

Report on the Outcome of the 2024 Spring Hunting Season in Malta

June 2024

Wild Birds Regulation Unit

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Enclosures

- Annex 1:** Assessment of the conservation status of Turtle-dove and Common Quail, February 2024
- Annex 2:** Report on a survey of the influx of migratory Common Quail and Turtle-dove over the Maltese Islands in autumn 2023
- Annex 3:** Specimen of the special licence issued for the 2024 Spring Hunting Season
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1. Introduction

1.1 This voluntary report has been prepared in addition to Malta’s formal reporting obligation under Article 9 of the Birds Directive. During bilateral discussions with the Commission Services, it was agreed that spring hunting reports are to be submitted within one month from termination of the migration study—a fixed period between 15 March and 15 May—rather than within one month from closure of the spring hunting season. The report provides an overview of the implementation of Malta’s spring hunting derogation for European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) and Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) in April 2024, including:

- an overview of the decision-making process leading up to the application of the derogation;
- consideration of the relevant legal and policy parameters;
- consideration of the conservation status of the species concerned;
- an assessment of the outcome of the previous autumn hunting season and an independent assessment of the migratory influx of European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) and Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) during autumn 2023;
- the necessary preparatory measures and regulatory controls effected prior to and during the season;
- an assessment of the migratory influx of Turtle-dove and Quail during the 2024 spring season and bag data;
- the enforcement effort in place to ensure the strict supervision of hunting during the 2024 season;
- disclosed offences and corresponding enforcement action taken; and
- the legal and other management aspects of relevance.

2. Legal and policy basis for the application of a derogation permitting spring hunting of Turtle-dove and Common Quail in 2024

2.1 As was also the case in previous years, a derogation permitting spring hunting in 2024 was applied on the basis of Article 9(1) of Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the Conservation of Wild Birds, which states that “*Member States may derogate from the provisions of Articles 5 to 8 [of the same Directive], where there is no other satisfactory solution*” in line with a number of limited reasons, such as that stipulated by Article 9(1)(c): “*to permit, under strictly supervised conditions and on a selective basis, the capture, keeping or other judicious use of certain birds in small numbers*”.

2.2 As regards the “no other satisfactory solution” criterion, the judgment delivered by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in case C-76/08, explicitly noted that “*hunting for Quail and Turtle Doves during the autumn hunting season cannot be regarded as constituting, in Malta, another satisfactory solution, so that the condition that there be no other satisfactory solution, laid down in Article 9(1) of the Directive, should, in principle, be considered met*”.¹

2.3 This judgment therefore recognises the right to apply a derogation for spring hunting in Malta subject to the strict conditions laid down in Directive 2009/147/EC. Malta’s biogeographical circumstances that were recognised by the Court in 2009 have remained the same, and therefore the hunting of Turtle-dove and Quail in spring remained the only satisfactory solution within the meaning of Article 9(1)(c).

¹ Case C-76/08 *Commission v Malta*, ECR I-8213, paragraph 63

- 2.4 The [Conservation of Wild Birds \(Framework for Allowing a Derogation Opening a Spring Hunting Season for Turtle-dove and Quail\) Regulations \(Subsidiary Legislation 549.57 of the Laws of Malta\)](#) (Framework Regulations) establish a series of parameters to be considered **prior to** any decision to apply a derogation, particularly the requirement to consider the previous autumn hunting bag data for Turtle-dove and Quail, and to consider the conservation status of the species concerned.
- 2.5 Consideration of the above two parameters is discussed in the following sections of this report.

3. Consideration by the Malta Ornis Committee

- 3.1 The Malta Ornis Committee, established under Regulation 10 of the [Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations \(Subsidiary Legislation 549.42 of the Laws of Malta\)](#) considered a range of aspects prior to providing a recommendation to the Maltese Government.
- 3.2 At its sitting on 3 April 2024, the Committee considered an updated assessment of the conservation status of Common Quail and Turtle-dove (enclosed in Annex 1 to this report).² The findings of this assessment are summarised in section 4 of this report.
- 3.3 The Committee further discussed the potential application of a spring hunting derogation for Quail and Turtle-dove. As a result of its deliberations, the Committee recommended in principle the application of a hunting derogation for Common Quail in spring 2024 with the same parameters as established in 2022. During the same sitting, the Committee voted in favor of opening a spring hunting season for the Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*). A final recommendation to Government on the dates of the season was made, namely to open the season for Quail from 10 April until 30 April and for Turtle-dove from 17 until 30 April.
- 3.4 Following Ornis Committee recommendation the Government opted to open the season for Quail between 10 April and 30 April, inclusive of both dates by virtue of [Legal Notice 85 of 2024](#). The season for Turtle-dove was opened between 18 until 30 April inclusive of both dates by virtue of [Legal Notice 89 of 2024](#), following the Court's final decree on the warrant of prohibitory injunction described in the below section. The national quota was set at 2,400 Quail and 1,500 Turtle-doves.

Warrant of Prohibitory Injunction

- 3.5 On 4 April 2024, BirdLife Malta filed a warrant of prohibitory injunction against the Maltese Government, requesting the Courts to withhold these authorities from opening a spring hunting season for Turtle-dove. In its decree of 4 April 2024, the Court provisionally accepted the request for prohibitory injunction.
- 3.6 On 9 April 2024, the Court revoked the provisional injunction it had issued earlier and delivered the decree from its chambers. The Court noted that the warrant of prohibitory injunction applied for was within the same merit of the warrant of prohibitory injunctions decided upon in the previous years. This is the third time that BirdLife Malta has filed such an injunction, with the Court observing that the NGO had used identical grounds to do on previous occasions. In this regard, the Court in its judgment dismissed the request.

² Minutes of the Ornis Committee meetings are available at: <https://wbru.gov.mt/en/the-department/ornis-committee/>

4. Consideration of the conservation status of European Turtle-dove and Common Quail

4.1 As was also the case in previous years, prior to further consideration by the Malta Ornis Committee on whether or not to recommend to Government the application of a derogation, the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) carried out an assessment of all latest available scientific data pertaining to the population status of the Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) and Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*). This assessment was presented to the Malta Ornis Committee on 3 April 2024 and is contained in Annex 1 to this report, which also includes an update on the conservation status of the European Turtle-dove.

Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*)

4.2 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 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.

4.3 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 *less* 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.**

European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*)

4.4 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: 41). 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).

4.5 The European Bird Census Council (2023 update; 2022 base year) has shown that at Pan-European level, the Turtle-dove **declined by 83%** when compared with the 1980 baseline data and by 5% during the 10-year trend (2013–2022). Compared with the previous EBCC update, the Turtle-dove population increased by 2% in the long-term trend [from -85% to -83%] and increased by 12% in the short-term (10-year) trend [from -17% to -5%].

4.6 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).**

4.7 In the long-term, 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.

- 4.8 As was the case in the previous conservation status report (February 2023), no additions to Malta’s EU reference population were made in this update since the countries in which the satellite-tagged specimens spent the 2023 breeding season already formed part of Malta’s EU reference population. The only change that has been carried out is in the associated percentages assigned to each country of origin, based on latest satellite tracking data. In the previous two updates (February 2022 and February 2023), Italy constituted 46.5% and 53.1% of Malta’s reference population respectively. **Based on the latest satellite-tracking data (2023), this update shows that Italy now constitutes 61.9% of Malta’s reference population.** This percentage change (i.e., percentage reallocation per Member State based on current tracking data) results in an overall increase in the minimum number of breeding pairs (as a percentage of the main contingents of Malta’s EU reference population) from 108,551 pairs, as reported in the previous update, to 115,698 pairs.
- 4.9 The previous Article 12 (2008–2012) data showed that Italy’s population was assessed as unknown in both the short-term and long-term trends. Subsequently, in the latest update for the 2013–2018 Article 12 reporting period, **Italy’s population has been reported as stable in the short-term and increasing in the long-term trend.**
- 4.10 At reference population level, the previous Article 12 (2008–2012) data showed that Malta’s EU reference population was decreasing in the short-term trend and stable in the long-term trend. The latest scientific data (Article 12 reports for period 2013–2018) shows that **Malta’s EU reference population of Turtle-dove is stable in both the short-term and long-term trends** (see Tables 12 and 13 in the February 2022 and February 2023 reports, and Tables 14 and 15 in the February 2024 conservation status reports, the latter included as Annex 1 to this report).
- 4.11 It should be noted that, as stated in the latest report³ prepared by IREC⁴ and PECBMS, “March 2023 Technical update: Turtle Dove population data and trends, abundance estimates and management scenarios (central-eastern flyway)”:

PECBMS estimates carry a significant amount of uncertainty when they refer to the three most recent years [2019-2021]. This is due to the fact that only part of the data were available to produce these estimates... [c]onsequently, these results must be taken as provisional and to be confirmed in future iterations of this exercise.

- 4.12 The level of uncertainty in the estimated population trends of the European Turtle-dove for the most recent years (2019–2021) rendered it impossible for the Maltese authorities to compile any additional updates to the February 2023 report (Annex 1). Nonetheless, as evidenced in the annexes to the IREC-PECBMS March 2023 report, the population size of each Member State that constitutes Malta’s reference population was identical to the one reported in the latest Article 12 composite report, on which Malta based its latest update on the conservation status of European Turtle-dove.

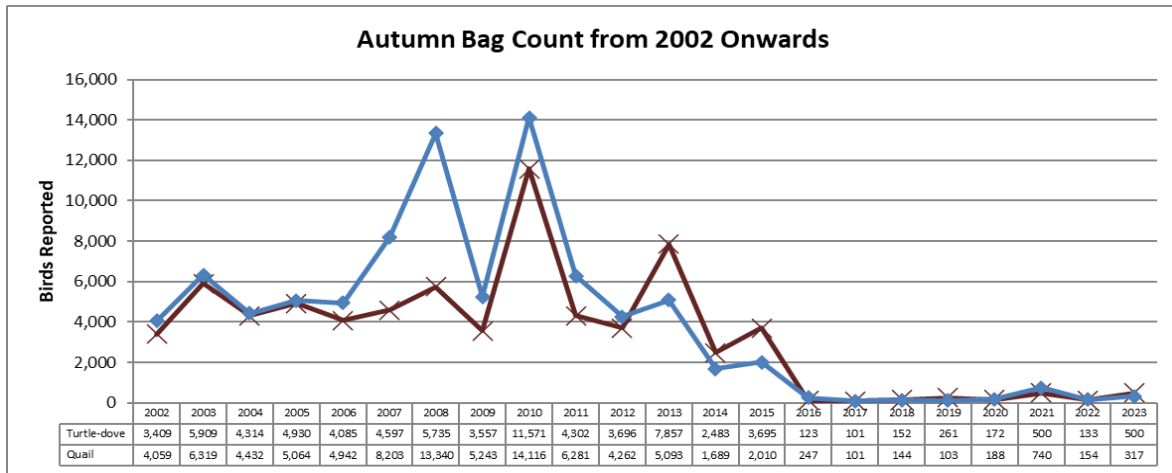
5. Consideration of autumn 2023 bag statistics, migration data and enforcement parameters

³ Document prepared in the frame of the service contract with the European Commission “Supporting the recovery of bird species of Annex II of the Birds Directive in non-secure conservation status” (09.0201/2022/886665/SER/D.3) in preparation for the March 2023 meeting of the Task Force on the Recovery of Birds (21-22/03/2023).

⁴ Instituto de Investigación en Recursos Cinegéticos (IREC, ES)

5.1 In 2023, there were 9,934 persons licensed to hunt birds on land. During the autumn hunting season, a total of 317 Common Quail (between 1 September 2023 – 31 January 2024) and 500 Turtle-doves (during September 2023) were reported hunted.

Figure 1 - Quail and Turtle-dove reported during autumn seasons since 2002.



5.2 The total number of Quail reported hunted during the 2023 autumn season was higher than in 2022 (154). The total number of Turtle-doves reported hunted during the 2023 autumn season was higher than in 2022 (133).

5.3 Detailed accounts of the reported catches by each month of the season (Figure 2, Table 1) were also considered.

Figure 2 - Reported catches for Quail between September 2023 and January 2024.

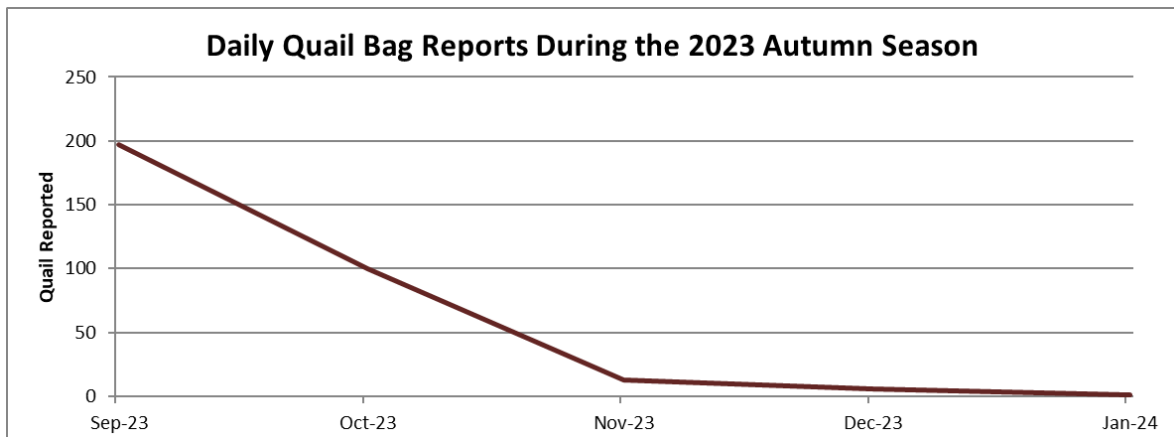


Table 1 - Monthly catches of Common Quail and Turtle-dove in the autumn of 2023 / winter 2024

Month	Quail	Turtle-dove
September '23	197	500
October '23	100	N/A
November '23	13	N/A
December '23	6	N/A
January '24	1	N/A
Total	317	500

- 5.4 An independent **migration study** to estimate the influx of Turtle-dove and Quail during the peak migration period in the autumn 2023 was conducted. The study aimed at surveying and scientifically monitoring the daily influx of Turtle-dove and Common Quail between 1 September and 31 October 2023 in order to estimate the overall daily presence (influx) of these two species for the whole study period, subject to scientifically justified assumptions. The full report of the study is enclosed in Annex 2 to this report.
- 5.5 The methodology used by Ecoserv during the autumn 2023 survey was identical to that used in surveys made by the same company from autumn 2015 to autumn 2022 (Ecoserv, 2015–2022) and during the spring migration studies (Ecoserv, 2011–2023).
- 5.6 The survey design was aimed at assessing changes in migratory influx, which entails trend analysis based on data from monitoring carried out regularly over a sufficiently long period comprising 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.
- 5.7 Prior to enrolment for the survey, the field assistants and observers (field personnel) were assessed by Ecoserv’s environmental consultants and ecologists to ensure that they were capable of identifying the two bird species and were also briefed on the contractual procedures required for data collection. Throughout the survey, Ecoserv’s environmental consultants and ecologists ensured close monitoring of the activities of the field personnel to ensure that collection of data proceeded as per designated protocol by carrying out field visits (most of which were surprise/unannounced visits) on a regular basis.

Migration observations of Common Quail

- 5.8 Raw daily counts for Common Quail recorded from any given site (out of the 21 sites) during the 2023 study varied between 0 and a maximum of 6, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 1.0. The recorded counts did not vary appreciably between the different sites: at the higher end, a total of 10 individuals were recorded from grid location 4666 located in west Malta; at the lower end, no Quail individuals were recorded throughout the survey period from grid locations 5663, 5277 and 5872, located in different regions around Malta.
- 5.9 Values of mean daily counts and total counts of Common Quail recorded during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023 from the 2023 survey, as well as the respective area surveyed at each site, are given in Table 2. Values of standard deviation associated with the mean daily counts are also provided in Table 2. Standard deviation is a measure of the variability among counts recorded from the different sites, that is, low standard deviation implies that very similar counts were recorded at all six sites surveyed during a particular day, whereas dissimilar values would lead to high standard deviation. Standard deviation is influenced by sample size (i.e. number of study sites); it tends to increase with decreased sample size. These same values are also shown, along with values of mean counts for the same period in 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2014 (Ecoserv, 2014a), 2015 (Ecoserv, 2015a), 2016 (Ecoserv, 2016a), 2017 (Ecoserv, 2017a), 2018 (Ecoserv, 2018a), 2019 (Ecoserv, 2019a), 2020 (Ecoserv, 2020a), 2021 (Ecoserv, 2021a) and 2022 (Ecoserv, 2022a), in Figure 4. The daily mean counts recorded during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023 are overall lower than values recorded in 2008 and 2009 (Thomaidis, nd) for the same period, but similar to those recorded in 2014–2022 (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022a). No migration peaks (with a mean count >3.0) were recorded during the 2023 survey. The general pattern from all years being compared is a main migratory influx between mid-September and mid-October.

