

# **Assessment of the latest enforcement measures and outcome of the autumn 2023 hunting season**

March 2024  
Wild Birds Regulation Unit

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Annex I - [Game Reporting Data Report 2023](#)

Annex II - [Monitoring study on the influx of Turtle Dove and Common Quail in Autumn 2023](#)

## 1. Introduction

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

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

This report is the latest in a series of similar enforcement reports previously published by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU), available at: <https://wbpu.gov.mt/en/resources/reports-and-statistics>.

## 2. Legal and policy measures for the autumn 2023 hunting season

The autumn hunting season in 2023 followed the same legislative parameters as the 2022 season, which parameters were set in March 2016 following the amendments introduced by virtue of the [Conservation of Wild Birds \(Amendment\) Regulations, 2016](#) (Legal Notice 69 of 2016) which amended the [Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations](#) (Subsidiary Legislation 549.42 of the Laws of Malta).

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

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

During the autumn 2023 hunting season, the hunting of birds on land was permitted between 1 September 2023 and 31 January 2024, from two hours before sunrise until two hours after sunset on any day between Monday and Saturday, and from two hours before sunrise until 1pm on Sundays and Public Holidays. However, the hunting of birds on land between 15 September 2023 and 7 October 2023 (inclusive of both dates) was not permitted from Monday to Saturday from 7 pm to two hours before sunrise of the following day. The same time restrictions also applied to the hunting of wild rabbit, which was permitted until 31 December 2023.

The hunting of birds at sea was permitted between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2024 during the same times as those applicable to hunting on land, whilst between 1 October 2023 and 7 October 2023, inclusive of both dates, hunting at sea was not permitted from Monday to Saturday from 7 pm to two hours before sunrise of the following day.

Hunters were only permitted to hunt the species for which they were licensed according to their licence category and were legally required to report game caught via the game reporting system prior to leaving the hunting area [except for hunting of European Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), which must be reported immediately upon capture – see next section], in accordance with the instructions as stipulated in the information booklet distributed together with the hunting licences.

Moreover, according to the [Conservation of Wild Birds \(Declaration of the Autumn Hunting Season for Turtle Dove\) Regulations, 2021](#) (Legal Notice 341 of 2021), hunting of European Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) was permitted only during the month of September, subject to maximum national quota of 500 birds as detailed in the section on the legal and policy measures for the opening of a limited autumn hunting season for European Turtle Dove.

As has always been the case, only those hunters who were in possession of a valid general licence to hunt birds on land were authorized to participate in the season. Hunters were required to carry with them the general licence card and the hunting booklet at all times whilst hunting.

In 2023, there were 9,934 general licences to hunt birds on land, 284 general licences to hunt birds at sea, 3,075 general licences to hunt wild rabbit and 65 general licences to capture wild rabbit with nets (ferreting).

## **2.1. The opening of a limited hunting season for Turtle Dove**

According to the latest Article 12 data (2013–2018)<sup>1</sup>, the conservation status of Malta’s EU reference population of Turtle Dove has improved when compared with the previous (2008–2012) reporting period.<sup>2</sup> Based on the latest Article 12 reporting cycle (2013–2018), Malta’s Turtle Dove EU reference population (i.e., the populations that breed in other EU Member States and migrate over Malta) improved its short-term trend status from Decreasing to Stable (Min. Pairs: - 0.30%; Max. Pairs: -0.29%) and remained Stable in the long-term trend (Min. Pairs: -0.32%; Max. Pairs: -0.36%). 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 12.7% (Min. Pairs) and by 10.25% (Max. Pairs).

In 2021, Malta took into consideration the measures recommended by the European Commission and enacted the legislative framework for the Turtle Dove autumn hunting by virtue of the Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration of the Autumn Hunting Season for Turtle Dove) Regulations, 2021<sup>3</sup>. This legislation 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) and introduced a mandatory requirement to immediately report Turtle Doves caught to monitor the uptake of the national quota in real-time and thus to ensure the hunting season for Turtle Dove is closed as soon as such quota is reached. Before 2021, hunters were legally required to report all game caught, including Turtle Doves, before leaving the hunting area. The reporting requirement for all other huntable species remained unchanged. Licensees had the option to report the birds caught either through the telephone reporting system, or by means of a mobile application that was launched in the beginning of 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://nature-art12.eionet.europa.eu/article12/summary>

<sup>2</sup> Compare tables 12 and 13 in the *Report on the Conservation Status of the European Turtle Dove (Streptopelia turtur) and Common Quail (Coturnix coturnix) February 2022 update*, available at: <https://wbru.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/anx2SprHunRep22.pdf>.

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

The 2023 autumn hunting season for Turtle Dove was opened with the same legislative framework from the 1 to 30 September, inclusive of both dates with a national quota of 500 Turtle Doves.

