations. Figure 5 specifies the number of hunters active during the open season for Turtle-dove.

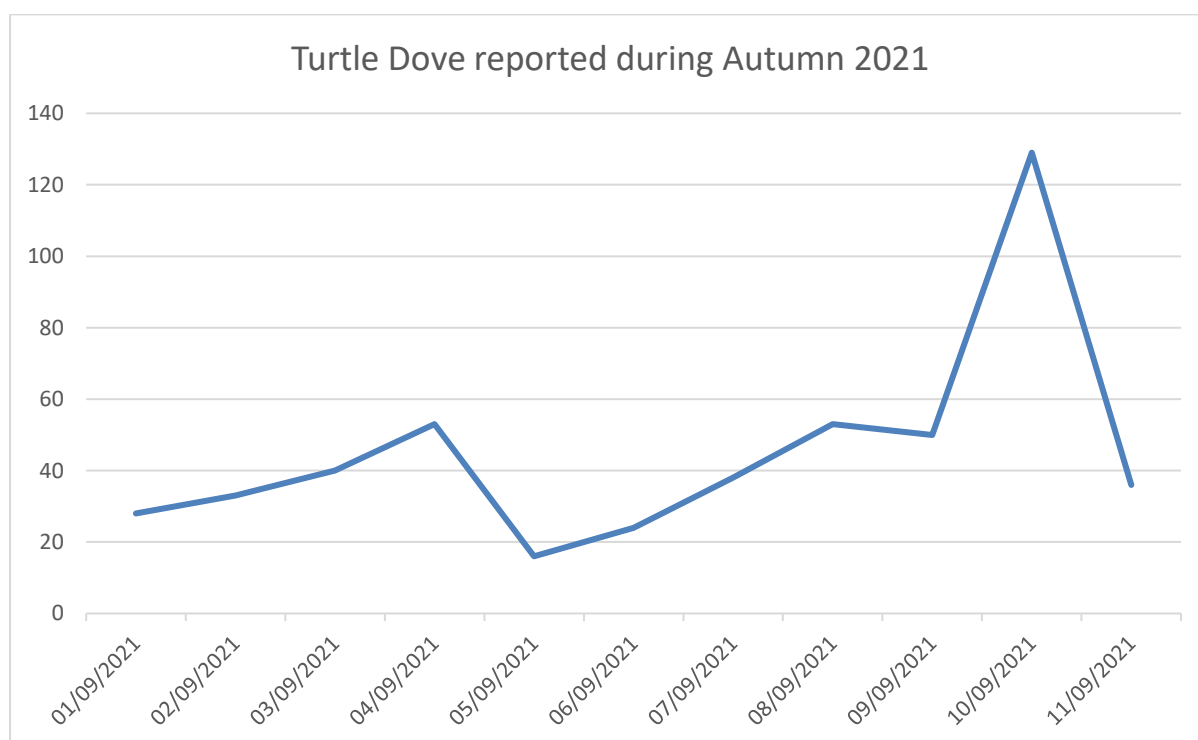


Figure 4 - Turtle-doves reported caught between the 1st September and 11th September 2021.

⁶ Report on game reporting 2021 available at: <https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/Reports%20and%20Statistics/grdReport2021.pdf>

⁷Government Notice 1,270 published in Government Gazette 20,702 available at: <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/DOI/Government%20Gazette/Government%20Notices/Pages/2021/09/Go vNotices2009.aspx>

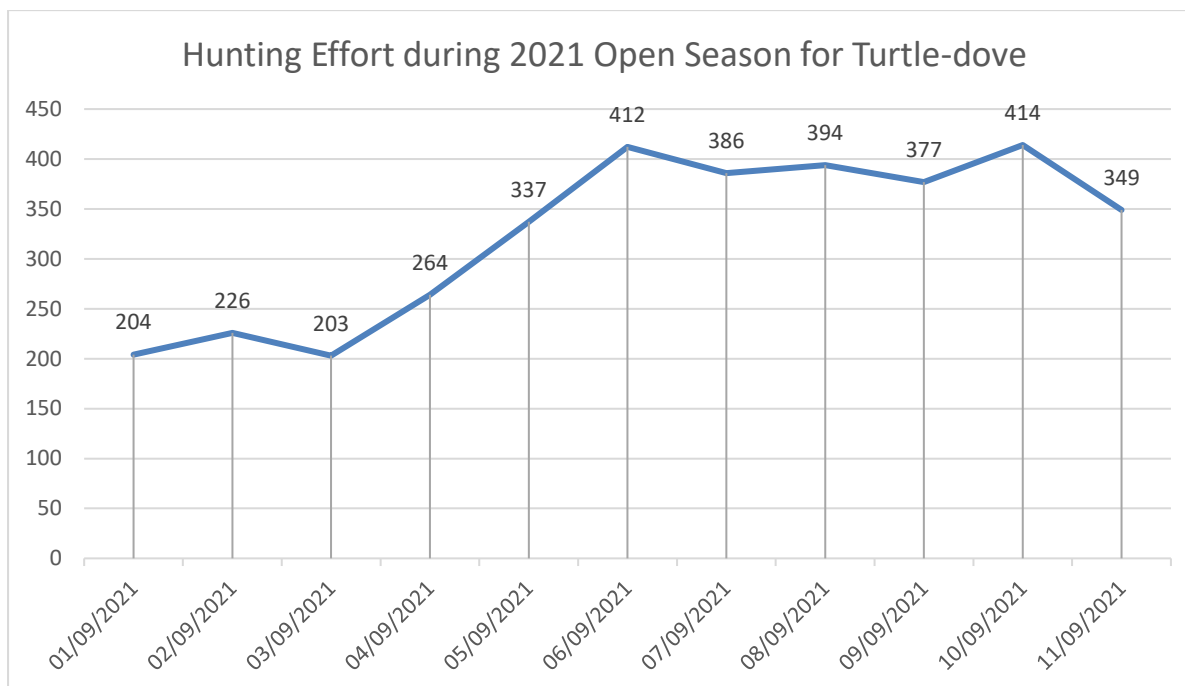


Figure 5 - Daily counts of hunters practicing hunting Turtle-dove between 1st and 11th September.