5.10 Values of the grand mean for Common Quail counts recorded during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023 from this survey, together with values of the grand mean for the same period in 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 (Ecoserv, 2014a - 2022a), are shown graphically in Figure 3. The grand mean recorded during the autumn 2023 survey is lower than that recorded during the 2008 and 2009 (Thomaidis, nd) surveys, but similar to values recorded during the 2014–2022 surveys (Ecoserv, 2014a - 2022a)..

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 Common Quail

Date	Mean Count \pm SD		Total Area Surveyed (km ²)	Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
01-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
02-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
03-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.148	1	1493
04-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
05-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
06-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
07-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.148	1	1493
08-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
09-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
10-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.182	1	1217
11-Sep-23	0.67	\pm 0.82	0.148	4	5973
12-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.197	2	2246
13-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
14-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
15-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	0.148	3	4480
16-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
17-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.162	1	1364
18-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.182	1	1217
19-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.55	0.148	3	4480
20-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.197	2	2246
21-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.162	1	1364
22-Sep-23	0.83	\pm 1.17	0.182	5	6085
23-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	0.148	3	4480
24-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	0.197	2	2246
25-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	0.162	2	2729
26-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
27-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.148	0	0
28-Sep-23	1.00	\pm 1.26	0.197	6	6737
29-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	0.162	3	4093
30-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.182	1	1217
01-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.148	1	1493
02-Oct-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	0.197	3	3369
03-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.162	2	2729
04-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.182	2	2434
05-Oct-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	0.148	3	4480
06-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.197	2	2246
07-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
08-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	0.182	2	2434
09-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.148	2	2987
10-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.197	1	1123
11-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.162	1	1364
12-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.182	2	2434

Date	Mean Count \pm SD		Total Area Surveyed (km ²)	Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
13-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.148	1	1493
14-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.197	2	2246
15-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	0.162	2	2729
16-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.182	1	1217
17-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.148	0	0
18-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
19-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
20-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
21-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.148	0	0
22-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
23-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
24-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
25-Oct-23	0.83	\pm 1.33	0.148	5	7466
26-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	0.197	1	1123
27-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.162	0	0
28-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.182	0	0
29-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.148	0	0
30-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0.197	0	0
31-Oct-23	0.50	\pm 1.22	0.162	3	4093
Sum total				78	102620

- 5.11 The highest mean count was recorded from Fawwara (Grid 4666) located in west Malta, while overall high counts were also recorded from sites in northwestern Malta. The lowest mean counts were recorded from Għar Hasan (Grid 5663), White Rocks (Grid 5277) and Xgħajra (Grid 5872), located in different areas of the island of Malta. The mean count recorded from the study site on Comino was 0.098, which was lower than the median value for the whole range of recorded mean counts.
- 5.12 As has been done in previous surveys undertaken in autumn (Ecoserv, 2014–2022) and spring (Ecoserv, 2011–2023), the total influx of Common Quail was estimated for the whole area of the Maltese Islands using the recorded area surveyed for Common Quail at each site. However, such an estimate should be considered with great caution because of the assumption that the rate of Common Quail settling at coastal sites (where the survey was carried out) is equal to that at inland locations. While this appears to hold true during spring, observations indicate that Common Quail tend to settle in larger numbers in coastal areas compared to inland ones.
- 5.13 It was furthermore noted that Quail also tends to appear in certain localities before others (Fenech, 2010; Fenech, *in litt.*). On the other hand, coastal areas are more likely to serve as short-term stopover sites immediately following a migratory flight compared to inland locations; thus, including inland locations as study sites in the survey may result in an overestimate of the total influx due to repeat counting of resident Quail.
- 5.14 To ensure that the total area used to estimate the migration count does not include regions within which Quail do not normally settle, even though some birds may fly over urbanized areas, the total area was calculated as the sum of agricultural areas (161.5 km²), forested areas (2.1 km²) and areas of natural vegetation (57.8 km²); this amounts to 221.4 km², representing 72% of the 315 km² total area of the Maltese Islands (land cover data source: MEPA, 2010).
- 5.15 The mean (\pm SD) daily counts and estimated daily influx of birds per day are shown above in Table 2. The estimated daily influx was obtained by extrapolating the mean daily values obtained for the surveyed areas to an area of 221.4 km² obtained as explained above. Values of estimated daily

influx were then summed to obtain an estimate of the total influx of migrating Quail for the eight-week study period. Based on these data, extrapolation translates to a total influx of Common Quail during 1 September – 31 October 2023 of 102,620 individuals, or some 1,682 Quail per day (Table 2).

Figure 3 - Grand mean of Common Quail counts made using data from the period 1 September – 31 October for autumn 2023 (Ecoserv 2023) and autumn 2014-2022 (Ecoserv, 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022) and autumn 2008 - 2009 (Thomaidis, nd)

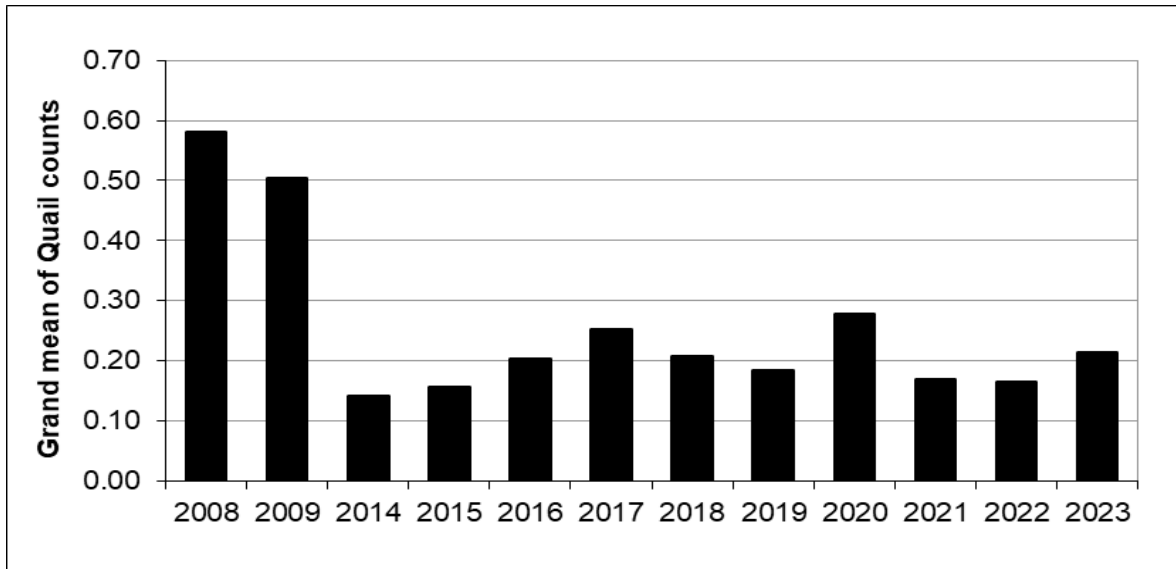
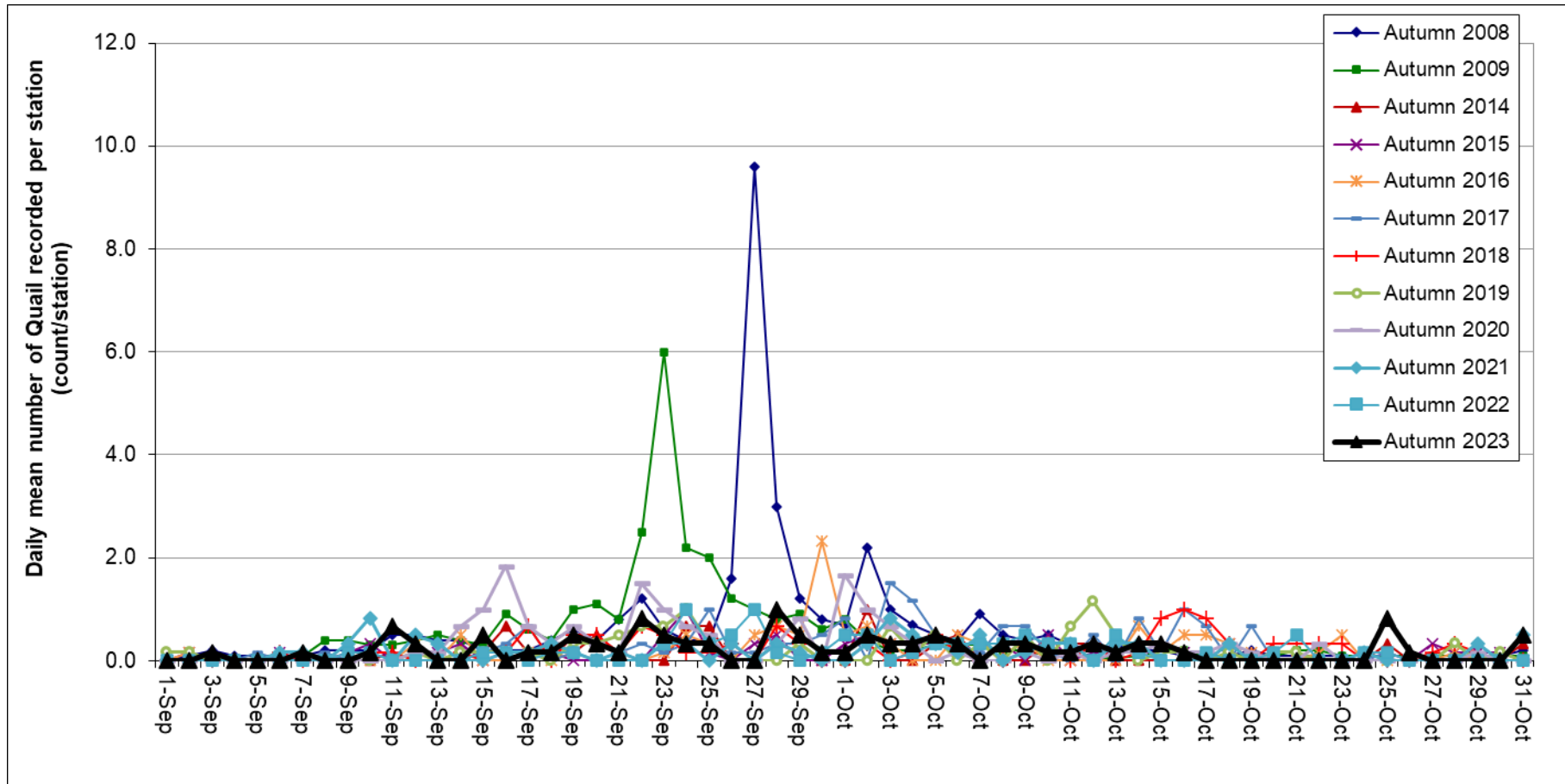


Figure 4 - Daily mean counts of Common Quail per station (= site) recorded during the present survey during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023, together with values of the same statistic for autumn 2008 and 2009 as reported in Thomaidis (nd), for autumn 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021,2022 as reported in Ecoserv (2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022).



Migration observations of Turtle-dove

- 5.16 Raw daily counts for Turtle Dove recorded from any given site (out of the 21 sites) during the 2023 study varied between 0 and a maximum of 13, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 2.17 (Table 3). No appreciable peaks in migratory counts were recorded throughout the survey period. The recorded counts showed little variation between the different sites over the whole survey period: at the lower end, no Turtle Dove individuals were recorded throughout the survey period from grid location 4077 (northwest Malta), while at the higher end, 11 Turtle Dove individuals were recorded from the site at grid location 4268 (west Malta).
- 5.17 Values of mean daily counts and total counts of Turtle Dove recorded during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023 from the 2023 survey are summarised in Table 3. Values of standard deviation associated with the mean daily counts are also provided in Table 3. As explained above for Common Quail, standard deviation is a measure of variability among counts recorded from the different sites, that is, a low standard deviation implies that very similar counts were recorded at all six sites surveyed during a particular day, whereas dissimilar values would lead to high standard deviation. Standard deviation is influenced by sample size (i.e. number of study sites); it tends to increase with a decreased sample size. These same values are also shown, along with values of mean counts recorded for the same period in 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2014 till 2021 (Ecoserv, 2014 - 2021) in Figure 6. 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; 2021a; 2022a) in autumn 2014–2022; that is, the main migratory influx occurs during September, with occasional migratory peaks recorded in some years.
- 5.18 Values of the grand mean of Turtle Dove counts recorded during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023 from the 2023 survey, together with values of the grand mean for the same period in 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 (Ecoserv, 2014a; till 2022a) are shown in Figure 5. Overall, the grand mean recorded during autumn 2023 falls within the range of those recorded during previous surveys held in autumn.

Table 3 - 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-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
02-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
03-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
04-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
05-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.55	3	271
06-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
07-Sep-23	0.67	\pm 0.82	4	362
08-Sep-23	0.83	\pm 0.41	5	452
09-Sep-23	1.17	\pm 1.33	7	633
10-Sep-23	2.17	\pm 2.64	13	1175
11-Sep-23	1.00	\pm 0.89	6	542
12-Sep-23	1.00	\pm 0.89	6	542
13-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.55	3	271
14-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
15-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
16-Sep-23	0.67	\pm 1.21	4	362
17-Sep-23	1.17	\pm 1.17	7	633
18-Sep-23	1.17	\pm 0.98	7	633

Date	Mean Count \pm SD		Total count	Estimated Daily Influx
19-Sep-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
20-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
21-Sep-23	0.50	\pm 0.84	3	271
22-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
23-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
24-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
25-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
26-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
27-Sep-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
28-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
29-Sep-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
30-Sep-23	1.17	\pm 1.17	7	633
01-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
02-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
03-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
04-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.52	2	181
05-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
06-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
07-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
08-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
09-Oct-23	0.33	\pm 0.82	2	181
10-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
11-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
12-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
13-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
14-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
15-Oct-23	0.17	\pm 0.41	1	90
16-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
17-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
18-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
19-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
20-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
21-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
22-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
23-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
24-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
25-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
26-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
27-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
28-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
29-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
30-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
31-Oct-23	0.00	\pm 0.00	0	0
Sum total			112	10123

5.19 The highest mean count was recorded from Dingli (Grid 4268) located in west Malta, while overall high counts were recorded from other study sites located along the western parts of Malta. A count of zero was recorded from Għajn Tuffieħa (Grid 4077), while relatively low counts were also recorded from Comino (Grid 4085) and some sites located on the northern parts of Malta.

5.20 As has been done in previous surveys undertaken in autumn (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a, 2021a; 2022a) and spring (Ecoserv, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014b;

2015b; 2016b; 2017b; 2018b; 2019b; 2020b; 2021, 2022, 2023), an estimate of the total influx of Turtle-dove over the Maltese Islands was made using the daily counts. Extrapolations were then made to obtain the total number of individuals of this species that have migrated over the Maltese Islands on a particular date. However, as emphasised in reports from previous surveys (Ecoserv, 2014a till 2022a), such an estimate must be treated with utmost caution, given that the Turtle-dove migration starts around the third week of August, which period is not covered by the present survey; the relatively small number of sites used; and that the counts were not made daily at each site.

5.21 Furthermore, passage of birds at different localities is extremely variable, with potential large differences in number of birds passing at two different localities, even if these are separated only by a very small distance. As already stated, the other limiting factor is that the field survey stops at 14:00 and does not start again before 07:00, hence potentially missing birds that arrive in the afternoon and during the night, which are usually seen at the very first light of day, some of which may have been hunted in the early hours of the morning, and therefore these may have not been recorded by the field observers during the survey. On the other hand, the estimate given in the present report is useful when making comparisons between different years, assuming data from surveys based on a similar design are available to assess whether the trend in influx is increasing or decreasing with time. Since the coastal length surveyed at each site during the present survey is approximately 0.5 km, the mean daily count represents the mean influx of Turtle-dove per 0.5 km coastline.