Hunters who did not manage to bag any birds whilst hunting were legally required to report their hunting effort before leaving the hunting area<sup>4</sup>. Hunting effort was required throughout the month of September for all huntable species including the Turtle Dove and wild rabbit.

In 2023, both the telephone and mobile app components of the game reporting system were maintained. The database element of this system was kept updated with all the necessary information to allow for proper functioning of the reporting system as well as to ensure an accurate record keeping. The overall seasonal bag limit for the Turtle Dove was reached on the 20 September and the hunting season for the Turtle Dove was closed with immediate effect.

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

## **2.2. Involvement of hunting organisations**

Hunting organisations are also actively contributing to Malta's efforts towards the conservation and sustainable harvest of the Turtle Dove. Following approval by the Malta Ornis Committee on 12 May 2021<sup>5</sup>, Saint Hubert's Hunters (KSU) initiated a satellite-tagging project of Turtle Doves, with a total of 20 satellite-tags co-financed by the Government's Conservation of Wild Birds Fund. The tagging project ran from the 21 May until 31 May 2021 (inclusive of both dates), and only one specimen was tagged and released but contact was lost soon. The project was again approved to run from 1 April until 30 May 2022 and during this period a total of 12 Turtle Doves were captured, tagged, and released. From this total, one Turtle Dove has not yielded data, one was evidenced as harvested during the hunting period with the GPS tag being returned, another specimen remained in Malta, whilst the remaining nine Turtle Doves migrated further north and spent the breeding season in the following countries: one in Sicily

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<sup>4</sup> Regulation 12(9) and Schedule IV(1)(c) of S.L.549.42. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/549.42/eng/pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Malta Ornis Committee (Video Conference). Available at: <https://wbru.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/oMinTwelMay21.pdf>.

(Camporeale), five in Italy (two in Pescara, one in Foggia, one in Bari and one in Taranto), one in Albania (Vlore), one in Kosovo (Prizren) and one in Turkey (Kozakli). The Turtle Dove that bred in Sicily wintered in Tunisia, the one that bred in Italy (Bari) wintered in West Africa (Niger), whilst the one that bred in Turkey was recorded in Greece on 24 October 2022.

In 2023, the Ornis Committee reapproved the tagging project to run between 1 April and 30 May. Between the 17 April and 30 April 2023, which dates coincided with the open season for the hunting of the species in spring, satellite tagging was allowed after i.e., following the closure of the hunting season, whilst no time limitations were imposed on the rest of the project days which did not coincide with the hunting season. During this period, eight Turtle-doves were tagged but one of the tags failed to transmit data. The other seven tagged specimens spent the breeding season in the following countries: 3 in Italy (Sicily, Lazio and Salerno), 1 in Malta, 1 in Hungary, 1 in Tunisia, and 1 in Romania.

Additionally, since this species does not breed in the wild in the Maltese Islands, with the help of local funding, the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK) has since 2017 implemented a captive-breeding program to augment the wild population through the release of captive-bred specimens. This is considered a tangible contribution that Malta can provide towards the conservation of the Turtle Dove. The officials from the FKNK Council who together with veterinarians oversaw the project, monitored the breeding birds at the respective breeding stations, prescribed the appropriate fodder and medicine as necessary and tested each specimen for any disease that could be present. The veterinarians re-test all specimens right before the release to ascertain that the birds are in a good state of health and strength to be able to migrate once released. All measures were taken in compliance with IUCN guidelines.

Between 2017 and 2019 approximately 1,500 captive-bred Turtle Doves were released into the wild whilst none were released in 2020 due to Covid-19 measures. In 2021, the FKNK also fitted eight GPS satellite tracking transmitters on first-year Turtle Doves hatched that same year as part of their captive-breeding program. The GPS satellite tracking transmitters only weighed 5 grams and charge through solar energy. In May 2022, 400 Turtle Doves were released and later in June, six (6) first year fledglings were fitted with a GPS satellite tracking transmitter. Prior release, weight and wing measurements were recorded and each bird was fitted with a split-ring. Turtle Doves are tagged a week prior to their release and released in a separate aviary so that they can get accustomed to the tag and observed before their eventual

release into the wild. Similar to other satellite-tagging projects, the GPS satellite trackers provide data on the bird's behaviour and movements, speed of flight, altitude of flight and location, besides other useful information. Information retrieved from the tags show that Turtle Doves tagged by FKKNK have settled in Sicily, Bulgaria, and Kosovo. The continuation of such projects is essential to enable the collection of more scientific data on the migration routes as well as habitat and breeding preferences of the species.

The FKKNK has also been actively involved in the collection of data on the age structure of bagged Turtle Doves. In this regard, during period 01–19 September 2022, hunters identified the age of 100 Turtle Doves, being 70 juveniles and 30 adults. The collection of this information is essential because it will shed light on the age structure of the locally hunted bags and will in turn provide data on the Turtle Dove population migrating over the Maltese Islands which may feed in building a reliable Population model as part of the Adaptive Harvest Management Mechanism for the Central-Eastern flyway. As of September 2023, the age structure of bagged Turtle Doves was incorporated in the game reporting system managed by the Maltese authorities (mobile app and freephone service). Results for September 2023 show that 57% of the harvested Turtle Doves were juvenile whilst the remaining 43% were adults.