4. Turtle-dove autumn migration study

An independent migration study to estimate the influx of Turtle-dove and Quail during the peak migration period in the autumn of 2021 was conducted. The study aimed at surveying and scientifically monitoring the daily influx of Turtle-dove and Common Quail between 1st September and 31st October 2021 in order to estimate the overall presence (influx) of these two species per day and for the whole study period, subject to scientifically justified assumptions. The full report of the study is included in Annex II.

The methodology used during autumn 2021 survey is identical to that used in surveys made by the same company in previous autumn (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a) and spring seasons (see Ecoserv, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014b; 2015b; 2016b; 2017b; 2018b; 2019b; 2020b; 2021). The survey design is aimed at assessing changes in migratory influx, which entails trend analysis based on data from monitoring carried out regularly over a sufficiently long period over subsequent years, and using the same methodology. During the survey, two individuals - a field assistant capable of identifying Turtle-dove and Common Quail and an observer who was responsible for recording of data in the field - were stationed at a total of 21 sites (= count stations) distributed over Malta, Comino and Gozo. Prior to enrolment for the survey, the field assistants had been assessed by Ecoserv's environmental consultants and ecologists to ensure that they are capable of identifying the two bird species.

The survey was undertaken over an eight-week period between 1 September and 31 October 2021. During the survey, counts of individuals of the two species *Coturnix coturnix* and *Streptopelia turtur* were made at each of 6 different sites on each day during the monitoring period. Each group of six sites was surveyed once every four days, such that a total of 21 sites were surveyed over each period of four days. The study site at Comino was included in the six sites surveyed on any one day, such that this site was surveyed on a daily basis. On those days when access to Comino by boat was not possible due to adverse weather conditions, the surveys were undertaken at an alternative site instead.

Raw daily counts for Turtle-dove recorded from any given site (out of the 21 sites) during the study varied between 0 and a maximum of 16, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 3.5 (Table 2 - Values of mean (\pm SD) daily count and daily total count recorded from the six study sites, together with total influx of migratory Turtle-dove.). A minor peak in migratory counts was recorded on 10 September. The recorded counts showed some variation between the different sites over the whole survey period: at the lower end, only one Turtle-dove was recorded throughout the survey period from grid locations 3690 (north Gozo), 3881 (north Malta), 5872 and 6067 (southeast Malta), while at the higher end, 54 Turtle-doves were recorded from the site at grid location 4070 (northwest Malta).

Overall, counts recorded during the present survey show a similar trend to those recorded by Thomaidis (nd) in autumn 2008 and 2009, and by Ecoserv (2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a) in autumn 2014–2020; that is, the main migratory influx occurs during September, with occasional migratory peaks recorded in some years.

Table 2 - Values of mean (\pm SD) daily count and daily total count recorded from the six study sites, together with total influx of migratory Turtle-dove.

Date	Mean Count \pm SD		Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
01-Sep-21	0.50	\pm 1.22	3	271
02-Sep-21	0.83	\pm 0.75	5	452
03-Sep-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
04-Sep-21	1.50	\pm 2.35	9	814
05-Sep-21	1.00	\pm 0.89	6	542
06-Sep-21	1.00	\pm 0.63	6	542
07-Sep-21	0.67	\pm 1.21	4	362
08-Sep-21	0.50	\pm 0.55	3	271
09-Sep-21	1.83	\pm 2.64	11	994

Date	Mean Count \pm SD		Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
10-Sep-21	3.50	\pm 5.24	21	1899
11-Sep-21	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
12-Sep-21	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
13-Sep-21	0.67	\pm 1.63	4	362
14-Sep-21	0.67	\pm 1.03	4	362
15-Sep-21	1.33	\pm 0.82	8	723
16-Sep-21	0.83	\pm 0.75	5	452
17-Sep-21	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
18-Sep-21	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
19-Sep-21	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
20-Sep-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
21-Sep-21	1.67	\pm 3.20	10	904
22-Sep-21	0.67	\pm 0.82	4	362
23-Sep-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
24-Sep-21	0.67	\pm 0.82	4	362
25-Sep-21	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
26-Sep-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
27-Sep-21	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
28-Sep-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
29-Sep-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
30-Sep-21	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
01-Oct-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
02-Oct-21	0.67	\pm 0.82	4	362
03-Oct-21	1.50	\pm 3.67	9	814
04-Oct-21	0.67	\pm 0.82	4	362
05-Oct-21	0.50	\pm 1.22	3	271
06-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
07-Oct-21	2.67	\pm 6.53	16	1447
08-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
09-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
10-Oct-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
11-Oct-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
12-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
13-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
14-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
15-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
16-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
17-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
18-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
19-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
20-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
21-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
22-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
23-Oct-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
24-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
25-Oct-21	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
26-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
27-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
28-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
29-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
30-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
31-Oct-21	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0

Date	Mean Count \pm SD	Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
Sum total		169	15,278