5.22 The estimated daily influx was obtained by extrapolating the recorded mean daily values (per 0.5 km) to the total coastline length for the Maltese Islands, which have a perimeter of 271.22 km (Mallia et al, 2002); that is, the estimated daily influx equals the mean daily count multiplied by an extrapolation factor of 271.22/0.5. The values of estimated daily influx were then summed to obtain an estimate of the total influx of migrating Turtle-dove for the eight-week study period. Based on the mean daily counts, extrapolation translates to an estimated daily influx ranging between 0 and 1,175 individuals, with a total influx over the survey period (1 September to 31 October; i.e. 61 days) of 10,123 individuals, i.e. some 166 birds per day.

Figure 5 - Grand mean of Turtle-dove counts made using data from the period 1 September to 31 October for autumn 2023, autumn 2014–2022 (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022a) and autumn 2008–2009 (Thomaidis, nd).

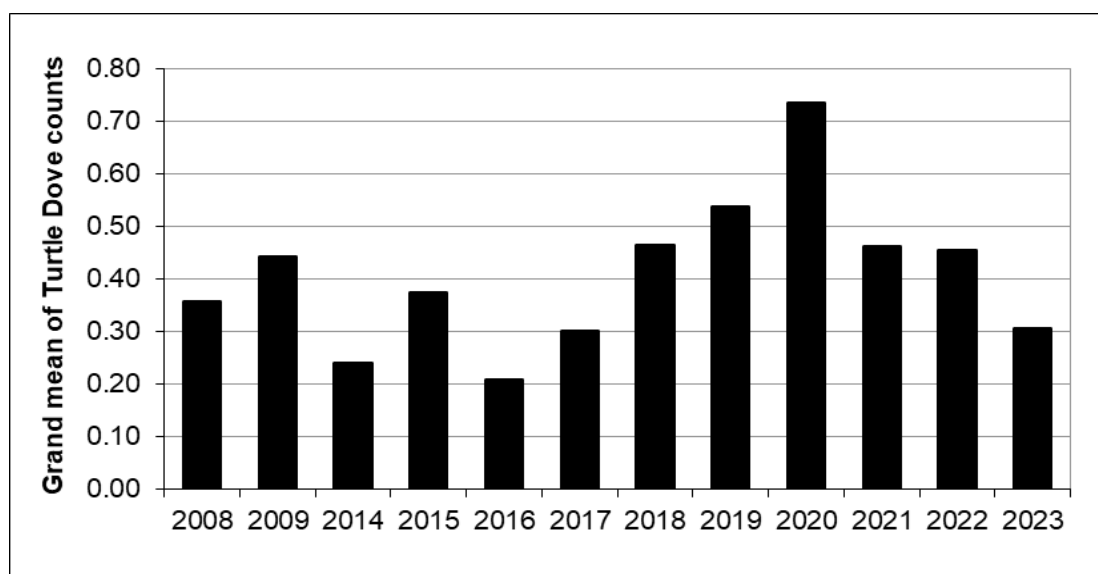
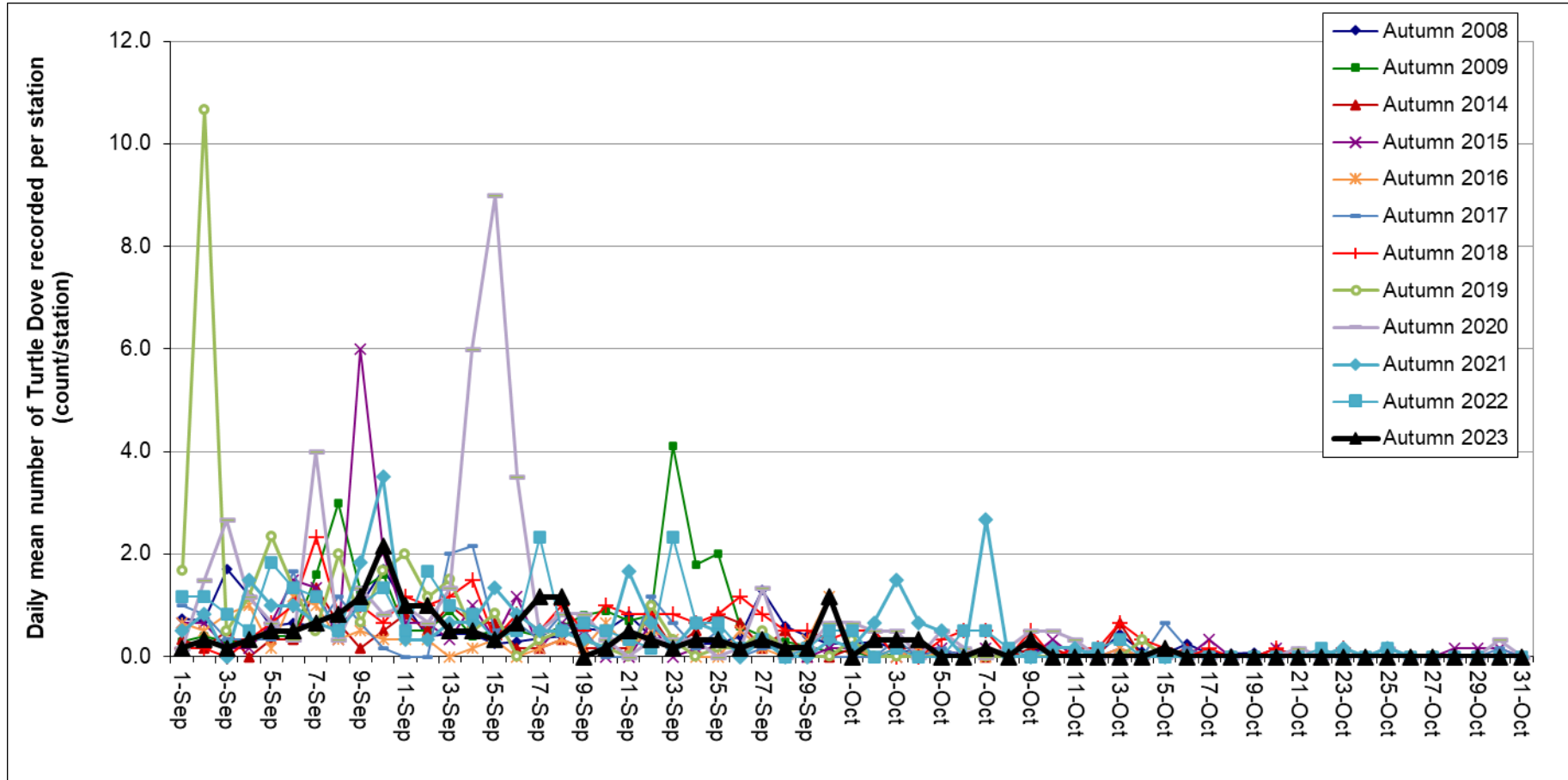


Figure 6 - Daily mean counts of Turtle-dove per station (= site) recorded during the present survey from 1 September to 31 October 2023, together with values of the same statistic for autumn 2008 and 2009 as reported in Thomaidis (nd), and for autumn 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 as reported in Ecoserv (2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022a).



Correlation of migration observations with reported bags

- 5.23 The analysis shows a general correlation between the number of catches reported by hunters in autumn and independent observations of migration for the Common Quail. There was a very similar temporal trend of counts until 20 September 2023, in both the daily counts made during the 2023 survey and the bag count data for the Turtle Dove, while no comparison could be made after 20 September since the quota for the 2023 Turtle-dove autumn hunting season was reached and thus the hunting season for Turtle Dove was closed on this day.(Figure 7 and Figure 8).
- 5.24 The above data on reported catches and observation trends were considered also in the context of the enforcement statistics pertaining to the 2023 autumn season summarised below.

Figure 7 - Daily bag count of Common Quail during 2023 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2023 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2023.

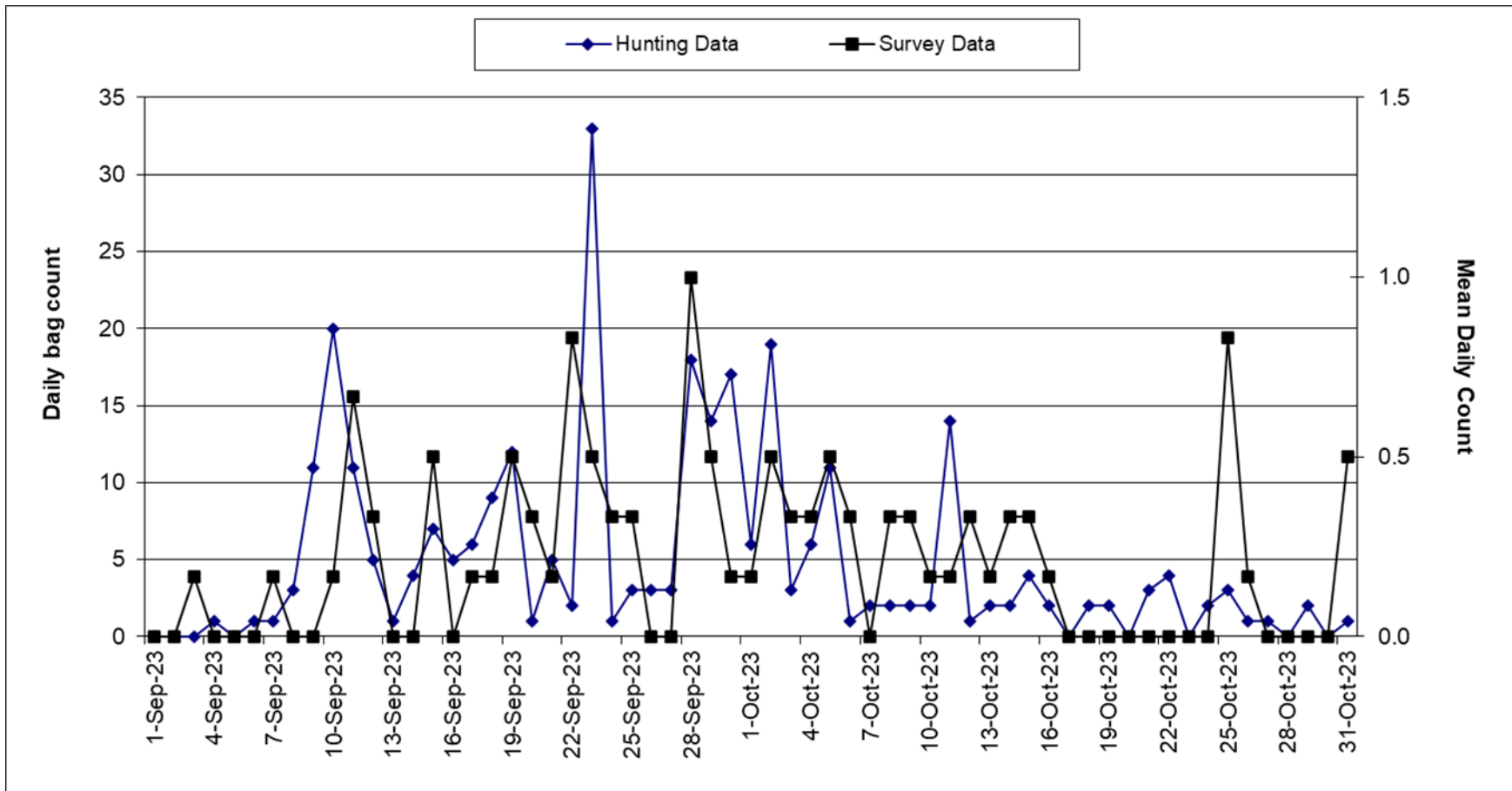
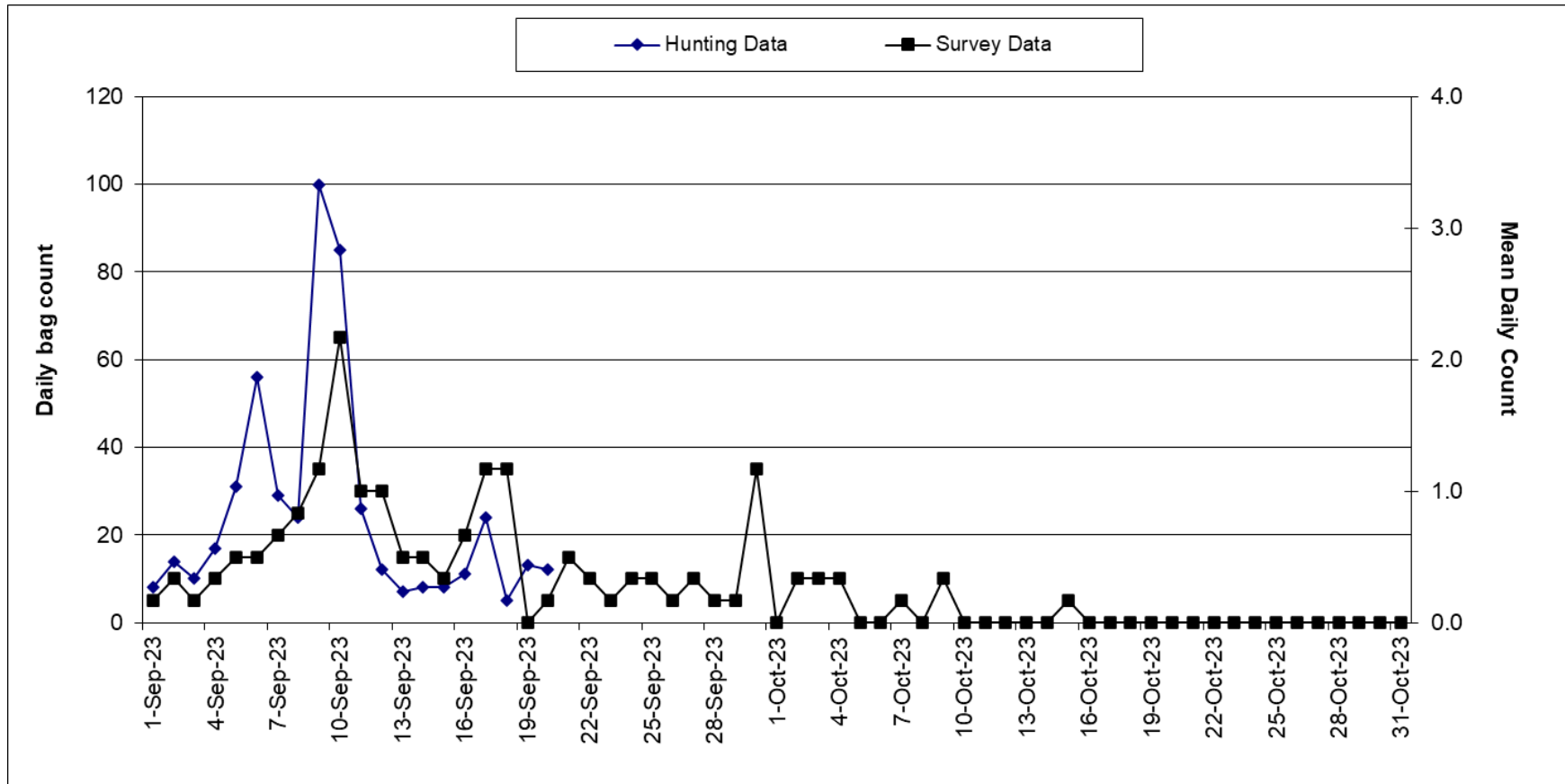


Figure 8 - Daily bag count of Turtle-dove during 2023 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2023 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2023. It should be noted that bag counts after 20 September are all zero given that the hunting season for this species closed on this date.