### **3. Game reporting system (GRS)**

As an integral part of the licensing procedure, hunters are obliged to provide WBRU with their mobile phone number which, apart from contact purposes (for the bulk text messaging service), is used for the purpose of reporting game caught during each season. Malta has again implemented the mandatory and legally binding game reporting requirement utilising the telephonic and mobile app Game Reporting System. This entails the reporting of game caught either through a toll-free phone call which guides the user through automated voice prompts or through a graphical process on the mobile app. Each report is registered in the database of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit in real time and the hunters receive an SMS confirmation of a successful report. The system allows hunters in possession of a valid hunting licence to report game caught via the mobile number registered or eID. No duplicate mobile numbers are allowed in the system to ensure that each hunter reports his catch from his own number for enforcement and cross-verification purposes during spot-checks. Additionally, the system does

not receive reports from numbers which are not registered on licensees to ensure that the system is only utilised by licence holders.

The hunting effort module of the system was maintained throughout the season, in this regard licence holders were required to report that they were practicing hunting even if they did not manage to hunt any birds before leaving the hunting area. Game reported through the system automatically features in the hunting effort module thus hunters who already reported game caught were not required to also report hunting effort before leaving the hunting area. As noted in the previous section, as of September 2023, the age structure of bagged Turtle Doves was incorporated in the game reporting system.

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

### **3.1. Game reported caught during the season**

Licensed hunters submitted catch reports under the relevant licence categories as explained below.

- 3 out of 284 (1.1%) hunters licensed to hunt at sea reported a catch at least once.
- 1 out of 65 (1.5%) hunters licenced to capture wild rabbits with nets reported a catch at least once.
- 48 out of 3,075 (1.6%) hunters licenced to hunt wild rabbit reported a catch at least once.
- 542 out of 9,934 (5.5%) hunters licensed to hunt birds on land submitted a report of a catch during the open season.

The 2023 report on game reporting is enclosed as Annex I<sup>6</sup> to this report.

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<sup>6</sup> Report on game reporting 2023. Available at:  
<https://wbru.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/grdReport2023.pdf>

### **3.2 Hunting Effort (reporting zero catches)**

As of 2021, the Game Reporting System also included a new component to gauge hunting effort on a daily basis. All hunters were required to confirm that they were practicing hunting, even if they did not manage to hunt any birds (or wild rabbit), before leaving the hunting area.

The statutory hunting effort requirement was promoted through various social media posts<sup>7</sup> and disseminated through hunting organisations. During the month of September and during derogation periods, the reporting of hunting effort is mandatory and thus a legal requirement. Failure to report hunting effort is subject to an administrative fine of €50 and three penalty points for each non-compliance, as specified under Schedule VIII [regulation 12(9) / paragraph 1(c) of Schedule IV] of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L.549.42) and under Schedule II [regulation 5(11)(c)] of the Protection of Wild Rabbit Regulations (S.L.549.90).

Enforcement data (police daily returns) shows that notwithstanding the thousands of spot-checks on individual hunters, including road-checks (see Figure 8), no administrative fines were issued during autumn 2023 as regards to non-reporting of game caught and non-reporting of hunting effort. This suggests that compliance with the game reporting obligations is high and that the total number of hunters that are out in the field concurrently on any given day is low, despite the total number of registered hunters.

Figure 1 below shows the number of individuals which declared that they were active on a given day but did not catch anything.

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to the following communication from the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, dated 31 August 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/dECNaKcgVXBEza9D/>