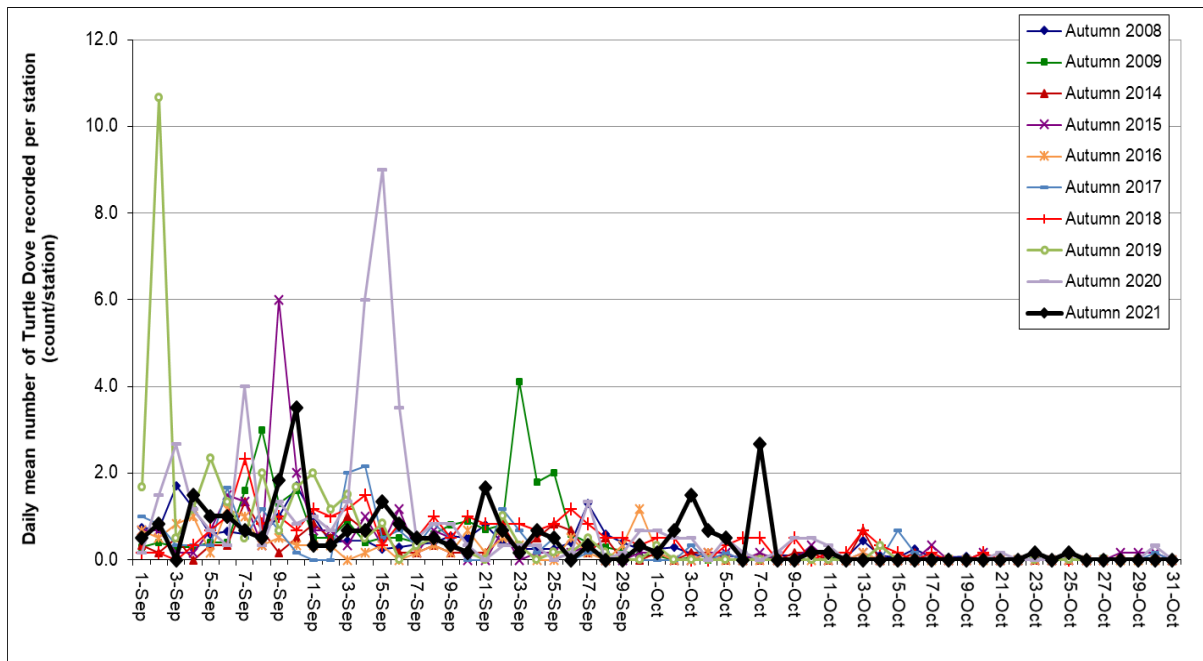


Figure 6 - Daily mean counts of Turtle-dove per station (= site) recorded during the present survey during the period 1 September to 31 October 2021, together with values of the same statistic for autumn 2008 and 2009 as reported in Thomaidis (nd), and for autumn 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 as reported in Ecoserv (2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a).

Based on the mean daily counts (Table 2 - Values of mean (\pm SD) daily count and daily total count recorded from the six study sites, together with total influx of migratory Turtle-dove.), extrapolation translates to an estimated daily influx ranging between 0 and 1,899 individuals, with a total influx over the survey period (1 September to 31 October; i.e. 61 days) of 15,278 individuals, i.e. some 250 birds per day.

The highest mean count was recorded from Mtaħleb (Grid 4070) located in northwest Malta, while overall high counts were recorded from other study sites located along the western parts of Malta and to a lesser extent from Marsalforn (Grid 3292) in Gozo. The lowest mean counts were recorded from Ċirkewwa (Grid 3881) in north Malta and from San Blas (Grid 3690) in north Gozo, while low counts were also recorded from several sites located on the southern and eastern sides of the Maltese Islands. The mean count recorded from the study site on Comino was 0.230, which was the median value for the whole range of recorded mean counts.

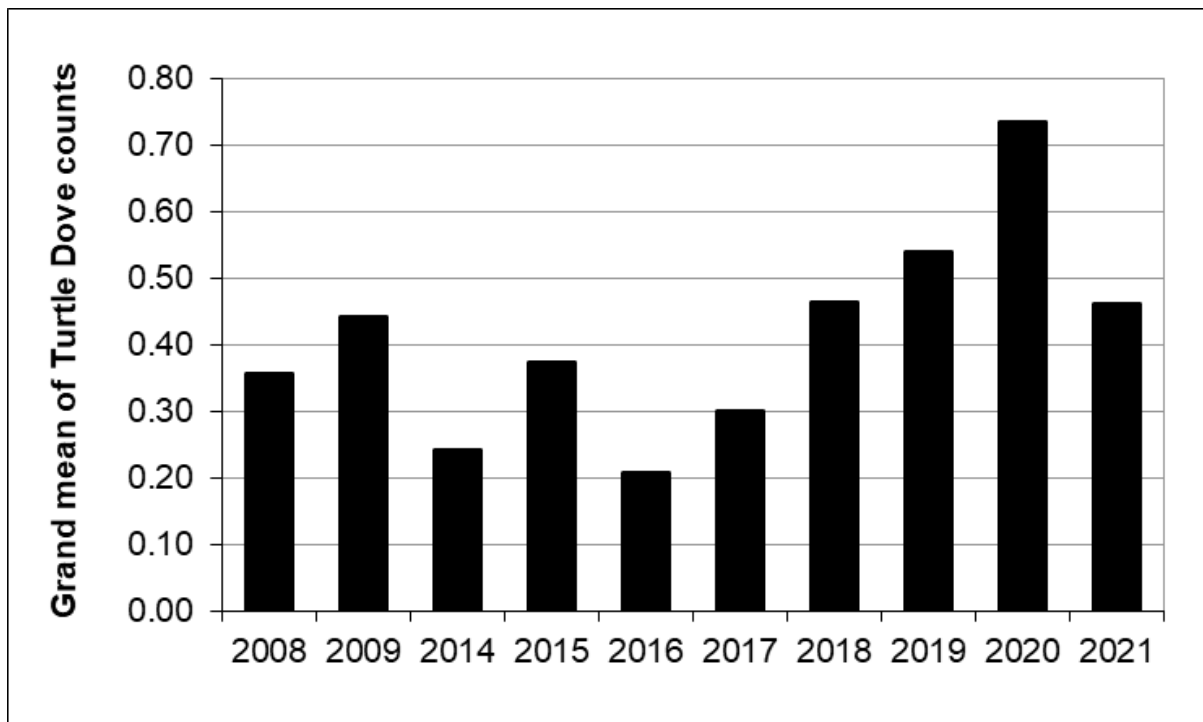


Figure 7 - Grand mean of Turtle-dove counts made using data from the period 1 September to 31 October for autumn 2021 (present survey), autumn 2014–2020 (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a) and autumn 2008–2009 (Thomaidis, nd).