6. Determination of the 2024 spring hunting bag limit and other parameters

- 6.1 Regulation 5 of the Framework Regulations stipulates the requirement for the establishment of an overall bag limit for a spring hunting season for Quail and for Turtle-dove, based on figures contained in Annex 1 to the same Regulations. The same Regulations also stipulate the requirement of taking into consideration the conservation status of the two species concerned and the maintenance of the population of both species at a satisfactory level when establishing the overall bag limit. Regulation 5 also provides for the requirement of establishing seasonal and daily bag limits per hunting licence.
- 6.2 The Regulations also establish that, should a spring hunting season be declared open, the overall national spring hunting limits would be set at not more than a ceiling limit of 5,000 for Quail and 11,000 for Turtle-dove, based on the principle of 1% of the total annual mortality of the species. They also establish that a spring hunting season will not be opened in cases where the number of birds hunted during the previous autumn season reaches 20,000 in the case of Quail and 21,000 in the case Turtle-dove. Furthermore, it should be noted that:
- (i) the maximum bag limit for a spring hunting derogation may be fully allowed in cases where the number of Quail or Turtle-dove hunted during the previous autumn season does not exceed 10,000 individuals for each species respectively; and that,
 - (ii) the maximum bag limit for a spring hunting derogation should be reduced by inverse proportion to the number of birds hunted in excess of 10,000 or each species in the previous autumn season.
- 6.3 Since the total bag for the autumn 2023 hunting season was 317 Quail and 500 Turtle-dove, the maximum limit of birds hunted in autumn as established by the Regulations in question (20,000 for Quail / 21,000 for Turtle-dove) was not reached. Moreover, since the numbers hunted did not exceed 10,000 individuals in either species, the maximum national bag limit allowed by law could have been applied.
- 6.4 However, 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. Given the rapid decline 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 was foreseen. Malta has committed to implement the measures recommended by the European Commission and in 2021 limited the annual bag to a maximum 50% of the average off-take between 2013–2018. The 50% reduction in hunting bag of the average off-take between 2013–2018 for Malta adds up to 2,000 Turtle-doves. Legal Notice 341 of 2021⁵ reduced the autumn national quota of the Turtle-dove from 7,000 to 500 birds, huntable in September only (from 1 to 30 September, inclusive of both dates). In 2024, available scientific data on population size and trends segregated for each Member State that constitutes the reference population for Malta, is Article 12 report for period 2013-2018. As outlined in Section 4 of this report, through this data, the Turtle-dove’s reference population is stable both in its short-term trend and in the long-term trend, thus Malta proposed a national quota of 1,500 Turtle-doves for the 2024 spring hunting season.

⁵ Legal Notice 341 of 2021 <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2021/341/eng>

- 6.5 Based on the above, the 2024 spring hunting overall bag limit for Quail was set at 2,400 and 1,500 for Turtle-dove on condition that the season would be closed immediately should this national overall bag limit be reached before 30 April 2024.

7. Application process and issuance of special spring hunting licences

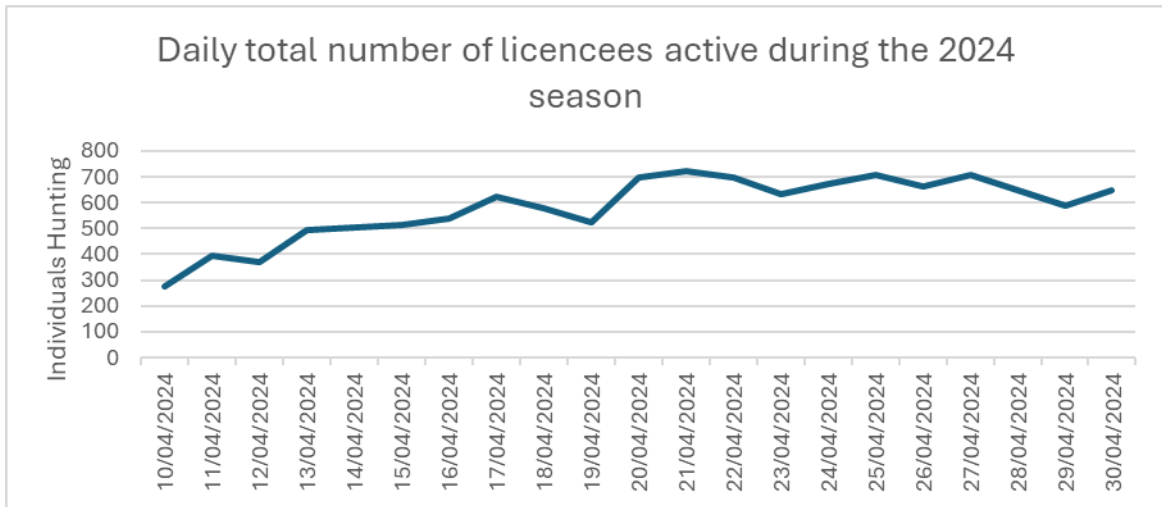
- 7.1 In order to be eligible for a 2024 Spring Hunting Special Licence, a hunter was required to be in possession, by the time of application, of the following:
- (a) Valid general licence to hunt birds on land;
 - (b) Paid-up membership in a recognised hunting organisation for 2024;
 - (c) Valid third party liability insurance cover for 2024;
 - (d) Valid permit to carry a firearm for hunting of birds on land issued by the Police.
- 7.2 Applications for a special spring hunting licence were received through the telephonic Game Reporting System (GRS) during a seven-day period from 12 March to 18 March 2024. During this period, the GRS was switched over to an application call flow where callers in possession of a valid general hunting licence were guided via automated voice prompts and declarations to apply for a special licence.
- 7.3 In 2024, the Wild Birds Regulation Unit received 7,982 applications for a spring hunting special licence, which is approximately 0.3% higher than the number of applications received in 2023 (7,961). Upon verification, two of these applications were considered invalid and thus rejected.
- 7.4 A total of 7,980 licences were subsequently issued, 6,651 to applicants resident in Malta and 1,329 to applicants resident in Gozo. A total of 109 issued licences (83 in Malta and 26 in Gozo) remained unclaimed throughout the season leaving a total of 7,871 active licences. Details on minimum statutory enforcement deployment is provided in the enforcement section of this report.
- 7.5 Spring hunting licence conditions were established according to the provisions of the Framework Regulations and the provisions of Legal Notice 85 of 2024 as well as the provisions of Legal Notice 89 of 2024. Additionally, all licensed hunters were required to abide by the regulations laid down in the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations. A copy of the special spring hunting licence, including details of the licence conditions, is attached in Annex 3 to this report.
- 7.6 Hunters were required to carry their spring hunting licence and general licence at all times. They were also required to immediately report Quail and/or Turtle-dove caught by calling on 8000 2020, or by using the Game Reporting MT mobile application. Hunters were also required to abide by the time restrictions and respect the national bag limits of 2,400 Quail and 1,500 Turtle-dove. These conditions were strictly monitored, supervised and enforced, as described in the enforcement section of this report.

8. Activity Data (Hunting Effort)

- 8.1 During this year's spring hunting season, hunters were obliged to report 'hunting effort' after each hunting outing which did not result in any bagged game through the Telephone Game Reporting System or the Game Reporting mobile app.
- 8.2 Reporting 'hunting effort' is a legal obligation as provided for by Regulation 12(9) and paragraph 1(c) of Schedule IV of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations as well as being explicitly stated in condition 10 of the special licence. Subsequently, hunters who upon inspection are found to have failed to report their hunting effort are issued with an administrative fine of €50, in line with Schedule VIII of the same Regulations.

8.3 During the 2024 spring hunting season, 878 individuals reported at least one bird caught whereas 1,864 individuals reported hunting effort only (no birds caught)—the data excludes individuals who were issued with a fine for failure to fulfil their reporting obligations (vide section 12 on enforcement). The maximum number of hunters active on any given day during the 2024 spring hunting season was 720 on 21st April, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 - Individuals hunting during the open season.



9. Real-time Game Reporting System

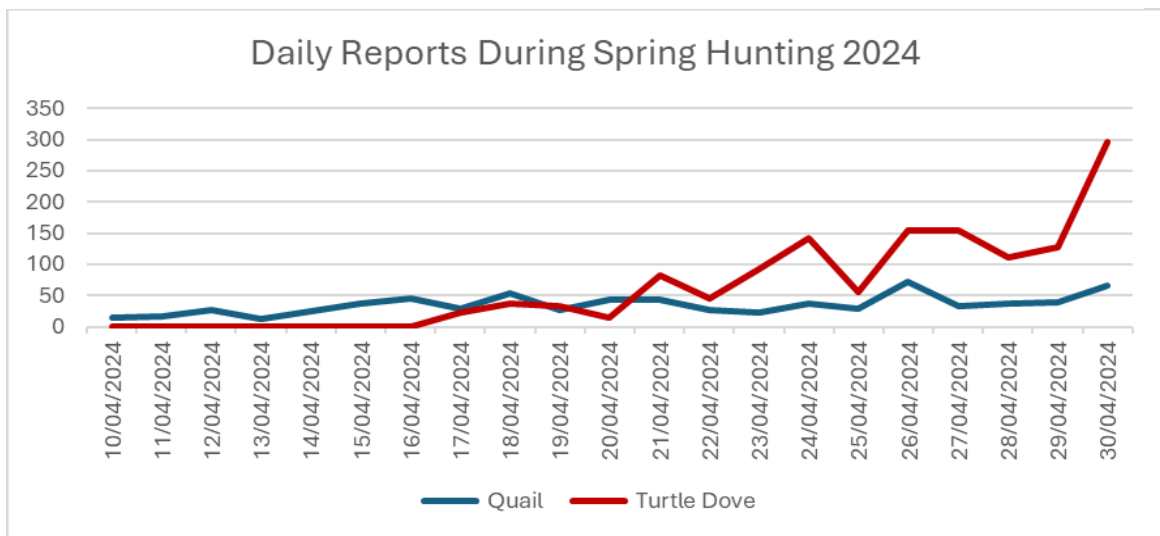
- 9.1 All hunters in possession of a spring hunting licence were reminded of their legal obligations through a letter sent together with the Spring Hunting Licence.
- 9.2 In accordance with Regulation 5(d) of the Framework Regulations, hunters in possession of the special spring hunting licence were obliged to immediately notify the authorities of any Quail and/or Turtle-dove hunted during the season. The Special Licence required the hunters to do so by calling on the telephone reporting system via their mobile phones or through a mobile reporting app immediately after catching a Quail or Turtle-dove stating the amount of birds caught.
- 9.3 Each report was registered in a database. Only calls made from registered mobile numbers of hunters in possession of a Special Licence were accepted for reporting. The relevant data for reported Quail and Turtle-dove is presented in Table 4 and Figure 10 respectively.

Table 4 - Number of birds reported through the game reporting system

Date	Quail	Turtle-dove
10/04/2024	15	0
11/04/2024	17	0
12/04/2024	26	0
13/04/2024	12	0
14/04/2024	24	0
15/04/2024	38	0
16/04/2024	45	0
17/04/2024	29	22
18/04/2024	53	38
19/04/2024	27	33
20/04/2024	44	15
21/04/2024	44	82

Date	Quail	Turtle-dove
22/04/2024	27	45
23/04/2024	23	93
24/04/2024	38	142
25/04/2024	28	56
26/04/2024	71	154
27/04/2024	33	154
28/04/2024	38	111
29/04/2024	40	128
30/04/2024	66	297
Totals	738	1,370

Figure 10 - Daily total number of Quail reported during the 2024 spring hunting season – as reported through the telephonic system.



9.4 The total number of reported birds did not exceed any of the national overall bag limits. During the 2024 spring hunting, the total number of Quail reported equates to 30.8% of the limit permitted by law, while the total number of Turtle-dove reported equates to 91.3% of the limit. Table 5 provides data on the number of Quail and Turtle-dove caught. There were 358 hunters who reported Quail and 742 hunters who reported Turtle-dove during the 2024 spring hunting season.

Table 5 - Number of birds caught by hunters.

Birds reported shot by hunters	Number of hunters declaring Quail	Number of hunters declaring Turtle-dove
1	211	435
2	76	175
3	27	61
4	17	27
5	6	17
6	9	11
7	2	5
8	2	5
9	1	2

Birds reported shot by hunters	Number of hunters declaring Quail	Number of hunters declaring Turtle-dove
10	2	1
>10	5	3

- 9.5 Hunters were bound by a legal obligation to report game caught immediately upon making a catch, thus allowing precise temporal data to be collected. Table 6 indicates percentages of Quail and Turtle-dove reports made within each hour time band.

Table 6 - Percentages of Quail reports made within each hour time band.

Time	Quail Reports (%)	Turtle-dove Reports (%)
05:00 - 06:00	0.0	0.0
06:00 - 07:00	1.9	6.0
07:00 - 08:00	7.3	12.3
08:00 - 09:00	15.6	18.2
09:00 - 10:00	21.3	17.4
10:00 - 11:00	19.2	16.4
11:00 - 12:00	34.7	29.6

10. Independent bird migration study in spring 2024

- 10.1 As was also the case in previous years, an independent scientific study was carried out in Spring 2024, in order to obtain an estimate of migratory influxes of Turtle-dove and Common Quail over the derogation period. The study was carried out by Ecoserv (2024) with the following main objective: *To survey and scientifically monitor the daily influx of the Turtle-dove and Common Quail; to estimate the overall presence (influx) of these two species per day and for the whole study period and to analyse observed and estimated migration trends in conjunction with the trends recorded in past studies, and in conjunction with any hunting data on the species surveyed.* The geographical scope of the study extended across the three inhabited islands of the Maltese archipelago (that is, Malta, Gozo and Comino), with data gathered between 15 March and 15 May 2024. A full copy of the report in question is attached in Annex 4, with key conclusions summarised below.
- 10.2 The methodology used in this study was identical to the methodology used for similar studies conducted in 2011–2023. Twenty-eight monitoring stations were set up across the Maltese Islands, with counts obtained from ten different sites each day. A field assistant capable of identifying the relevant species and an observer responsible to record data were posted to each station, in order to conduct counts of individuals. Each group of ten sites was surveyed once every three days, such that over a three-day period, all 28 sites would have been surveyed. Furthermore, wherever possible, the study site at Comino was included in the ten sites surveyed on any one day, such that this site was surveyed on a daily basis. When weather conditions precluded surveys at the Comino site due to unavailability of sea transport services, these were undertaken at an alternative site (Qala, San Blas or Ramla tal-Bir) instead. Given that the study was mainly intended to quantify the influx of migrating individuals, field sites were located at strategic locations along the coast, which locations would be expected to serve as stop-over points for migrating individuals.
- 10.3 Counts obtained across this network of observation stations over the survey period for the Turtle-dove are given in Table 7 below.

Table 7 - Counts obtained for Turtle-dove across the network of observation stations over the study period.

Date	Total Daily Count
15-Mar-24	0
16-Mar-24	0
17-Mar-24	0
18-Mar-24	1
19-Mar-24	0
20-Mar-24	0
21-Mar-24	0
22-Mar-24	1
23-Mar-24	1
24-Mar-24	1
25-Mar-24	0
26-Mar-24	1
27-Mar-24	3
28-Mar-24	1
29-Mar-24	2
30-Mar-24	1
31-Mar-24	1
01-Apr-24	2
02-Apr-24	0
03-Apr-24	2
04-Apr-24	1
05-Apr-24	2
06-Apr-24	13
07-Apr-24	6
08-Apr-24	4
09-Apr-24	6
10-Apr-24	31
11-Apr-24	14
12-Apr-24	30
13-Apr-24	32
14-Apr-24	15
15-Apr-24	33
16-Apr-24	30
17-Apr-24	5
18-Apr-24	32
19-Apr-24	27
20-Apr-24	11
21-Apr-24	35
22-Apr-24	35
23-Apr-24	17
24-Apr-24	52
25-Apr-24	20
26-Apr-24	33
27-Apr-24	25
28-Apr-24	14
29-Apr-24	17
30-Apr-24	14
01-May-24	5
02-May-24	11
03-May-24	8
04-May-24	6
05-May-24	9
06-May-24	11
07-May-24	12

Date	Total Daily Count
08-May-24	6
09-May-24	4
10-May-24	14
11-May-24	7
12-May-24	6
13-May-24	11
14-May-24	6
15-May-24	0
Total	687

10.4 Daily raw counts for Turtle-dove recorded from the 28 sites during the 2024 study varied between 0 and a maximum of 52, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 5.20. Overall, counts recorded during the present survey show a similar trend to those recorded in previous surveys. The general pattern is of very low counts recorded in March and early April, with marginally higher counts recorded from mid-April to early May. The daily mean counts recorded during the present survey are similar to those recorded in previous years. Occasional peaks were recorded in some years: in 2008, a very high mean count (98, on 15-4-08) and a secondary peak (26, on 20-04-08) were recorded, while a single main peak was recorded in 2009 (33, on 23-04-09) and in 2018 (25, on 19-04-18); no mean counts greater than 20 were recorded in any of the other years, including during the 2024 survey. (Figure 12).