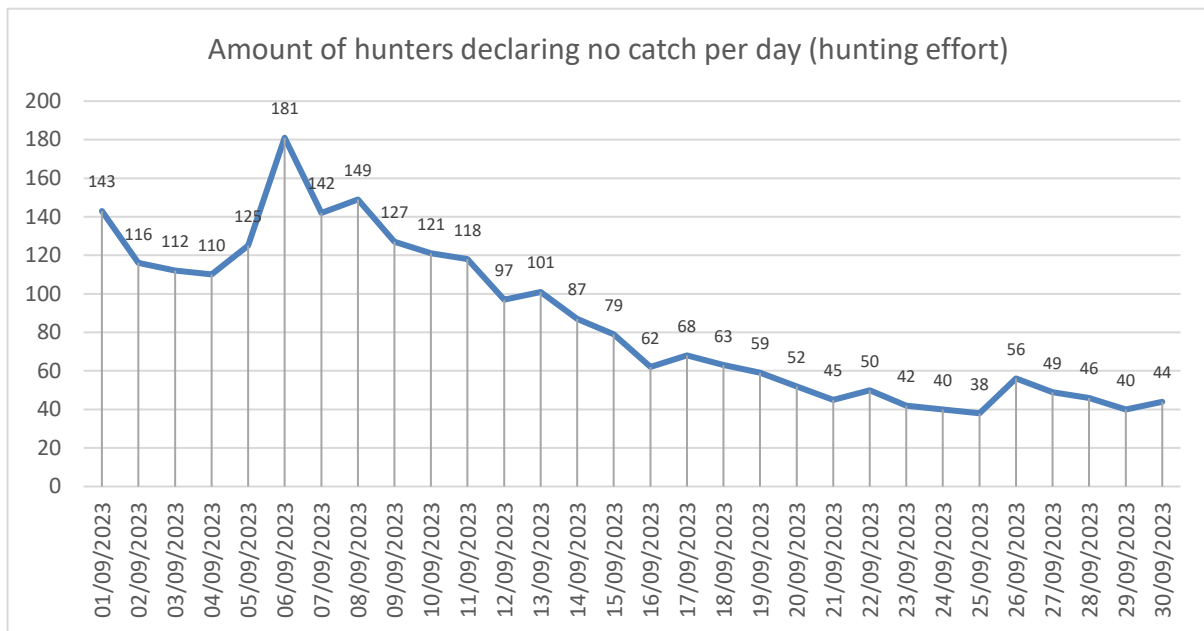


Figure 1 - Number of individuals per day who reported having been out hunting but did not catch any specimens from the list of huntable species (all licence categories).

### 3.3 Game reporting data and hunting effort for Turtle Dove

Of all the species huntable during the 2023 autumn season (Schedule II of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations), only the Turtle Dove had a national quota. This was set at 500 Turtle Doves. The statutory open season for this species was from 1 September to 30 September 2023. However, the national quota for this species was reached before the statutory deadline and the season was thus immediately closed on 20 September 2023 (Figure 2).

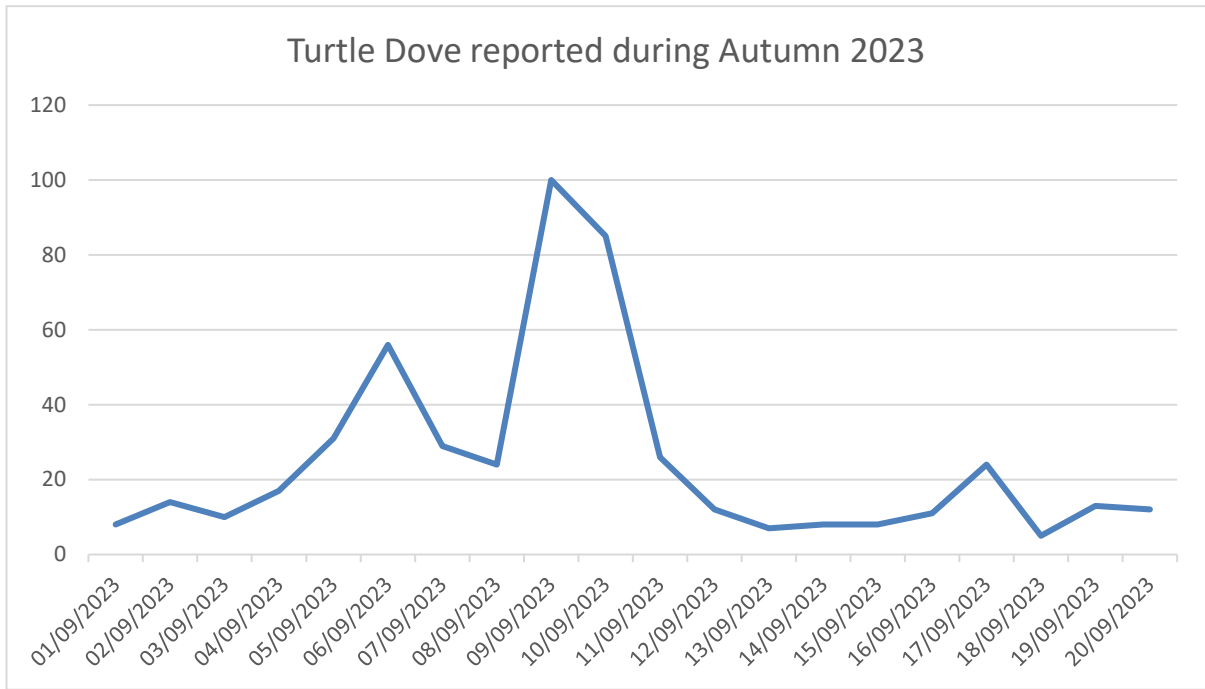


Figure 2 - Turtle Doves reported caught between 1 September and 20 September 2023.