4.1. Comparison of monitored Turtle-doves with hunting bag data

The daily bag counts indicating the number of Turtle-dove caught during the 2021 autumn hunting season and the mean daily counts of Turtle-dove made during the 2021 survey are shown in Figure 8, while Figure 9 shows the same data but with the results from the present survey given as total daily counts. The magnitude of the bag counts and those of the mean/total counts made in the 2021 survey are not directly comparable. Therefore, in Figure 8 and Figure 9, two separate y-axes are used: the bag count data is plotted on the left-side y-axis, whereas the counts from the survey are plotted on the right-side y-axis.

Overall, the general trend of daily counts recorded during the 2021 survey is of relatively higher counts in September and early October, with a minor peak on 10 September, with the rest of October mostly characterised by zero counts. The bag count data for the period 1 to 11 September includes daily fluctuations with a peak bag count on 10 September; no Turtle-dove individuals were bagged after 11 September given that the hunting season for Turtle-dove was closed on this date. Overall, there was a very similar temporal trend of counts in early September 2021, with a peak on 10 September in both the daily counts made during the present

survey and the bag count data, while no comparison could be made for the period 12 September to 31 October since the hunting season for Turtle-dove was closed on 11 September 2021.

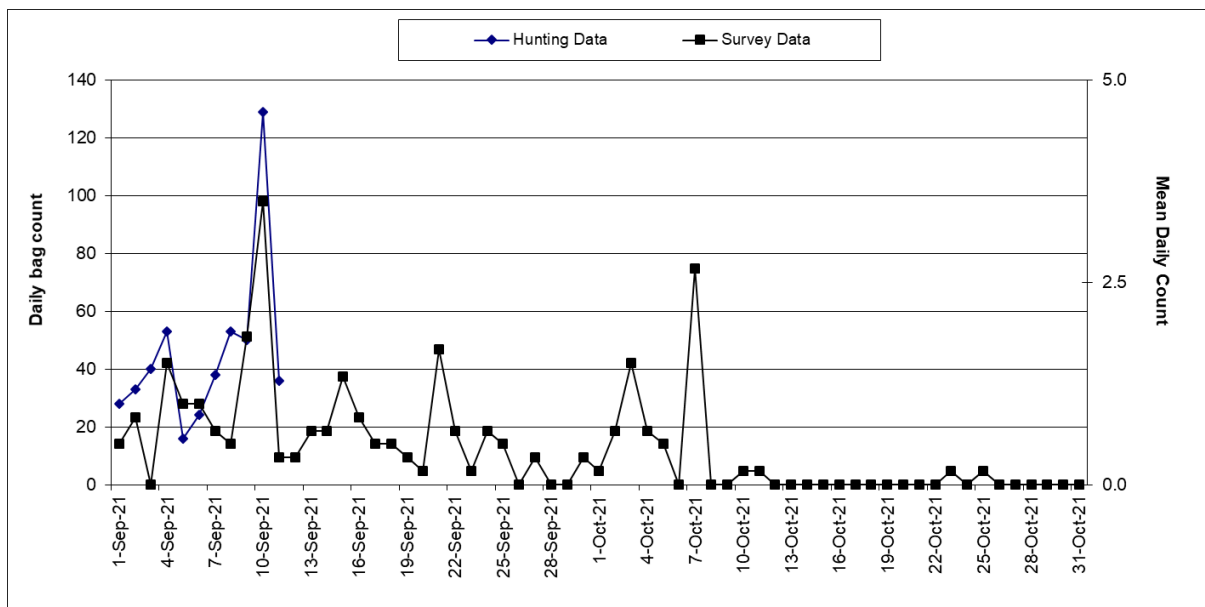


Figure 8 - Daily bag count of Turtle-dove during 2021 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2021 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2021. It should be noted that bag counts after 11 September are all zero given that the hunting season for this species closed on this date.

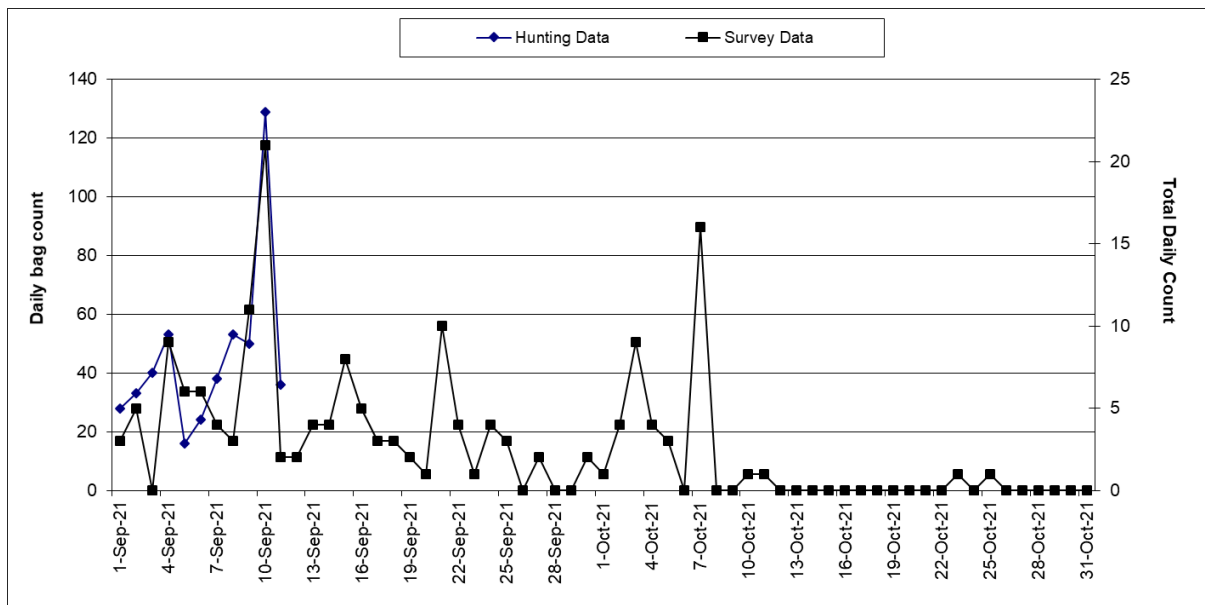


Figure 9 - Daily bag count of Turtle-dove during 2021 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the total daily counts recorded during the 2021 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2021. It should be noted that bag counts after 11 September are all zero given that the hunting season for this species closed on this date.