10.5 The grand mean of Turtle Dove counts recorded during the period 15 March to 15 May from the 2024 survey is 1.11; this is appreciably lower than the grand mean of 2.76 recorded over the same period in 2009 but within the range of those recorded in 2019–2023 (0.98–1.40). Comparisons of the grand mean for the period 15 March to 15 May from the 2024 study with that from other previous surveys is not possible since the latter covered much shorter periods. The main period which was covered by most surveys is from 10 to 30 April. Values of the grand mean of Turtle Dove counts recorded during this period (10 to 30 April) from the 2024 survey, together with values of the grand mean for the same period in 2018, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), for the period 14 to 30 April 2015 (Ecoserv, 2015), for the period 10 to 14 April 2017 (Ecoserv, 2017), and for the period 10 to 21 April 2018 (Ecoserv, 2018) are shown in Figure 11. Overall, the grand mean recorded during the 2024 survey during the period 10 to 30 April is similar to that recorded from most surveys held between 2012 and 2023, but lower than that recorded from surveys made in 2008, 2009 and 2018.

Figure 11 - Grand mean of Turtle Dove counts for data from the period 10 to 30 April recorded in spring 2024 and spring 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), together with the grand mean for data from the period 14 to 30 April recorded in spring 2015 (Ecoserv, 2015), from the period 10 to 14 April recorded in spring 2017 (Ecoserv, 2017), and from the period 10 to 21 April recorded in spring 2018 (Ecoserv, 2018).

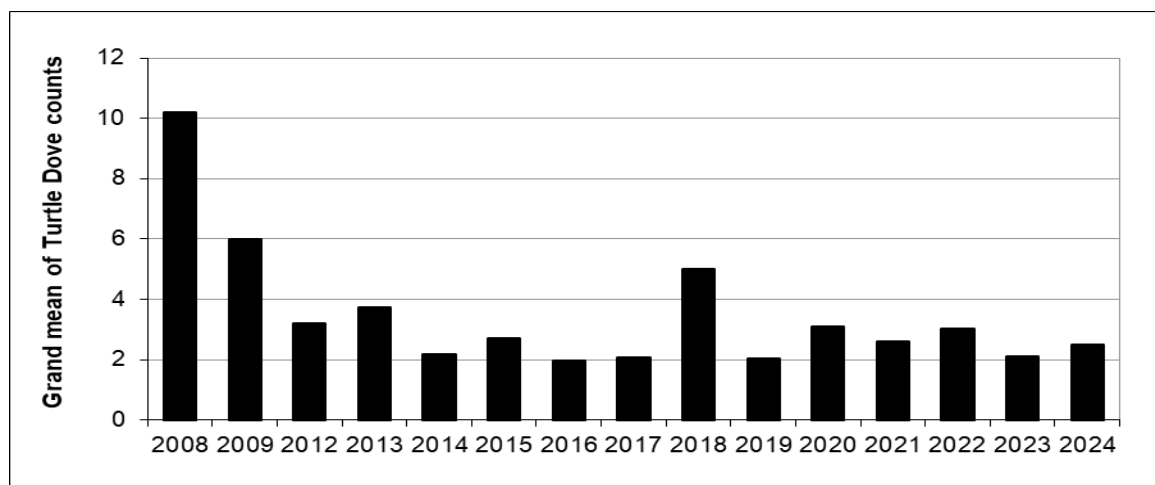
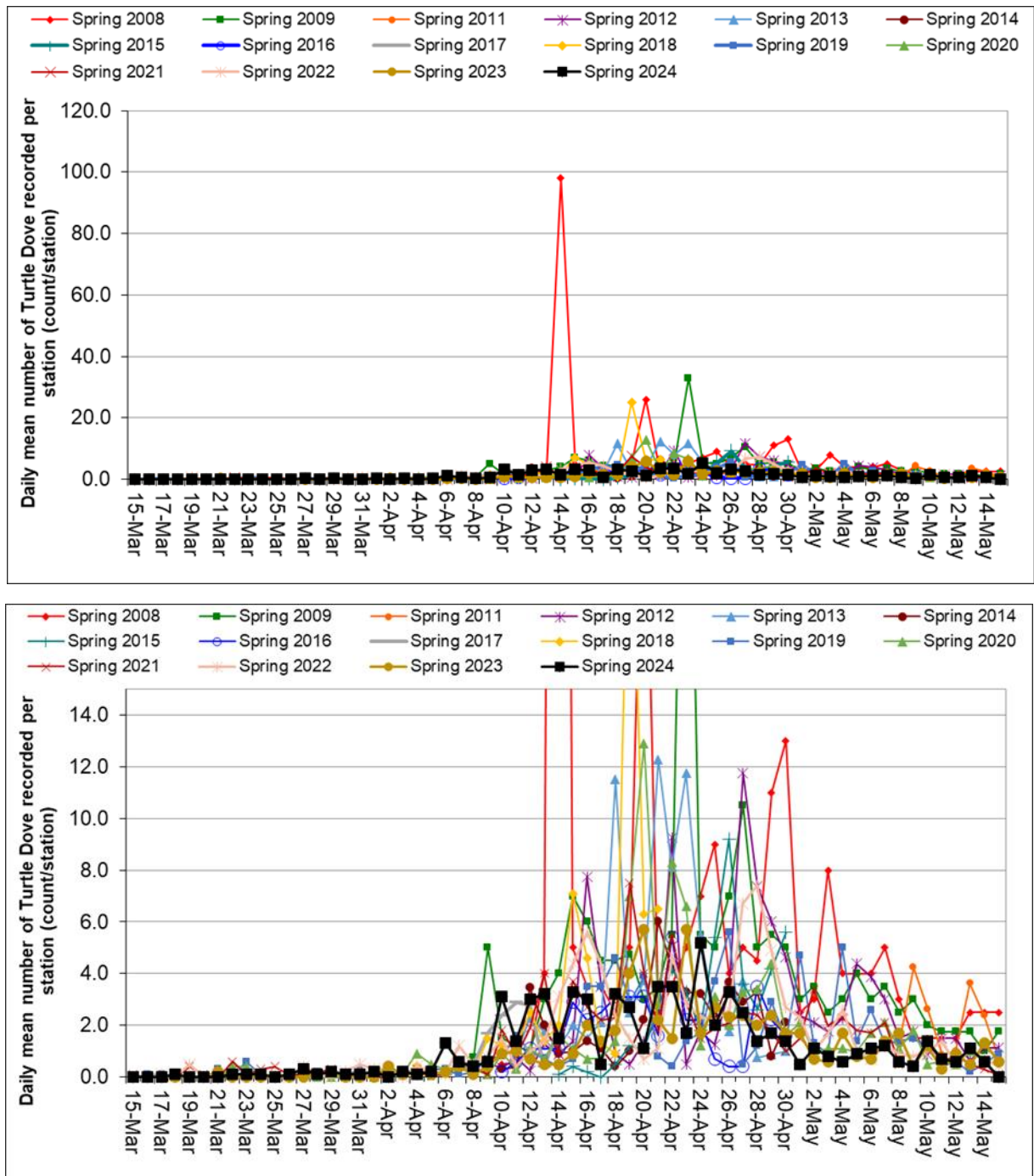


Figure 12 - Daily mean counts of Turtle Dove per station (= site) recorded during the spring 2024 survey held between 15 March and 15 May, together with values of the same statistic for spring 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).

Top: graph showing all values including peak counts >20 individuals recorded in 2008, 2009 and 2018;

Bottom: graph showing all values except the peak counts >20 individuals recorded in 2008, 2009 and 2018.



10.6 An estimate of the total influx of Turtle Dove over the Maltese Islands was made using the daily counts recorded from the 2024 survey. Extrapolations were then made to obtain the approximate total number of individuals of this species that are envisaged to have migrated over the Maltese Islands on a particular date. However, as emphasised in reports of surveys from previous years made in spring (Ecoserv, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), such an estimate must be treated with utmost caution, given the relatively small number of sites used on any one day and that the counts were not made daily at each site. Furthermore, passage of birds at different localities is extremely variable, with potential large differences in birds passing at two different sites, even if these are separated by a small distance.

As already stated in the introduction section above, the other limiting factor is that the field survey stops at 14:00 and does not start again before 07:00 of the following morning, hence potentially missing birds arriving late in the afternoon and early evening, as well as those arriving during the night, which may have not been recorded by the field observers during the survey.

- 10.7 On the other hand, the estimate given in the 2024 report is useful when making comparisons between different years, assuming data from surveys based on a similar design are available to assess whether the trend in influx is increasing or decreasing with time. Since the coastal length surveyed at each site during the present survey is approximately 0.5 km, the total influx of migrating Turtle Dove for the three-week study period was estimated by extrapolating the values obtained to the total coastline length for the Maltese Islands, which have a perimeter of 271.22 km (Mallia et al, 2002). Based on the mean daily counts, extrapolation translates to an estimated daily influx ranging between 0 and 2,821 individuals, with a total influx over the survey period (15 March to 15 May 2024; i.e. 62 days) of 37,260 individuals, i.e. some 601 birds per day.

Table 8 - Estimated total influx of Turtle-dove during 2024 study period.

Date	Estimated Total Daily Influx
15-Mar-24	0
16-Mar-24	0
17-Mar-24	0
18-Mar-24	54
19-Mar-24	0
20-Mar-24	0
21-Mar-24	0
22-Mar-24	54
23-Mar-24	54
24-Mar-24	54
25-Mar-24	0
26-Mar-24	54
27-Mar-24	163
28-Mar-24	54
29-Mar-24	108
30-Mar-24	54
31-Mar-24	54
01-Apr-24	108
02-Apr-24	0
03-Apr-24	108
04-Apr-24	54
05-Apr-24	108
06-Apr-24	705
07-Apr-24	325
08-Apr-24	217
09-Apr-24	325
10-Apr-24	1682
11-Apr-24	759
12-Apr-24	1627
13-Apr-24	1736
14-Apr-24	814
15-Apr-24	1790
16-Apr-24	1627
17-Apr-24	271
18-Apr-24	1736
19-Apr-24	1465
20-Apr-24	597
21-Apr-24	1899
22-Apr-24	1899

Date	Estimated Total Daily Influx
23-Apr-24	922
24-Apr-24	2821
25-Apr-24	1085
26-Apr-24	1790
27-Apr-24	1356
28-Apr-24	759
29-Apr-24	922
30-Apr-24	759
01-May-24	271
02-May-24	597
03-May-24	434
04-May-24	325
05-May-24	488
06-May-24	597
07-May-24	651
08-May-24	325
09-May-24	217
10-May-24	759
11-May-24	380
12-May-24	325
13-May-24	597
14-May-24	325
15-May-24	0
Total	37,260

10.8 Counts for Common Quail obtained across the twenty-eight monitoring stations set up across the Maltese Islands as described in section 10.2 are given in Table 9 below.

Table 9 - Counts obtained for Common Quail across the network of observation stations over the study period.

Date	Total Daily Count
15-Mar-24	0
16-Mar-24	1
17-Mar-24	4
18-Mar-24	0
19-Mar-24	4
20-Mar-24	3
21-Mar-24	1
22-Mar-24	3
23-Mar-24	4
24-Mar-24	4
25-Mar-24	9
26-Mar-24	3
27-Mar-24	2
28-Mar-24	0
29-Mar-24	2
30-Mar-24	3
31-Mar-24	9
01-Apr-24	7
02-Apr-24	9
03-Apr-24	2
04-Apr-24	1

Date	Total Daily Count
05-Apr-24	7
06-Apr-24	1
07-Apr-24	5
08-Apr-24	11
09-Apr-24	3
10-Apr-24	9
11-Apr-24	8
12-Apr-24	5
13-Apr-24	3
14-Apr-24	7
15-Apr-24	3
16-Apr-24	2
17-Apr-24	1
18-Apr-24	17
19-Apr-24	6
20-Apr-24	2
21-Apr-24	4
22-Apr-24	1
23-Apr-24	0
24-Apr-24	3
25-Apr-24	4
26-Apr-24	2
27-Apr-24	7
28-Apr-24	2
29-Apr-24	6
30-Apr-24	4
01-May-24	1
02-May-24	2
03-May-24	2
04-May-24	0
05-May-24	2
06-May-24	1
07-May-24	2
08-May-24	0
09-May-24	0
10-May-24	1
11-May-24	0
12-May-24	2
13-May-24	1
14-May-24	1
15-May-24	0
Total	209

10.9 Daily raw counts for Common Quail recorded from the 28 sites during the present study varied between 0 and a maximum of 17, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 1.70. Overall, counts recorded during the 2024 study remained low during the entire survey period, but were slightly higher in April and lowest in May. The general pattern observed in previous surveys is of low migratory counts in mid-March, which start to increase in late March, with the highest

counts usually recorded in mid to end April, and a subsequent decline in counts during May. The daily mean counts recorded during the 2024 survey are overall slightly lower than those in 2008 and 2009 (Thomaidis, nd) and similar to those in 2011–2023 (Ecoserv 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023). Minor peaks of around 2.0–3.0 were recorded in spring 2008, 2009, 2012 and 2020, while no mean counts greater than 2.0 were recorded in any of the other years, including in the 2024 survey.

10.10 The grand mean of Common Quail counts recorded during the period 15 March to 15 May from the 2024 survey is 0.34, which is lower than the grand mean of 0.74 recorded over the same period in 2009, but within the range of those recorded in 2019–2023 (0.19–0.40). Comparisons of the grand mean for the period 15 March to 15 May with other previous surveys is not possible since these covered much shorter periods. The main period which was covered by most surveys is from 10 to 30 April. Values of the grand mean of Common Quail counts recorded during this period (10 to 30 April) from the 2024 survey, together with values of the grand mean for the same period in 2018, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), for the period 14 to 30 April 2015 (Ecoserv, 2015), for the period 10 to 14 April 2017 (Ecoserv, 2017), and for the period 10 to 21 April 2018 (Ecoserv, 2018) are shown in Figure 13. Overall, the grand mean recorded during the 2024 survey for the period 10 to 30 April is similar to that recorded during the 2013–2023 surveys, but lower than that recorded in 2008, 2009 and 2012.

Figure 13 - Grand mean of Common Quail counts for data from the period 10 to 30 April recorded in spring 2024 and spring 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), together with the grand mean for data from the period 14 to 30 April recorded in spring 2015 (Ecoserv, 2015), from the period 10 to 14 April recorded in spring 2017 (Ecoserv, 2017), and from the period 10 to 21 April recorded in spring 2018 (Ecoserv, 2018).