Figure 3 shows the number of hunters active during the open season specifically for Turtle Dove species and including any other hunting activity under the General Licence for hunting birds on land.

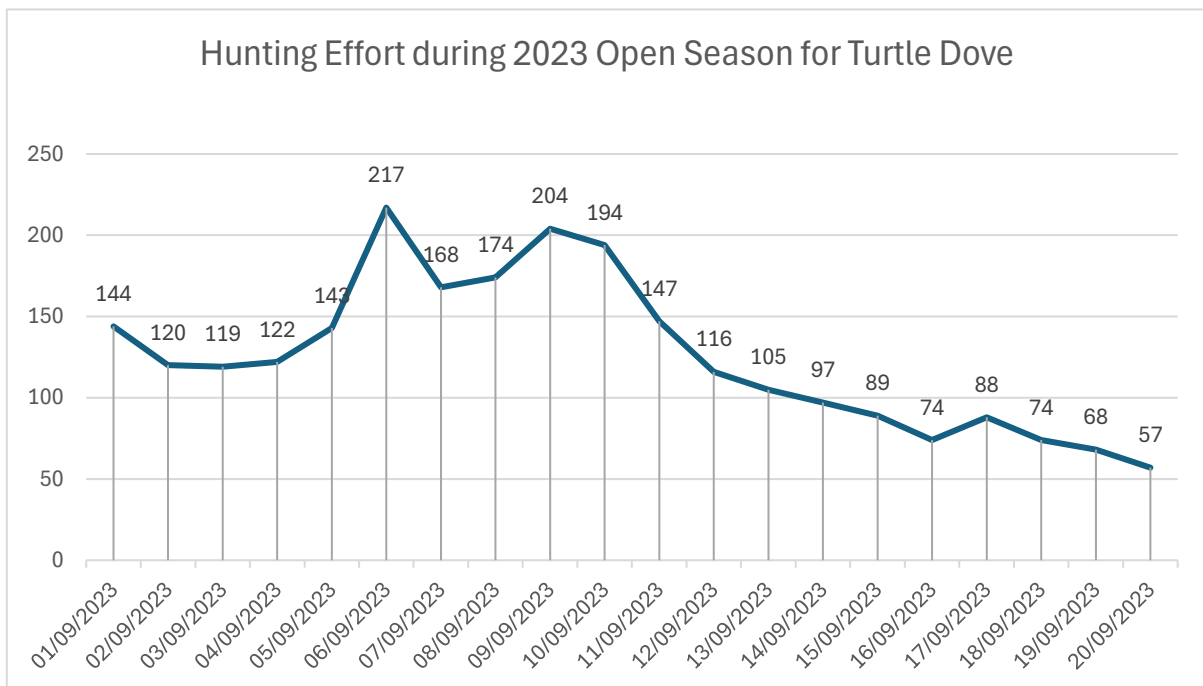


Figure 3 - Daily counts of hunters practising hunting of Turtle Dove between 1 and 20 September. This data includes those individuals that were on a hunting outing and caught nothing as well as those that reported a catch.

#### 4. Turtle Dove autumn migration study

An independent migration study to estimate the influx of Turtle Dove and quail during the peak migration period in the autumn of 2023 was conducted. The study aimed at surveying and scientific monitoring of the daily influx of Turtle Dove and common quail between 1 September and 31 October 2023 to estimate the overall presence (influx) of these two species per day and for the whole study period, subject to scientifically justified assumptions. The full report of the study is included in Annex II to this report.

The methodology used during autumn 2023 survey is identical to that used in surveys made by the same company in previous autumn (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022a) and spring seasons (see Ecoserv, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014b; 2015b; 2016b; 2017b; 2018b; 2019b; 2020b; 2021b; 2022b, 2023). The survey design is aimed at assessing changes in migratory influx, which entails trend analysis based on data from monitoring carried out regularly over a sufficiently long period over subsequent years and using the same methodology. During the survey, two individuals - a field assistant capable of identifying Turtle Dove and common quail and an observer who was responsible for recording of data in the field - were stationed at a total of 21 sites (= count stations) distributed over Malta, Comino, and Gozo. Prior to enrolment for the survey, the field assistants were assessed by Ecoserv's environmental consultants and ecologists to ensure that they can identify the two bird species.

The survey was undertaken over an eight-week period between 1 September and 31 October 2023. During the survey, counts of individuals of the two species *Coturnix coturnix* and *Streptopelia turtur* were made at each of 6 different sites on each day during the monitoring period. Each group of six sites was surveyed once every four days, such that a total of 21 sites were surveyed over each period of four days. The study site at Comino was included in the six sites surveyed on any one day, such that this site was surveyed daily. On those days when access to Comino by boat was not possible due to adverse weather conditions, the surveys were undertaken at an alternative site instead.

Raw daily counts for Turtle Dove recorded from any given site (out of the 21 sites) during the study varied between 0 and a maximum of 13, while the mean daily counts ranged between 0 and 2.17 (Table 1 - 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.). 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).