5. Summary of enforcement action during the autumn hunting season

5.1. Specialised training to enforcement personnel

As was also the case in previous years, prior to the start of the season the Wild Birds Regulation Unit organised specialised training sessions in Malta and in Gozo on enforcement priorities and techniques. Training sessions in Malta and Gozo were held prior to the opening of the hunting season. Over 34 attendees were trained in basic field ornithology, applicable regulations, principles of surveillance as well as counter-poaching operations and wildlife crime detection and prosecution techniques.

The objectives of enforcement deployment were:

1. To ensure continuous deployment presence in the countryside to deter any potential abuse from occurring in the first place.
2. To ensure that no illegal targeting of protected species occurs, and that any detected incidents of abuse are dealt with swiftly and effectively.
3. To ensure that the general prohibitions and parameters related to the open season are enforced.

5.2. Enforcement deployment

During the autumn hunting season, the authorities deployed a maximum complement of 76 officers tasked with overseeing compliance with the parameters of the season. This complement consisted of 20 officers of the Environmental Protection Unit (EPU) of the Malta Police Force, ten officers of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), 15 Gozo Police officers, ten police officers temporarily seconded with the EPU from other police units, six WBRU officers and 15 environmental rangers responsible for patrols in terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites.

This enforcement complement of the Police Force and AFM was deployed gradually from the 1st of September until the 19th of October, with a daily field deployment ranging between a maximum of 19 officers and a minimum of nine officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and a maximum of 13 officers and a minimum of five officers in the field

at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. From the 20th October till the 10th January, the daily field deployment ranged between a maximum of 59 officers and a minimum of 44 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and a maximum of 56 officers and a minimum of 37 officers in the field at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. From the 11th of January till the end of January, the daily field deployment ranged between a maximum of 41 officers and a minimum of 25 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and a maximum of 31 officers and a minimum of 16 officers in the field at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. The indicated number of officers deployed includes all other non-field staff assigned on-duties related to the supervision of the season but excludes field staff on shift rotation.

In addition to this complement, the 15 environmental rangers were deployed daily on a twelve-hour shift from 06:30hrs to 18:30hrs on patrols in Terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites, whilst WBRU officers were active daily from 07:15hrs to 16:00hrs and provided on-call service during other hours. These officers reported illegal activities directly to the Police. The WBRU ensured effective operational liaison between enforcement entities and other stakeholders and provided 24/7 on-call enforcement service to the Police, the general public, and NGOs.

5.3. Patrols, inspections and spot-checks conducted

The officers utilised a mixture of techniques, including vehicular patrols, covert observation, stationary observation posts, foot patrols, physical inspections and spot-checks on individual licence holders, as well as roadblocks and patrols at sea.

Enforcement authorities assigned a higher priority to spot-checks on individual licensees since 2018, and in 2021 this resulted in a total of 4,704⁸ spot-checks on individual licensees (3,876 in Malta and 828 in Gozo). In addition, police have also carried out 50 patrols at sea in order to ascertain compliance with legal requirements during hunting at sea.

The below figure presents a comparison of the number of spot-checks, including road checks, conducted over the past six years during autumn hunting seasons (1 September – 31 January).

⁸ Out of which 25 were road checks.

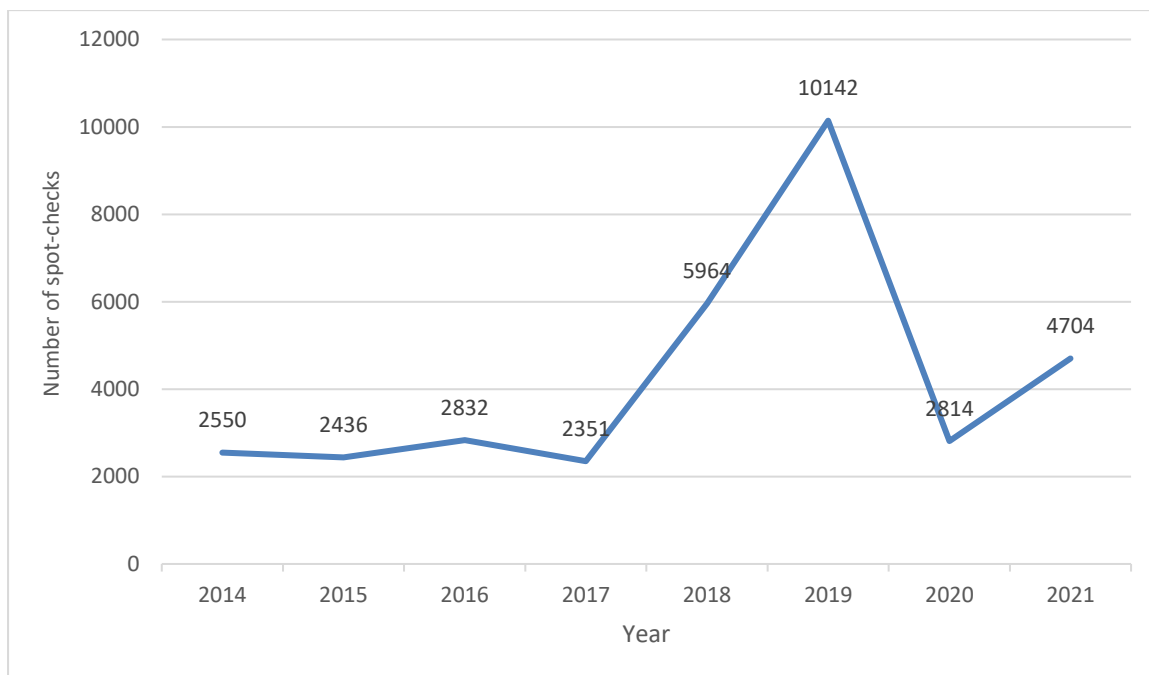


Figure 10 - Comparison of the number of spot-checks (including road checks) conducted over the past eight years during autumn hunting seasons (1 September – 31 January).