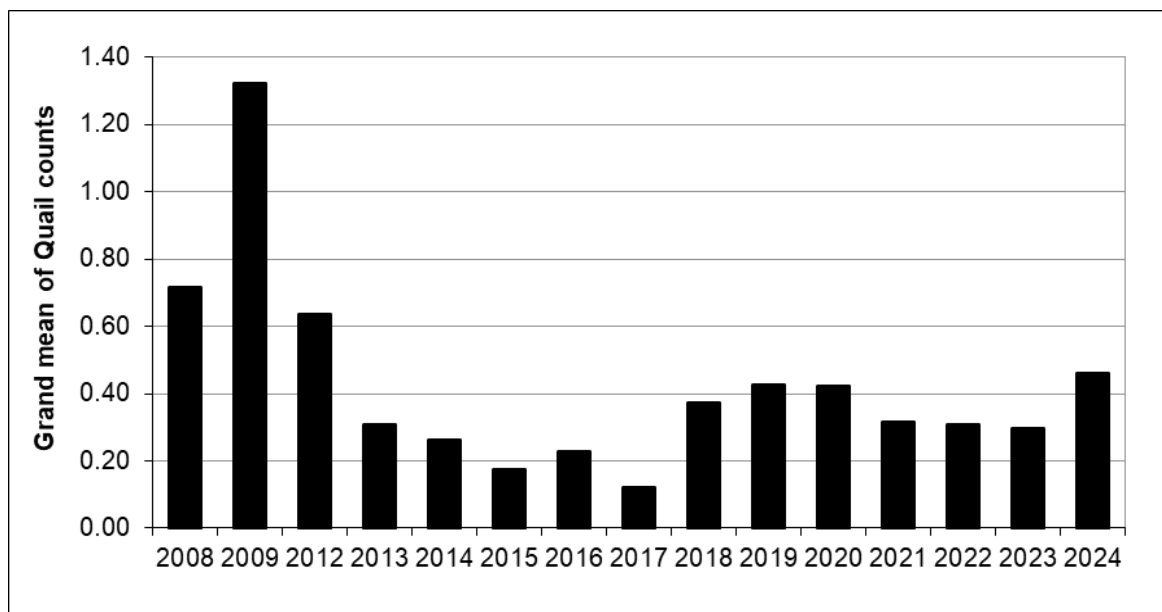
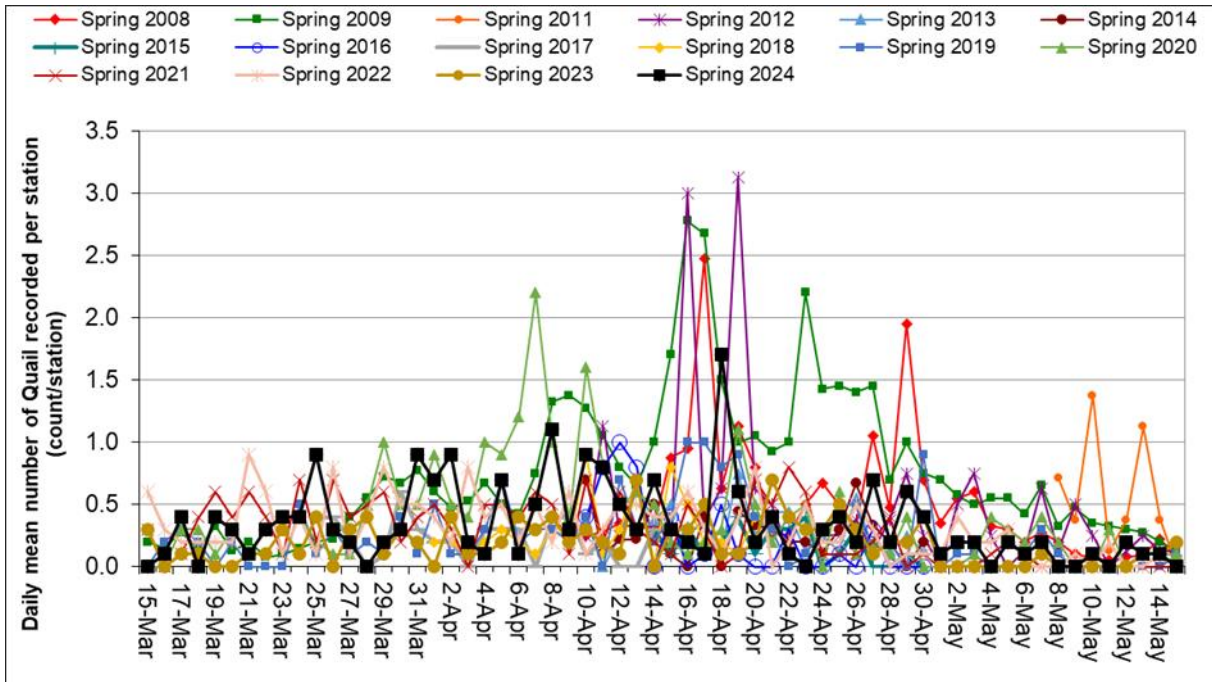


Figure 14 - Daily mean counts of Common Quail per station (= site) recorded during the spring 2024 survey held between 15 March and 15 May, together with values of the same statistic for spring 2008, 2009 (Thomaidis, nd), 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2024 (Ecoserv, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).



10.11 The total influx of Common Quail was estimated for the whole area of the Maltese Islands using the recorded area surveyed for Quail at each site. However, such an estimate requires the following assumptions: (i) the rate of Quail settling at coastal sites (where the survey was carried out) is equal to that at inland locations, and (ii) the total area used to estimate the migration count does not include areas where settlement of Quail cannot occur in practice. Since Quail tend to migrate to inland sites, settling of Quail in coastal areas will likely be less than or equal to that in inland regions, but not greater, meaning that the estimated total may be an underestimate. The use of only coastal sites is still justified since these are more likely to serve as short-term stopover sites immediately following a migratory flight than inland locations; thus, including inland locations may result in an overestimation of the total influx due to repeated counting of resident Quails.

10.12 To ensure that the total area used to estimate the migration count does not include regions within which Quail do not normally settle, even though some birds may fly over urbanized areas, the total area was calculated as the sum of agricultural areas (161.5 km²), forested areas (2.1 km²) and areas of natural vegetation (57.8 km²); this amounts to 221.4 km², representing 72% of the 315 km² total area of the Maltese Islands (land cover data source: MEPA, 2010). The mean (\pm SD) daily counts and estimated total influx of birds per day are shown in Table 10. Based on these data, extrapolation translates to a total influx of Common Quail during 15 March to 15 May 2024 of 173,016 individuals, or some 2,791 Quail per day. However, as emphasised in the reports of previous surveys (Ecoserv, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), such an estimate must be treated with utmost caution, given the relatively small number of field sites used on any one day and that counts were not made daily at each site, such that only a very small portion of the total area of potential habitat in the Maltese Islands was sampled.

Table 10 - Estimated total influx of Common Quail in 2024 study period.

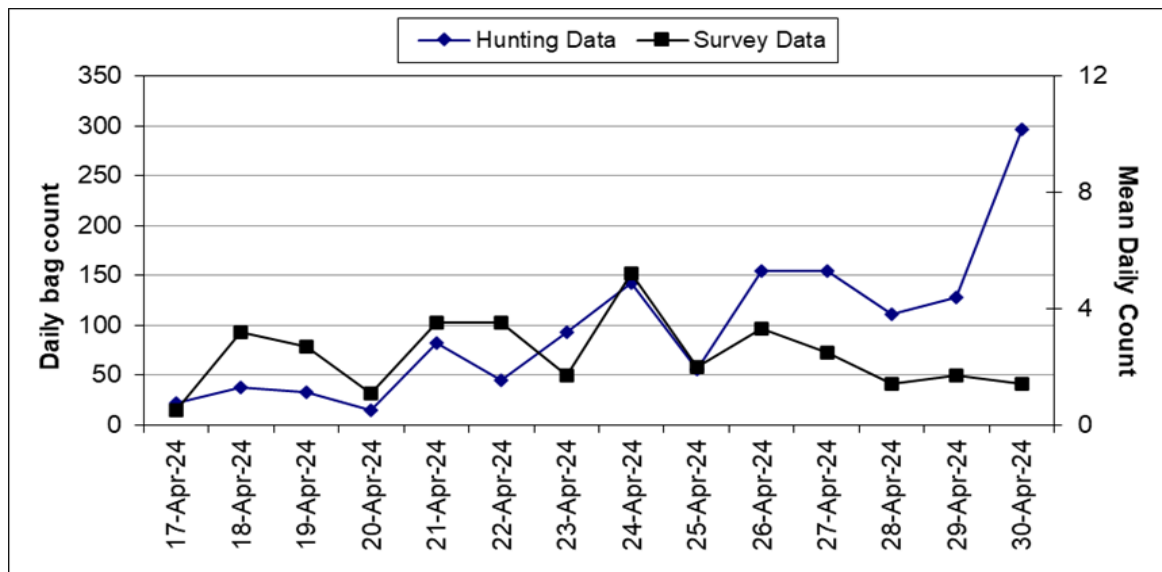
Date	Estimated Daily Influx
15-Mar-24	0
16-Mar-24	693
17-Mar-24	3223
18-Mar-24	0
19-Mar-24	2773
20-Mar-24	2410
21-Mar-24	969
22-Mar-24	2080
23-Mar-24	3213
24-Mar-24	4043
25-Mar-24	6239
26-Mar-24	2417
27-Mar-24	2013
28-Mar-24	0
29-Mar-24	1612
30-Mar-24	3032
31-Mar-24	6256
01-Apr-24	5453
02-Apr-24	9060
03-Apr-24	1386
04-Apr-24	806
05-Apr-24	7046
06-Apr-24	693
07-Apr-24	4029
08-Apr-24	11073
09-Apr-24	2085
10-Apr-24	7229
11-Apr-24	8085
12-Apr-24	3475
13-Apr-24	2426
14-Apr-24	7075
15-Apr-24	2085
16-Apr-24	1612
17-Apr-24	1011
18-Apr-24	11784
19-Apr-24	4835
20-Apr-24	2021
21-Apr-24	2780
22-Apr-24	803
23-Apr-24	0
24-Apr-24	2080
25-Apr-24	3213
26-Apr-24	2013
27-Apr-24	4881
28-Apr-24	1612
29-Apr-24	6064

Date	Estimated Daily Influx
30-Apr-24	2789
01-May-24	809
02-May-24	2013
03-May-24	13860
04-May-24	0
05-May-24	2021
06-May-24	695
07-May-24	1606
08-May-24	0
09-May-24	0
10-May-24	803
11-May-24	0
12-May-24	1390
13-May-24	809
14-May-24	1007
15-May-24	0
Total	173,016

11. Comparison between migration study data and game reporting data

- 11.1 A comparative analysis of data from the monitoring study with bag data was undertaken. The bag dataset comprises the daily bag count of Turtle-dove (as reported by hunters through a telephone reporting system and the Game Reporting MT app) for the period 17 to 30 April 2024, and the daily bag count of Common Quail (as reported by hunters through a telephone reporting system and the Game Reporting MT app) for the period 10 to 30 April 2024. It should be noted that the two sets of data were collected for different purposes and using very different methodologies; therefore, the magnitudes of values are not directly comparable. However, the temporal trends can be expected to follow similar patterns; that is, within the same season the periods when higher mean daily counts were recorded during the monitoring survey should broadly follow the days when higher numbers of Turtle-dove or Common Quail were caught (and reported in the bag data). Graphical representations of the mean or total daily counts made during the 2024 survey and the daily bag counts for the same period (10 to 30 April 2024 or 17 to 30 April 2024) for Turtle-dove and Common Quail were compared.
- 11.2 The daily bag counts indicating the number of Turtle-dove caught during the 2024 spring hunting season made during the 2024 survey are shown in Figure 15. As already noted, the magnitudes of the bag counts and those of the total counts made in the 2024 survey are not directly comparable; hence the two sets of values are on different scales. Therefore, in Figure 15, two separate y-axes are used: the bag count data is plotted on the left-side y-axis, whereas the counts from the 2024 survey are plotted on the right-side y-axis.
- 11.3 Overall, the general trend of daily counts made during the 2024 survey is of relatively similar counts between 17 and 30 April, with no appreciable peaks. The bag count data includes a similar trend of relatively similar counts between 17 and 29 April, with an appreciable increase in bag counts during the last day of the spring hunting season (30 April), when the reported bag count was more than twice that recorded on most of the other days. Therefore, overall, there was a similar temporal trend of only small day to day variation in both the daily counts made during the present survey and the bag count data, but the latter showed a significant peak in counts made on 30 April, whereas no such increase in daily counts made on 30 April was recorded during the 2024 survey.

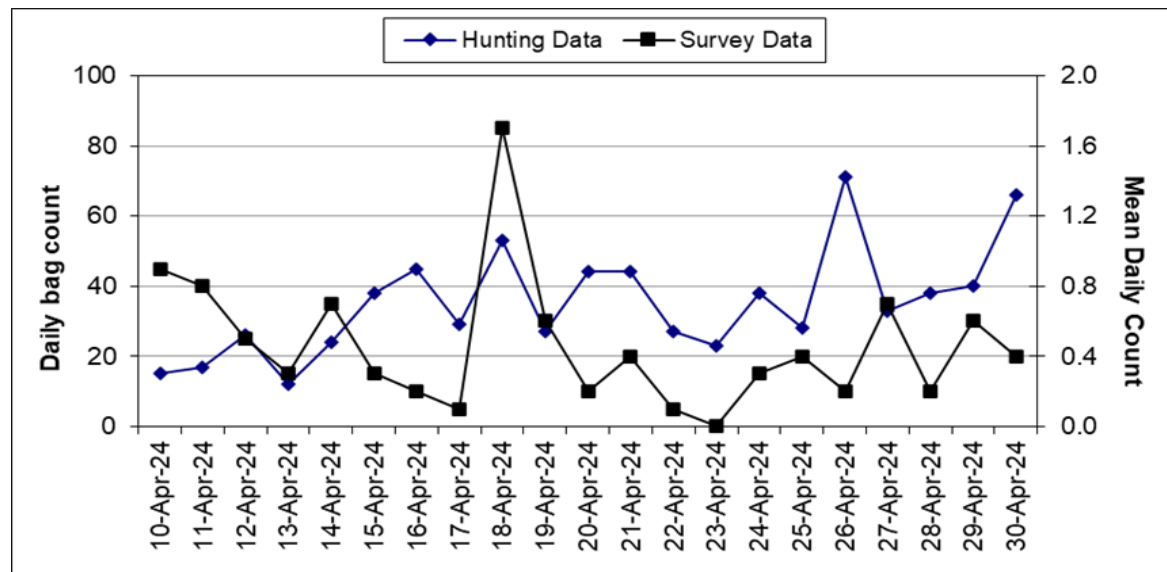
Figure 15 - Daily bag count of Turtle Dove during 2024 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2024 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 17–30 April 2024.



11.4 The daily bag counts indicating the number of Common Quail caught during the 2024 spring hunting season are shown in Figure 16. As already noted, the magnitudes of the bag counts and those of the mean/total counts made in the 2024 survey are not directly comparable; hence the two sets of values are on different scales. Therefore, in Figure 16 two separate y-axes are used: the bag count data is plotted on the left-side y-axis, whereas the counts from the 2024 survey are plotted on the right-side y-axis.

11.5 The daily counts made during the 2024 survey include day-to-day fluctuations, but the overall pattern is of similar counts recorded throughout the period 10–30 April with marginally higher counts on 18 April. No overall trend of increase or decrease in daily survey counts is discernible over most of the survey period. The bag count data also included an overall pattern of similar counts recorded throughout the period 10–30 April, with marginally higher counts on 26 and 30 April. Therefore, overall, there was a trend of similar counts between 10 and 30 April in both the daily counts made during the 2024 survey and the bag count data, with marginally higher counts recorded on some days.

Figure 16 - Daily bag count of Common Quail during 2024 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2024 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 10–30 April 2024.



12. Enforcement

12.1 The Maltese authorities sought to maintain the level of enforcement effort deployed during previous spring hunting seasons. The Framework Regulations stipulate that a minimum of seven (7) enforcement officers for every 1,000 licensed hunters are required to be deployed during hunting hours. A total of 7,980 hunters (6,651 in Malta and 1,329 in Gozo) were issued with a spring hunting licence in 2024 and therefore a minimum of 56 enforcement personnel were needed in accordance with national legislation to supervise the derogation period (in the region of 47 officers in Malta and 9 in Gozo). Out of the total special licences issued, a total of 109 special licences remained uncollected (83 in Malta and 26 in Gozo), thus 7,871 individuals were in possession of a special licence.

12.2 Field surveillance and patrols were deployed from within the Environment Protection Unit (EPU) of the Malta Police Force with additional support from the 11 district police areas and from the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), the Compliance Team of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit and Environmental Rangers from Ambjent Malta.

12.3 Prior to commencement of the season, enforcement officers received specialised training delivered by officials of the Compliance Section of the Wild Birds Regulation. Six training sessions were held: two in Malta and four in Gozo. Officers who attended the training sessions as well as all officers participating in enforcement received detailed information through digital platforms, namely:

- The legal framework concerning the conservation of wild birds;
- Legal requirements pertaining to the spring hunting season;
- Monitoring and surveillance techniques and approaches;
- Basic species identification skills;
- Inspections;
- Hotspots and areas requiring particular attention; and
- Potential law enforcement evasion techniques deployed by poachers.

12.4 The objectives of training and enforcement operations are:

- To ensure continuous deployment presence in the countryside to deter any potential abuse from occurring in the first place;

- To ensure that no illegal targeting of species other than Quail and Turtle-dove occurs, and that any detected incidents of abuse are dealt with swiftly and effectively (that is, apprehension of suspects and gathering sufficient field evidence to enable prosecution);
- To ensure that the general prohibitions and parameters related to the open season are enforced (such as: no hunting in prohibited areas; outside permitted hours; using prohibited means like bird callers; semi-automatic or automatic weapons with a magazine capable of holding more than two rounds of ammunition; hunting without a valid spring hunting licence); and
- To ensure that specific regulations applicable to the spring hunting derogation are enforced (such as the game reporting obligation).