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.

*Table 1 - 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.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Mean Count <math>\pm</math> SD</b>		<b>Total count</b>	<b>Estimated Daily Influx</b>
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
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

<b>Date</b>	<b>Mean Count <math>\pm</math> SD</b>		<b>Total count</b>	<b>Estimated Daily Influx</b>
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
<b>Sum total</b>			<b>112</b>	<b>10123</b>

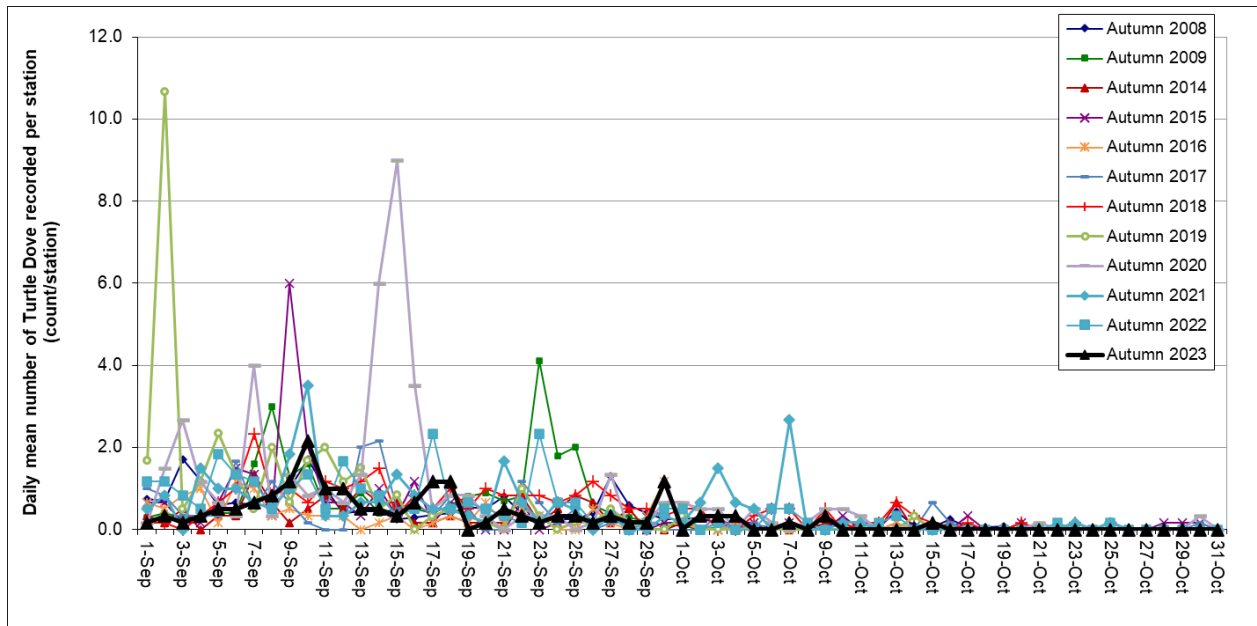


Figure 4 - Daily mean counts of Turtle Dove per station (= site) recorded during the 2023 survey during the period 1 September to 31 October 2023, together with values of the same statistic for autumn 2008 and 2009 as reported in Thomaidis (nd), and for autumn 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020,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

Based on the mean daily counts (Table 1), 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.

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 Ghajn Tuffieħa (Grid 4077), while relatively low counts were also recorded from Comino (Grid 4085) and some sites located on the northern parts of Malta.