5.4. Offences detected

In the course of field surveillance, inspections and spot-checks, the authorities disclosed a total of 154 offences, of which five offences were committed by the same offender. Legal action was taken against 140 offenders, of which 65 persons were subject to criminal prosecution and 75 persons subject to administrative fines. No legal action could be taken on the remaining nine cases given that the perpetrator/s remained unknown to the police.

Additionally, during the eleven-day Turtle-dove hunting season (1st to 11th September) no infringements directly related to the hunting of this species were detected. However, after the closing of the season for this species, enforcement officers found a person in possession of eight Turtle-dove carcasses and another individual in possession of three unreported carcasses found in a freezer within his property. Legal action was initiated against both culprits.

The data in the following tables shows hunting related offences which were detected and confirmed by enforcement officers. It should be noted that, for the purpose of these tables, cases comprising of more than one offence have been listed under the most grievous category, for example: ‘Illegal shooting of protected birds’ and ‘Illegal possession of protected bird carcasses’.

Table 3 - Hunting offences detected and confirmed during autumn hunting season.

Offences detected and confirmed during autumn hunting season	2021–2022		
	(01.09.21–31.01.22)		
	Cases in Malta	Cases in Gozo	Total number of cases
Hunting within prohibited distances / prohibited areas	3	0	3 ⁹
Hunting without licence	3	0	3
Illegal shooting of protected birds	3	0	3 ¹⁰
Hunting using illegal means / firearms irregularities / other breaches of licence conditions	90	0	90 ¹¹
Hunting during closed season or outside permitted hours	0	0	0
Trapping before the opening of the seasons and after the closing of the trapping seasons	22	5	27
Illegal possession of bird carcasses / stuffed birds	14	0	14
Illegal possession of live birds	10	0	10
Illegal sale of protected birds	2	0	2
Smuggling of protected birds	1	0	1
Failure to report game caught	0	1	1
Total offences disclosed	148	6	154 ¹²
Persons against whom legal action was taken	138	2	140 ¹³

⁹ Cases refer to hunting within less than 200m from inhabited areas.

¹⁰ Cases refer to the illegal shooting of a Short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*), illegal shooting of four Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) and the illegal shooting of a Mediterranean Gull (*Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*). Offences were carried out by known culprits on whom legal action is being taken.

¹¹ Cases refer to 68 cases of use of bird caller whilst hunting and 22 cases of firearm irregularities (15 cases referred for court action and 7 cases subject to administrative fine).

¹² Total consists of 154 cases, 140 committed by known culprits leading to legal action (five individuals committed double offences) and nine cases committed by unknown culprits where no further legal action could be taken.

¹³ 75 administrative fines and 65 court cases.

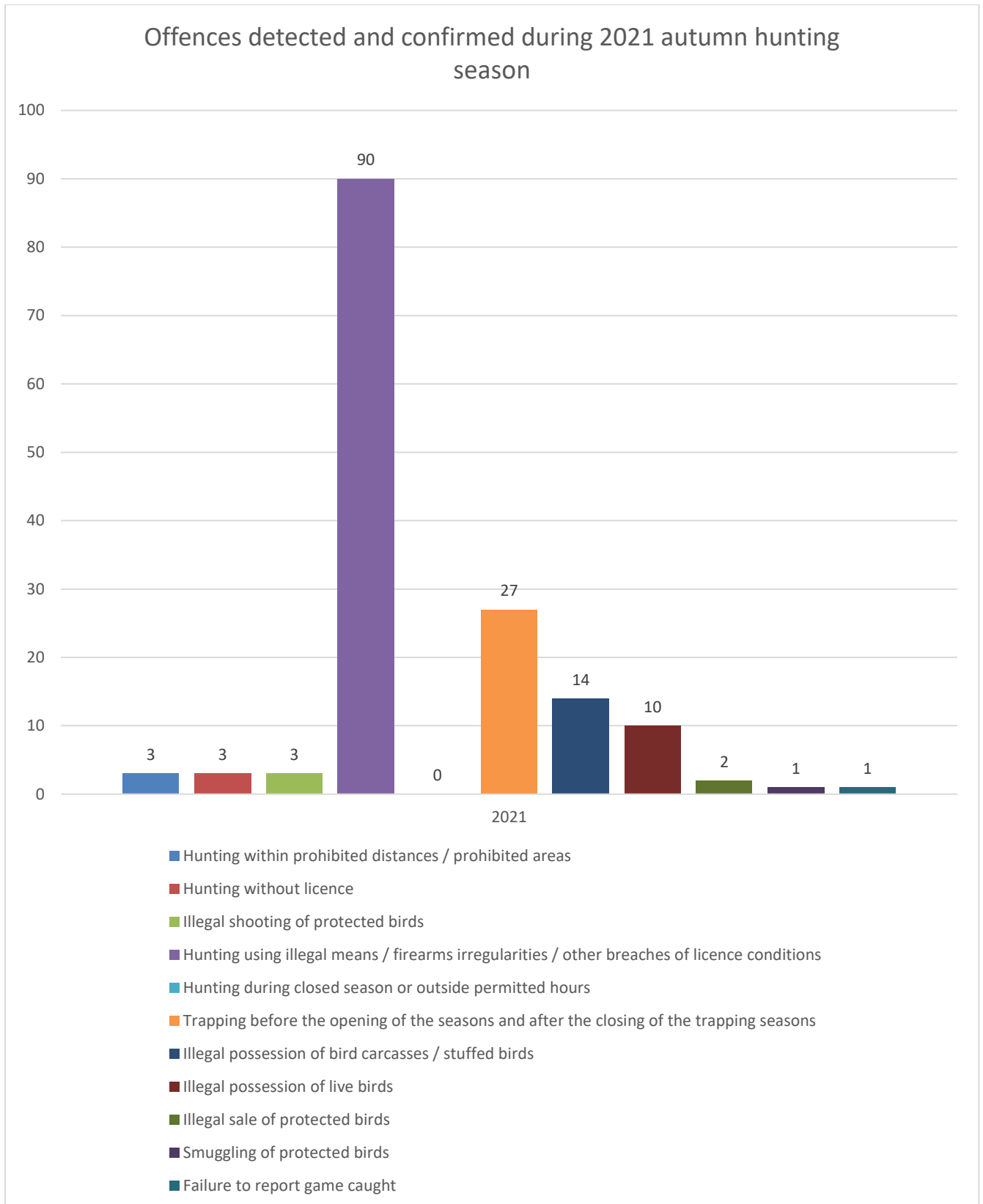


Figure 11 - Offences detected and confirmed during the 2021 autumn hunting season.