12.5 Specialised training sessions have been organised over the past years and enforcement statistics show that this training is demonstrating significant added value in terms of efficiency in enforcement action. Enforcement officers have also gained field experience which enables them to identify areas which require surveillance during particular days due to prevailing winds which affect migration and are also aware of the areas commonly frequented by hunters thus enabling targeted enforcement action.

12.6 As was also the case in previous years, the enforcement operation throughout the season deployed a mix of the following approaches and techniques:

- a) **Vehicular patrols** by EPU, AFM and WBRU to ensure regular coverage of the entire Maltese countryside, with an emphasis on priority surveillance areas and hunting grounds;
- b) **Foot patrols** by uniformed officers (both the AFM and EPU) within particular locations, especially those areas with difficult vehicular access. WBRU officers also accompanied uniformed officers during some of the foot patrols;
- c) **Stationary observation posts** manned by **uniformed** and **plain-clothed** personnel, including WBRU officers. Stationary observation posts were located at vantage points within priority surveillance areas and hunting grounds;
- d) **Systematic spot-checks on individual licensees and roadblocks** at strategic vehicular entry and exit points by Police. The objective of spot-checks is two-fold: (1) to detect the possession of illegally shot protected birds or other illegal material and (2) to enforce bag limit and real-time reporting requirements; and
- e) Deployment of **covert surveillance** backed up by mobile units especially in response to large influxes of protected birds or to ensure sufficient surveillance of particular hotspots known for targeting of protected birds.

12.7 The Maltese authorities paid particular attention to collaboration with the numerous NGO volunteers who were present in the countryside during the season. These volunteers aided the overall enforcement effort by:

- Acting as a deterrent to illegal hunting by virtue of their presence in the countryside;
- Submitting vital day-to-day information about the presence of birds and alerting the authorities to the presence of high risk species or high risk sites such as roosting sites;
- Acting as ocular witnesses to illegal hunting incidents, and reporting such incidents to the authorities;
- Gathering of video/photographic evidence of poaching and making available such evidence to the enforcement authorities.

12.8 During the season, WBRU's Customer Care Branch received a number of calls from hunters wishing to report suspected or alleged irregular activity noticed directly by themselves. All telephonic reports were immediately passed on to enforcement personnel to ensure swift action against crime.

12.9 During inspections, police forces were responsible for ensuring the lawful operation of hunting practices. Police officers were, *inter alia*, instructed to:

- Verify that hunters were in possession of all the required documents;
- Verify that Quail and Turtle-doves caught were being immediately reported in accordance with regulations;
- Ensure compliance with the provisions of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations, the Framework Regulations and the Regulations opening the spring 2024 season (L.N. 85 of 2024 and L.N. 89 of 2024);
- Ensure that no species other than Quail and Turtle-dove, were being targeted;
- Ensure compliance with bag limits and time restrictions.

12.10 During the derogation period, between 10 April and 30 April 2024, there was a daily average of 44 police officers deployed in Malta and a daily average of 13 police officers in Gozo deployed during morning shift⁶. Between 10 April and 30 April 2024 after 12pm, there was a daily average of 16 police officers deployed in Malta and a daily average of 4 police officers deployed in Gozo. Any reports received past these shifts (i.e., at night), are attended by District Police, Rapid Intervention Unit or Mobile Squad as necessary.

12.11 In addition to the above complement, throughout the spring hunting season the Wild Birds Regulation Unit deployed three compliance officers with daily deployment consisting of two teams patrolling the countryside from 6:00am till 12:30pm. WBRU officers were tasked with vehicular patrols, foot patrols within public footpaths, stationary observations and surveillance from vantage points. Moreover, 16 Environmental Rangers (Ambjent Malta) conducted patrols in terrestrial Natura 2000 Sites, other protected and scheduled areas, and public rural areas. These uniformed officers are tasked with monitoring and taking action against different types of environmental crime and also act as deterrent against illegal activities relating to hunting. These officers also report all crime detected directly to the EPU.

12.12 In addition to enforcement deployment by the authorities, 28 hunting marshals were deployed by the Federation for Hunting and Conservation – Malta (FKNK) to assist the authorities in surveillance, whilst Kaċċaturi San Ubertu (KSU) deployed 20 observers to assist the authorities in the detection and reporting of any observed illegalities. Furthermore, various volunteers from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) and BirdLife Malta maintained a close watch for irregularities throughout the season. These officers also report all crime detected directly to the Police Force.

12.13 During the derogation period, between 10 April and 30 April 2024, when the season was open, field officers from the Environment Protection Unit and Gozo Police carried out 848 field inspections / patrols (574 in Malta and 274 in Gozo). In addition, these officers conducted 605 spot-checks on individual hunters (450 in Malta and 155 in Gozo).

12.14 This enforcement effort cumulatively amounts to **1,453**⁷ inspections and spot-checks during the open season (10 April till 30 April 2024). Although the number of inspections and spot-checks during this season may, at face value, appear to be less than that of the previous year (2023), as shown in figure 17, it is important to note that this enforcement effort does not include efforts of District police, Rapid Intervention Unit or Mobile Squad carried out past EPU / Gozo police shifts⁸, enforcement efforts carried out by Ambjent Malta's Environmental Rangers⁹ or hunting marshals deployed by NGOs. Moreover, the enforcement effort in 2024 (i.e., the total number of

⁶ In Malta, enforcement officers operated on a two-shift basis: 0500 – 1330 and 1330 – 2130, whilst in Gozo, shift roster followed different pattern: number of officers varied between 0500–0700, 0700–1800 and 1800–2000 periods

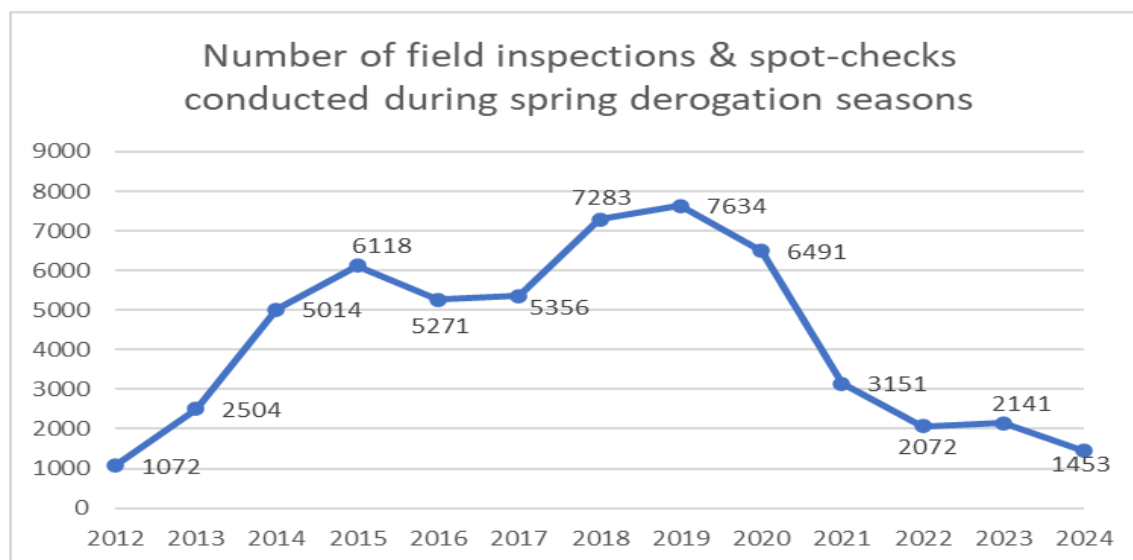
⁷ 848 field inspections / patrols, 605 spot-checks on individual hunters.

⁸ In Malta, enforcement officers operated on a two-shift basis: 0500 – 1330 and 1330 – 2130, whilst in Gozo, shift roster followed different pattern: number of officers varied between 0500–0700, 0700–1800 and 1800–2000 periods.

⁹ Environmental Rangers work from Monday to Friday between 0630 – 1530 and on day-in-day-out shifts from 0630 – 1830.

field inspections and spot-checks) cannot be seen in isolation as it is relative to the hunting effort (i.e., number of active hunters on any given day). The maximum number of hunters active on any given day during the 2024 spring hunting season was 720 (refer to section 8). This equates to 217 less active hunters than the maximum number of hunters active on any given day during the previous (2023) spring hunting season. In terms of ratios, the enforcement effort in spring 2024 was on par with that of 2023, that is, two spot-checks for every hunter when the total number of hunters out in the field was highest.

Figure 17 - Comparison of number of field inspections and spot-checks performed during the spring hunting seasons over the past years.



- 12.15 Following the closure of the spring hunting season, the statutory enforcement deployment was maintained until Wednesday 8 May with a minimum of three officers per 1,000 licences in line with Regulation 6(4) of the Framework Regulations. Between the 1 May and 8 May, police carried out 37 field inspections / patrols (8 in Malta and 29 in Gozo).
- 12.16 In the course of these inspections and spot-checks, officers disclosed a total of 17 offences (15 in Malta and 2 in Gozo). These consist of 15 hunting offences which led to the issuing of 5 administrative fines and eight court actions, and two trapping offences, one of which led to court action. In total, legal action has been taken against 14 persons, 13 for hunting offences and one for trapping offences. No further action could be taken on the remaining cases (3 hunting, and 1 trapping) due to lack of information on the possible culprits which renders futile any attempt to press charges and secure a conviction.
- 12.17 All five administrative fines were issued to hunters in possession of a spring hunting special licence. Thus, this shows that 0.06% of the total number of persons with an active spring hunting special licence (7,871 licences) breached their special licence conditions and were fined administratively. These fines are in the process of being settled at WBRU office.
- 12.18 Court action has been initiated against eight individuals holding a spring hunting special licence. This shows that 0.1% of the total number of persons with an active spring hunting special licence (7,871 licences) have breached their special licence conditions and will be charged in Court. Court action is ongoing.
- 12.19 Enforcement data shows that between administrative fines and court action, 13 known persons have breached their special licence conditions which translates to 0.17% of all active spring hunting special licences (7,871 licences).
- 12.20 Statistics pertaining to daily enforcement deployment, daily number of field inspections and spot-checks conducted and nature of the offences detected are summarised in Table 11.

Table 11 - Enforcement deployment and offences detected during 2024 spring hunting season.

Date	Number of officers deployed 0500-1500 (EPU / District / AFM)		Number of officers deployed 1500-2100 (EPU / District / AFM)		Number of field inspections conducted (visits to specific areas)		Number of spot-checks on individual hunters ¹⁰		Offences detected (number of cases and nature of offence)		Number of persons charged and action taken	
	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo
10/04/2024	45	9	14	3	31	4	21	12	0	0	0	0
11/04/2024	43	13	17	4	30	5	19	6	0	0	0	0
12/04/2024	40	13	18	3	30	4	26	5	1 Hunting during closed season ¹¹	0	1 Court action	0
13/04/2024	46	13	14	4	30	14	25	5	0	0	0	0
14/04/2024	45	14	16	4	36	16	33	5	0	0	0	0
15/04/2024	44	15	17	4	35	15	20	7	1 Hunting during closed season ¹²	0	1 Court action	0
16/04/2024	43	12	17	4	33	15	31	2	0	0	0	0
17/04/2024	44	13	16	4	22	22	17	3	1 Illegal shooting of protected birds ¹³	0	1 Court action	0
18/04/2024	43	10	18	4	25	8	14	10	0	0	0	0
19/04/2024	45	15	20	2	22	13	18	9	2 Illegal trapping ¹⁴	0	1 Court action	0
20/04/2024	45	16	18	4	16	13	14	11	1 Hunting within prohibited distances ¹⁵	1 Use of illegal means ¹⁶	1 Administrative fine	0
21/04/2024	43	16	18	2	21	15	16	8	1 Use of illegal means ¹⁷ 1 Illegal shooting of protected birds ¹⁸	0	1 Administrative fine 1 Court action	0
22/04/2024	44	12	17	4	29	15	21	10	1 Hunting without a licence ¹⁹	0	1 Court action	0
23/04/2024	46	12	16	4	35	6	22	11	2 Hunting within prohibited distances ²⁰	0	1 Administrative fine 1 Court action	0
24/04/2024	43	11	18	3	33	16	30	8	1 Failure to report birds caught ²¹	0	1 Administrative fine	0
25/04/2024	43	9	16	4	23	16	21	4	0	0	0	0
26/04/2024	44	15	17	5	22	11	21	6	1 Hunting within a bird sanctuary ²²	0	1 Court action	0
27/04/2024	43	13	13	4	20	7	15	11	1 Use of illegal means ²³	0	1 Administrative fine	0

¹⁰ Including road checks.

¹¹ Case refers to an individual caught hunting after permitted hours, i.e. at 16:40pm in Marsaxlokk. Police seized all hunting equipment and special licence and issued charges against the individual.

¹² Case refers to an individual caught hunting using two Turtle-dove decoys before the opening of the season for the species. Police seized the live decoys and special licence and issued charges against the individual.

¹³ Case refers to an individual caught hunting after permitted hours in Marsaxlokk. Police seized all hunting equipment, special licence, and an illegally shot Marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), and issued charges against the individual.

¹⁴ First case refers to an individual caught illegally trapping for finches in Fawwara l/o Siggiewi during closed season. Police seized all trapping equipment as well as the live bird decoys found on site and issued charges against the individual. The second case refers to an active trapping site found in St. Paul's Bay. No further legal action could be taken because the culprit remains unknown to the Police.

¹⁵ Case refers to an individual who was found hunting while within 200m from an inhabited area (155m) in Żonqor Point, Marsaskala. The hunter was issued with an administrative fine of €250.

¹⁶ Case refers to the discovery of an unattended bird caller. No further legal action could be taken because the culprit remains unknown to the Police.

¹⁷ Case refers to an individual caught using pre-recorded bird calls in Fawwara, l/o Siggiewi. Police seized the bird caller and the hunter was issued with an administrative fine of €250.

¹⁸ Case refers to an individual caught with an illegally shot Eurasian Collared dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) in Żonqor, l/o Marsaskala. Police seized all hunting equipment, special licence and the illegally shot bird and issued charges against the individual.

¹⁹ Case refers to an individual who was caught hunting without a general licence, with firearm irregularities, and an illegally shot European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*). Police seized all hunting equipment and the illegally shot bird and issued charges against the individual.

²⁰ Case refers to two individuals who were caught hunting within 200m from an inhabited area (157m and 104m in Kalkara respectively). The first individual was issued with an administrative fine of €250 whilst the second individual was issued charges in line with Schedule VIII of Regulation 27A.

²¹ Case refers to an individual who failed to declare a hunted European Turtle-dove in Tas-Silg, l/o Marsaxlokk. The hunter was issued with an administrative fine of €50.

²² Case refers to an individual who was found hunting within Ghadira Nature Reserve. Police seized all hunting equipment and special licence and issues charges against the individual.

²³ Case refers to an individual who was caught using pre-recorded bird calls in Haż-Żebbuġ. Police seized the bird caller and the hunter was issued with an administrative fine of €250.

Date	Number of officers deployed 0500-1500 (EPU / District / AFM)		Number of officers deployed 1500-2100 (EPU / District / AFM)		Number of field inspections conducted (visits to specific areas)		Number of spot-checks on individual hunters ¹⁰		Offences detected (number of cases and nature of offence)		Number of persons charged and action taken	
	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo	Malta	Gozo
28/04/2024	45	15	14	3	18	21	21	10	1 Firearm irregularity ²⁴	0	1 Court action	0
29/04/2024	45	11	13	3	23	2	25	9	0	0	0	0
30/04/2024	43	8	17	4	30	2	20	3	0	0	0	0
CLOSED SEASON												
01/05/2024	6	4	4	4	0	1	0	0	0	1 Use of illegal means ²⁵	0	0
02/05/2024	4	2	2	4	3	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
03/05/2024	6	4	2	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
04/05/2024	6	4	3	2	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
05/05/2024	6	4	4	2	3	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
06/05/2024	3	4	1	4	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
07/05/2024	7	4	2	4	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
08/05/2024	8	2	4	4	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total					574²⁶	274²⁷	450²⁸	155²⁹	15	2	14	0
					848³⁰		605³¹		17		14	

²⁴ Case refers to an individual caught leaving a firearm unattended with a minor in Ghaxaq. Police seized all hunting equipment and the special licence, and issued charges against the individual.

²⁵ Case refers to the discovery of decoys of Turtle-dove set up in a field after the closure of hunting season. No further legal action could be taken because the culprit remains unknown to the Police.