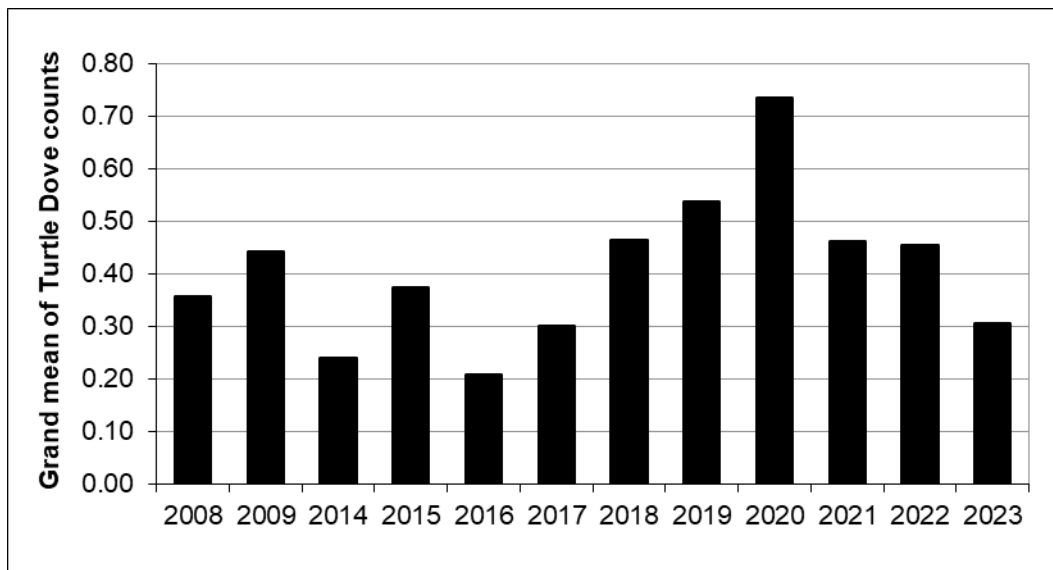


Figure 5 - Grand mean of Turtle Dove counts made using data from the period 1 September to 31 October for autumn 2023, autumn 2014–2021 (Ecoserv, 2014a; 2015a; 2016a; 2017a; 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2022a) and autumn 2008–2009 (Thomaidis, nd).

#### 4.1. Comparison of monitored Turtle Doves with hunting bag data

The daily bag counts indicating the number of Turtle Dove caught during the 2023 autumn hunting season and the mean daily counts of Turtle Dove made during the 2023 survey are shown in Figure 6. Figure 7 shows the same data but with the results from the 2023 survey given as total daily counts. The magnitude of the bag counts and those of the mean/total counts made in the 2023 survey are not directly comparable. Therefore, in Figure 6 and Figure 7, two separate y-axes are used: the bag count data is plotted on the left-side y-axis, whereas the counts from the survey are plotted on the right-side y-axis.

Overall, the general trend of daily counts recorded during the 2023 survey is of relatively higher counts in September and early October, with the rest of October mostly characterised by zero counts. The bag count data for the period 1 to 20 September includes higher counts on 6, 9 and 10 September and an overall declining trend thereafter; no Turtle Dove individuals were bagged after 20 September given that the hunting season for Turtle Dove was closed on this date. Overall, there was a similar temporal trend of counts in September 2023, in both the daily counts made during the present survey and the bag count data, while no comparison could be made for the period 21 September to 31 October since the hunting season for Turtle Dove was closed on 20 September 2023 in accordance with Legal Notice 341/2021<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Legal Notice 341/2021. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/ln/2021/341/eng>

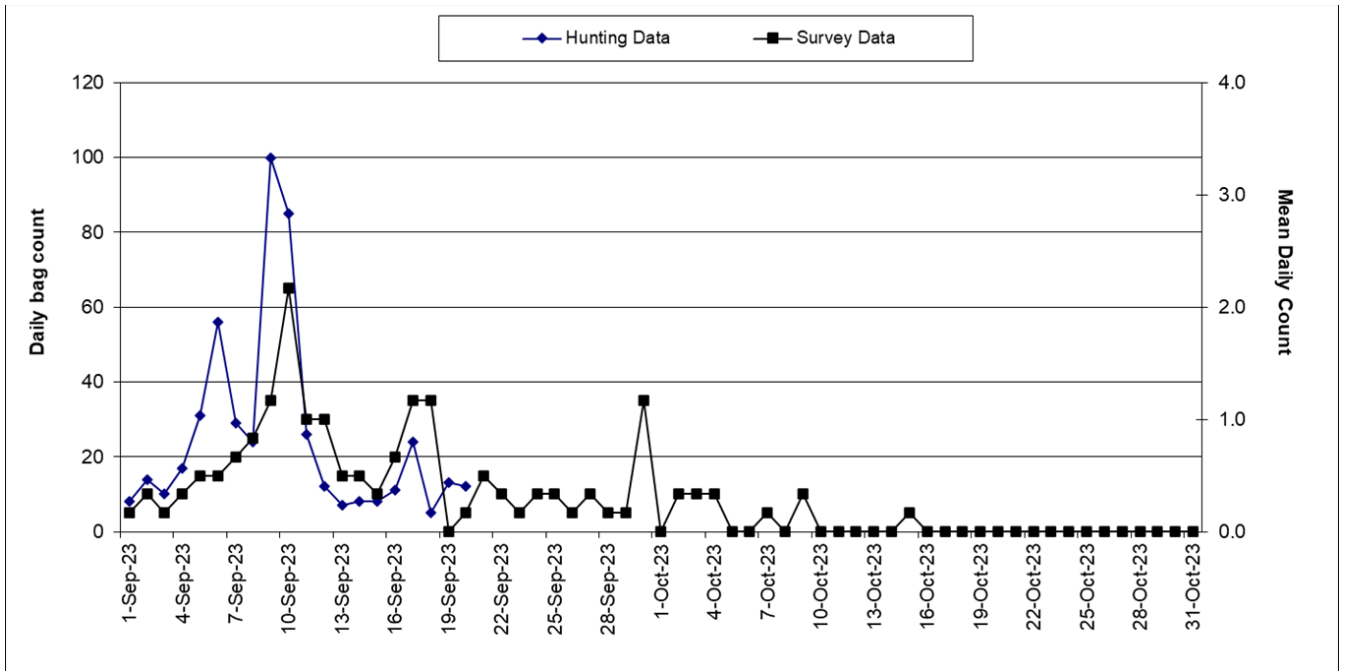


Figure 6 - Daily bag count of Turtle Dove during 2023 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the mean daily counts recorded during the 2023 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2023. It should be noted that bag counts after 20 September are all zero given that the hunting season for this species closed on this date.