5.5. Illegal killing of protected birds during the 2021 autumn hunting season.

A procedure coordinated by the WBRU was put in place in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Unit, BirdLife Malta and the government-appointed veterinarian to provide appropriate veterinary care and, where possible, rehabilitation of wild birds.

During the 2021 autumn hunting season, 286 injured wild birds belonging to 64 species were referred to the government-appointed veterinarian. These birds were provided with the appropriate veterinary care and in a number of cases, were successfully rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Of these, 105 protected birds (37%) were confirmed to have sustained gunshot wounds. This figure also includes a Turtle-dove which was found in a decomposed state on the 22nd of September. Given that its retrieval date is past the date of the open hunting season for this species (quota reached on the 11th September), this bird has been considered to be illegally shot, however given its decomposed state it cannot be excluded that it was hunted during the Turtle-dove open season for this species and not retrieved.

The below figure illustrates the number of illegally shot protected birds during autumn hunting season over the past four years (2018–2021).

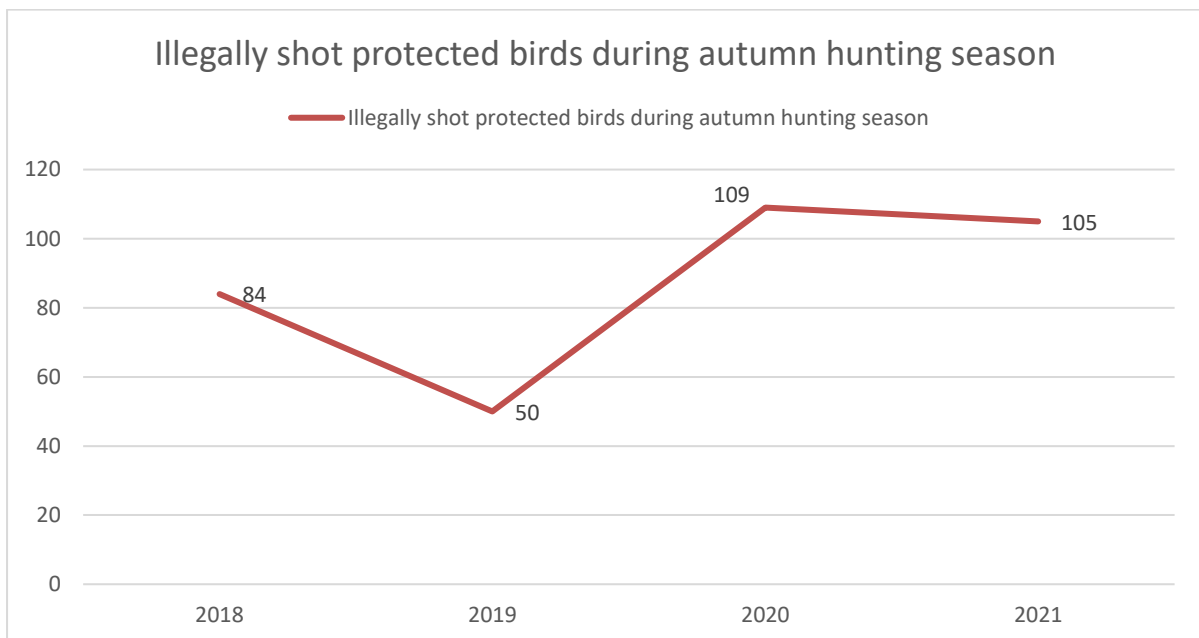


Figure 12 - The number of illegally shot protected birds during autumn hunting season recovered by the authorities over the past four years (2018-2021).

Notwithstanding that the number of illegally shot protected birds during the 2021 autumn hunting season is slightly lower than that of autumn 2020 data shows that the problem of illegal

killing of protected birds is still evident and thus the issue continues to merit the urgent attention of all stakeholders at national level since **there is a much-needed concerted effort to actively curb IKB-related crime.**

5.6. Ensuring sustainability of hunting tourism and aviculture

Aware of the fact that some Maltese hunters opt to travel on hunting trips abroad and the increasing trend of people interested in keeping different bird species for aviculture, the WBRU continued to maintain a very active role in disseminating information amongst hunters and individuals involved in aviculture on the procedure concerning the importation of live or dead birds. The WBRU also made use of its social media, including the Unit's Facebook page and website, which were routinely updated with the latest information¹⁴. In order to better reach the hunting community, the WBRU collaborated with hunting organizations in the dissemination of information through their social media.

During the reporting period, the WBRU also regularly monitored adverts to ensure that the sale/offering for sale of European-territory birds is carried out in line with the legal requirements set out by the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42), particularly in relation to the statutory requirement for specimens offered for sale to be fitted with a seamless closed ring of a correct size for the species, with the exception of the following Schedule III(a) species:

1. Mallard | Kuluvert (*Anas platyrhynchos*)
2. Willow Grouse | Perniça (*Lagopus lagopus lagopus*)
3. Red Grouse | Perniça Ħamra (*Lagopus lagopus scoticus* and *Lagopus lagopus hibernicus*)
4. Red-legged Partridge | Perniça Saqajha Ħamra (*Alectoris rufa*)
5. Barbary Partridge | Haġla ta' Barbarija (*Alectoris barbara*)
6. Grey Partridge | Perniça Griża (*Perdix perdix*)
7. Common Pheasant | Faġan Komuni (*Phasianus colchicus*)
8. Wood Pigeon | Tudun (*Columba palumbus*).