²⁶ 564 during open season and 10 during closed season.

²⁷ 240 during open season and 34 during closed season.

²⁸ All during open season.

²⁹ All during open season.

³⁰ 804 during open season and 44 during closed season.

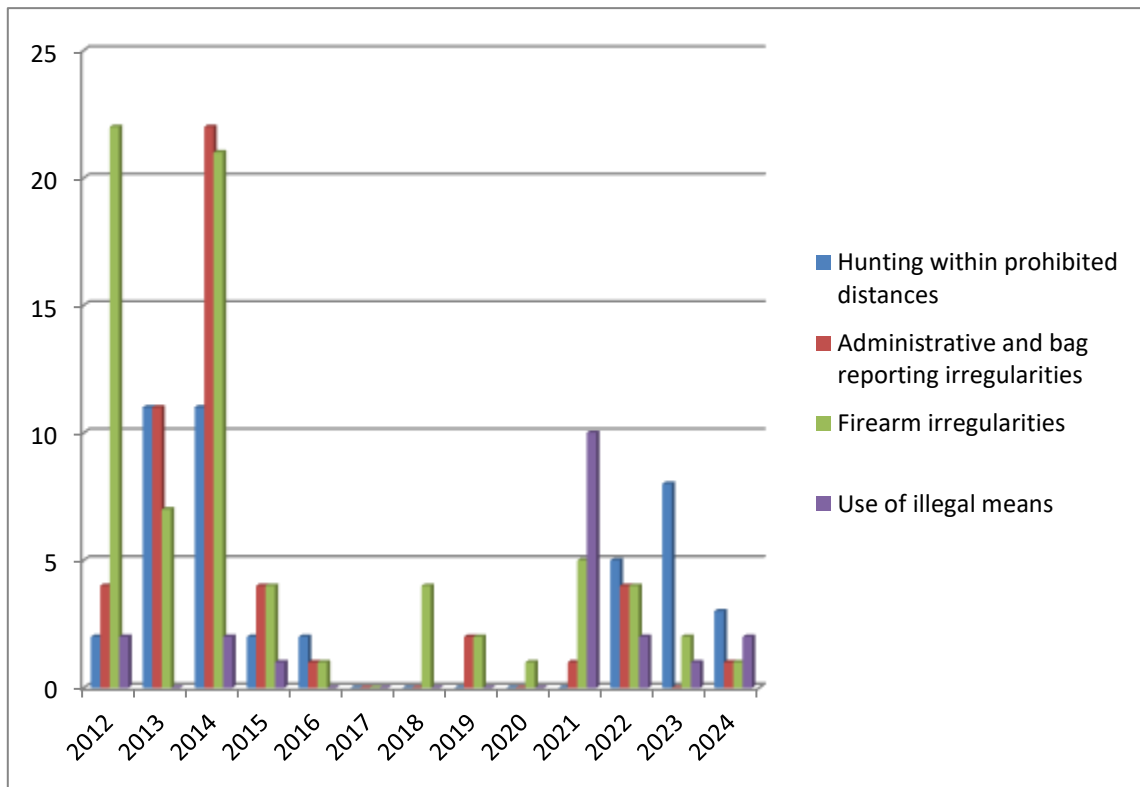
³¹ All during open season.

12.21 Table 12 below compares the number and nature of the offences detected on which legal action was taken during 2024 spring hunting season with the corresponding statistics for the previous seasons. Figure 18 and Figure 19 illustrate the trends pertaining to detection and legal action of minor (Figure 18) and major (Figure 19) offences during the period of spring hunting derogation over the past ten years.

Table 12 - Comparison of offences detected on which legal action was taken during 2012 – 2024 spring hunting seasons.

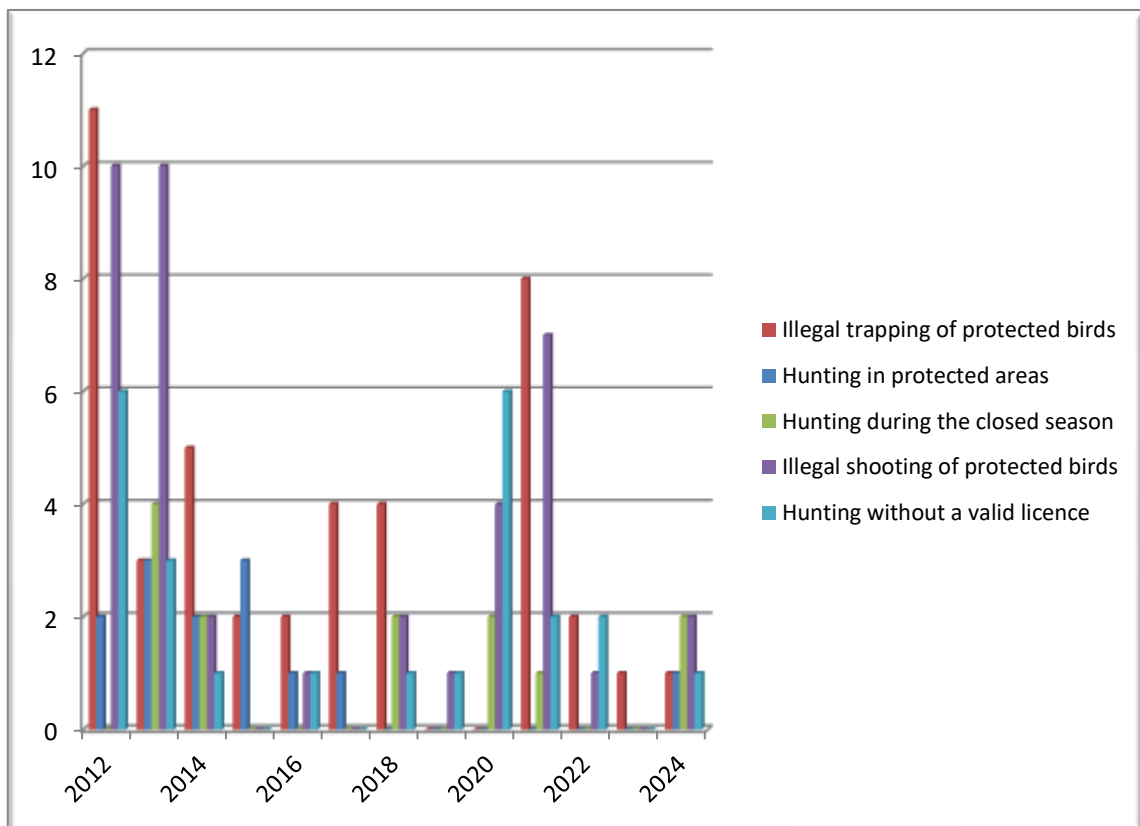
Offences detected on which legal action was taken during 2012 – 2023 spring hunting seasons													
Offences	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Hunting within prohibited distances	2	11	11	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	5	8	3
Administrative and bag reporting irregularities	4	11	22	4	1	0	0	2	0	1	4	0	1
Firearm irregularities	22	7	21	4	1	0	4	2	1	5	4	2	1
Use of illegal means	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	10	2	1	2
Illegal trapping of protected birds	11	3	5	2	2	4	4	0	0	8	2	1	1
Illegal shooting of protected birds	2	3	2	3	1	1	2	1	4	7	0	0	2
Possession of protected species	5	1	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hunting in protected areas	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Hunting without a valid licence	10	10	2	0	1	0	1	1	6	2	2	0	1
Hunting during the closed season	6	3	1	0	1	0	2	0	2	1	1	0	2
Conspiracy of breaking the law	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total offences against which legal action was taken	64	53	69	18	9	5	17	6	13	34	20	12	14

Figure 18 - Analysis of the trends pertaining to the detection and legal action on minor offences during the spring hunting seasons over the past years.



Data Source: Wild Birds Regulation Unit / Malta Police, 2024

Figure 19 - Analysis of the trends pertaining to the detection and legal action on major offences during the spring hunting seasons over the past years.



Data Source: Wild Birds Regulation Unit / Malta Police, 2024

12.22 Table 13 provides a comparison between the total number of birds confirmed to have been illegally shot during the 2023 and 2024 spring hunting seasons.

Table 13 - Birds confirmed to have been illegally shot during the 2023 and 2024 spring hunting seasons.

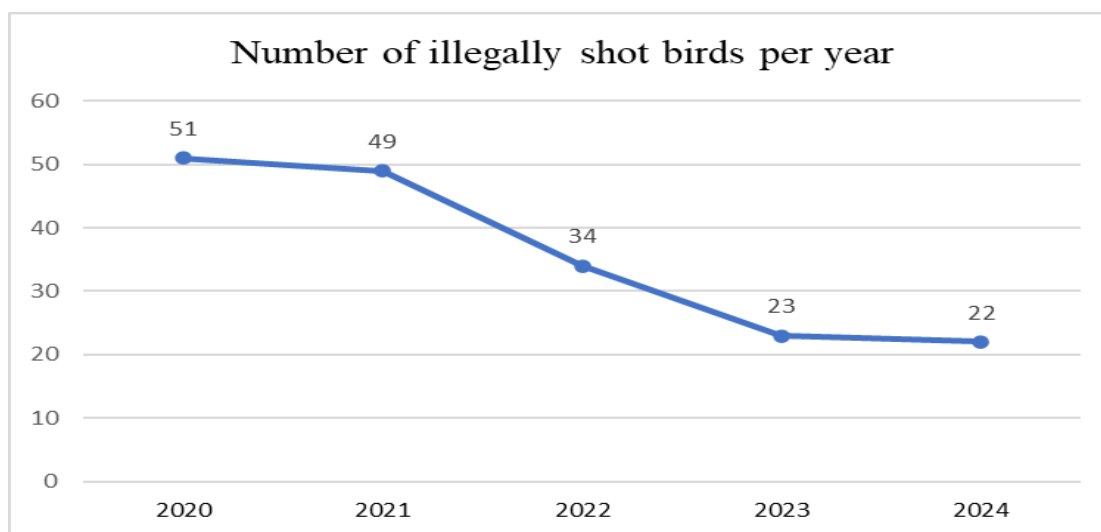
2023 spring hunting season (10/04/2023 – 30/04/2023)			2024 spring hunting season (10/04/2024 – 30/04/2024)		
Date of retrieval	Species	Retrieved from	Date of retrieval	Species	Retrieved from
10/04/2023	-	-	10/04/2024	-	-
11/04/2023	-	-	11/04/2024	-	-
12/04/2023	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Xgħajra	12/04/2024	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Qajjenza
13/04/2023	Eurasian Hoopoe (<i>Upupa epops</i>)	Żebbuġ	13/04/2024	-	-
	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Magħtab			
14/04/2023	Montagu's Harrier (<i>Circus pygargus</i>)	Mġarr	14/04/2024	-	-
	Eurasian stone-curlew (<i>Burhinus oedicanus</i>)	Mellieħa			
15/04/2023	-	-	15/04/2024	House Martin (<i>Delichon urbicum</i>)	Baħrija
16/04/2023	-	-	16/04/2024	-	-
17/04/2023	Yellow-legged Gull (<i>Larus michahellis</i>)	Salina	17/04/2024	Common Cuckoo (<i>Cuculus canorus</i>)	Has-Saptan
	Eurasian Golden Oriole (<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>)	Salina		Night Heron (<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>)	Wied Qirda
	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Marsa			
18/04/2023	-	-	18/04/2024	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Marsaxlokk
				Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Birżebbuġia
				Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Marsaxlokk

2023 spring hunting season (10/04/2023 – 30/04/2023)			2024 spring hunting season (10/04/2024 – 30/04/2024)		
19/04/2023	-	-	19/04/2024	-	-
20/04/2023	Lesser Kestrel (<i>Falco naumanni</i>)	Kalkara	20/04/2024	-	-
21/04/2023	-	-	21/04/2024	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Rabat
22/04/2023	European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Ħal Far	22/04/2024	European Nightjar (<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>)	Birżebbuġia
	European Honey-buzzard (<i>Pernis apivorus</i>)	Salina		European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Marsalforn
23/04/2023	European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Delimara		23/04/2024	Squacco Heron (<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>)
24/04/2023	Yellow-legged Gull (<i>Larus michahellis</i>)	Sigġiewi	24/04/2024	Eurasian Hobby (<i>Falco Subbuteo</i>)	Miżieb
	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Marsa		European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Birżebbuġia
	Collared-dove (<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>)	Ghadira		-	-
	Collared-dove (<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>)	Wardija		-	-
25/04/2023	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Għarb, Gozo	25/04/2024	Eurasian Marsh Harrier (<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>)	Santa Luċija
	Cattle Egret (<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>)	Sigġiewi		Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Qormi
	European Roller (<i>Coracias garrulus</i>)	Limits of Rabat		Common Cuckoo (<i>Cuculus canorus</i>)	Ħal Safi
26/04/2023	European Roller (<i>Coracias garrulus</i>)	Limits of Rabat	26/04/2024	Common Kestrel	Qormi

2023 spring hunting season (10/04/2023 – 30/04/2023)			2024 spring hunting season (10/04/2024 – 30/04/2024)		
				(<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	
				Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Qormi
27/04/2023	-	-	27/04/2024	European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Żejtun
28/04/2023	Eurasian Golden Oriole (<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>)	Victoria, Gozo	28/04/2024	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Żebbuġ
	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Bahrija			
29/04/2023	Red-footed Falcon (<i>Falco vespertinus</i>)	Għaxaq	29/04/2024	-	-
30/04/2023	Common Cuckoo (<i>Cuculus canorus</i>)	Miżieb	30/04/2024	Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Nadur
				European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	Pembroke
23			22		

12.23 As shown in Table 13 above, 23 illegally shot birds were reported during the previous spring hunting season (10 April – 30 April 2023) whilst during the 2024 spring hunting season, there were 22 illegally shot birds. The ratio of illegally shot birds for the open seasons during both years, that is, from the 10 to 30 April, is 0.96:1 (2024:2023). The Common Kestrel constituted the majority of casualties in spring 2023, however the Eurasian Marsh Harrier was the most illegally shot species with the Common Kestrel being the second most illegally shot species during the 2024 spring hunting season.

Figure 20 - Number of illegally shot birds retrieved in the past five years



Data Source: Wild Birds Regulation Unit, 2024

12.24 Figure 20 above shows the number of illegally shot birds during the spring hunting season over the past five years. It is evident that there is a decline in the number of illegally shot protected birds during recent years.

12.25 As detailed in Table 11, in respect of the offences detected during the 2024 spring hunting season, court action is being taken against nine persons. Two persons for hunting during closed season, two persons for hunting of protected species, a person for hunting within a protected area, a person for hunting without a valid licence, a person for hunting within 150m of an inhabited area, a person leaving an unattended firearm in the presence of a minor, and another person for illegally trapping for finches. In addition, five administrative fines were issued, two persons for the illegal use of bird caller, two persons for carrying of loaded/unloaded firearm that was not in its case within 200 metres from any town or village or other inhabited area, and one for a person not reporting caught game.

12.26 The minimum enforcement deployment as set out in Framework Regulations was met by enforcement authorities and exceeded when taking into consideration the number of marshals, Ambjent Malta enforcement officers and observers employed by NGOs. Additionally, the absolute majority of offences detected were effectively investigated and prosecuted.

13. Conclusions

13.1 The application of the 2024 spring hunting derogation was preceded by a series of analyses that considered all relevant legal, scientific and technical aspects pertaining to this derogation, as well as by an open and transparent discussion with stakeholders.

13.2 As a result of these processes, the decision to apply the derogation was made after ascertaining that there is no other satisfactory solution, and that the following critical prerequisites will be met:

- The derogation will satisfy all the relevant requirements of the Birds Directive, and specifically the parameters stipulated in Articles 9(1) and 9(1)(c) thereof.
- The actual implementation of the derogation on the ground will ensure that the relevant legal parameters will be respected in the field through an elaborate and robust enforcement regime.

13.3 Throughout the period of this derogation, the priority of the Maltese authorities was to ensure that all parameters of the derogation were met in practice. Although the decline in the number of illegally shot protected birds during recent years is evident, both during and on the margins of the spring hunting season, further preventive measures are still required to totally curb this illegality. In this regard, the Maltese authorities are actively working to address this issue by, inter alia, ensuring effective enforcement to deter, detect and prosecute bird-related crime and by addressing the key motives for IKB-related crime, including illegal taxidermy.