Several cases were referred to the Police for further investigation.

¹⁴<https://mgoz.gov.mt/en/Documents/WBRU/NEWS/notaGwidaImpo.pdf>

5.7. Investigations concerning illicit possession of protected birds

Recognising the fact that illicit trade and taxidermy of illegally acquired protected birds is a substantial driver behind illegal targeting of protected birds, the law enforcement authorities continued to dedicate substantial effort towards preventing, detecting, and curtailing any potential abuse.

During 2021, the WBRU together with the EPU and ERA officials inspected 1,676 stuffed bird specimens held in ten private collections. During these investigations, a total of 285 registered stuffed bird specimens were found to be illegally possessed and seized and another registered 708 specimens were found to have been illegally disposed. Legal action was initiated against the culprits.

During the same period, the WBRU assisted Police during 11 investigations concerning possession of live birds. During these inspections a total of 807 live birds were examined, of which 711 birds were subsequently seized due to the fact that they were not fitted with a closed ring or fitted with a ring larger than that required for the species or fitted with an illegal R16U ring not supplied by WBRU in 2016/17. The birds were taken for rehabilitation prior to being released back into the wild and legal action was initiated against the culprits. In addition, four of the above-mentioned investigations are related to illegal sale of protected birds at the Floriana open market.

WBRU was also involved in a joint inspection concerning the importation of a protected bird from overseas which led to the seizure of the specimen and legal action against the individual. During the year, the compliance team also assisted the police and the government-appointed veterinarian in identifying and verifying the legality of other specimens pertaining to pending investigations.

5.8. Judicial action against bird-related crime

During 2021, officials of the WBRU attended and testified during various Court sittings for which assistance was requested by police. Throughout the year, the Unit also issued administrative fines to 108 offenders, of which 91 were settled within 21 days, one was appealed, five referred to the police for further proceedings in the Law Courts for failure to

settle the fine within the statutory deadline and 11 fines were still pending payment at the time this report was prepared given that their statutory 21-day payment term had not yet elapsed.

Malta has one of the highest penalty systems within the European Union for prosecution of bird-related crimes. The penalty for first count offences concerning the illegal taking, trapping and trade of wild birds ranges from €500 up to €5,000, the confiscation of the *corpus delicti* and the suspension of any licence or permit issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42) and Part XV of the Code of Police Laws for a period of not less than two years but not exceeding five years. On a second count offence, the penalty increases to a fine of not less than €1,000 up to €10,000 or to imprisonment for a term of not less than six months but not exceeding two years, or to both fine and imprisonment, the confiscation of the *corpus delicti* and the permanent revocation of any licence or permit issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42) and Part XV of the Code of Police Laws.

In addition, should the target species be listed in Schedule I (Annex I of the Birds Directive) or Schedule IX of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42), the penalty for a first count offence would increase to an obligatory fine of €5,000 or to imprisonment for one year, or to both fine and imprisonment, the confiscation of the *corpus delicti* and to the permanent revocation of any licence or permit granted under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42) and Part XV of the Code of Police Laws. On a second or subsequent offence, the fine would increase to €10,000 or to imprisonment for two years, or to both such fine and imprisonment and the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*. As seen from sentences meted out by the Law Courts during the years, the punishment described above is strictly adhered to by Magistrates and is undoubtedly a high-handed penalty system.

Below is the outcome of some of the cases related to illegal targeting of protected birds decided by the Maltese Law Courts in 2021:

- On the 24th of August 2021, the Law Courts decided on the case of illegal trapping of finches which offence took place in October 2018 i.e., during a closed season. The accused was found guilty of all charges brought against him and was ordered to pay a fine of €1,000, had all his licenses issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus*

delicti. The same sentence was given on the 31st of August 2021 to another offender found guilty of illegally trapping for finches during the same month. Similarly, on the 4th of November 2021 the court heard an additional four similar cases of illegal trapping of finches in spring 2019 and the accused were all found guilty of charges brought against them. One of the accused was ordered to pay a fine of €1,700 whilst the other three offenders were ordered to pay a fine of €1,500 each. All offenders had all their licenses issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and were ordered the confiscation of all *corpus delicti*. Similarly, on the 16th of December 2021 a person that was found illegally trapping for finches in March 2018 was found guilty of charges and ordered to pay €1,500 fine, had all his licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and was ordered the confiscation of all *corpus delicti*.

- On the 19th of November, the Law Courts decided an additional five cases concerning illegal trapping of finches and illegal hunting during closed season. The first case consisted of an individual found trapping Common Linnets (*Linaria cannabina*) and illegally hunting during a closed season in March 2020. The accused was found guilty of all charges and was ordered to pay a fine of €1,800, had his licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and was ordered the confiscation of *corpus delicti*. Similarly, the second and third cases consisted of illegal trapping of finches in March of 2020 where the accused were found guilty and were ordered to pay a fine of €2,000 and €1,500 respectively, had all licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and were ordered the confiscation of *corpus delicti*. Finally, the fifth case consisted of illegal hunting on land whilst in possession of small cages used for trapping during spring 2020. The Law Court found the accused guilty and ordered the accused to pay a €2,500 fine, had all licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.
- On the 14th of September 2021, the Law Courts decided on a case of illegal hunting of a European Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) and a Eurasian Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) in spring 2019. The European Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) can only be hunted in September whilst the Eurasian Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) is not a

hunnable species. The accused was found guilty of all charges brought against him and was ordered to pay a fine of €3,000 with a suspension of all licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws for three years.

- On the 14th of September 2021, the Law Courts decided on a case of a taxidermy inspection that was carried out in 2019. During the inspection it was found that the person was in possession of a protected bird specimen that was not declared with the authorities during the 1998 and 2003 amnesties whilst five registered bird specimens were illegally disposed without the appropriate authorisation. The accused was found guilty of all charges and was ordered to pay a fine of €1,500 and had all his licences issued under S.L. 549.42 and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years.