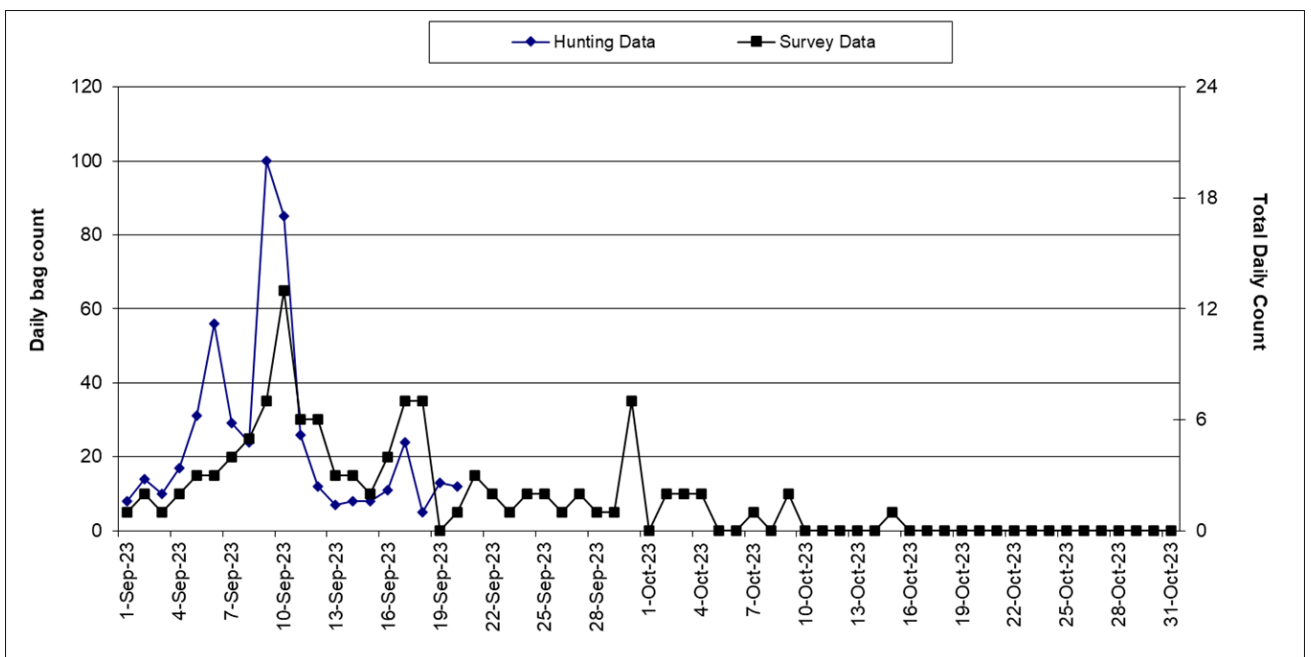


Figure 7 - Daily bag count of Turtle Dove during 2023 (blue line; values on left-side y-axis), together with the total daily counts recorded during the 2023 survey (black line; values on right-side y-axis), for the period 1 September – 31 October 2023. It should be noted that bag counts after 20 September are all zero given that the hunting season for this species closed on this date.

## 5. Summary of enforcement action during the autumn hunting season

### 5.1. Specialised training to enforcement personnel

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

The objectives of enforcement deployment were:

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

### 5.2. Enforcement deployment

During the autumn hunting season, the authorities deployed a maximum complement of 71 officers tasked with overseeing compliance with the parameters of the season.

*Table 2 Deployment of enforcement officers during the autumn 2023 hunting season*

Entity	Number of officers	Duties
Environment Protection Unit (EPU) of the Police	18	Field patrols, surveillance, inspections, spot-checks, investigations and prosecution.
District police officers seconded to the EPU	15	
Gozo police	14	
Armed Forces of Malta	4	Field patrols and surveillance

<b>Entity</b>	<b>Number of officers</b>	<b>Duties</b>
Environmental rangers	14	Patrols in Terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites, reporting illegal activities to Police
Wild Birds Regulation Unit	6	Verification of compliance with registration conditions; assistance to police in prosecution processes, other expert services
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	

This enforcement complement of the Police Force and AFM was deployed gradually from the 1 September until the 19 October 2023, with a daily field deployment ranging between a maximum of 10 officers and a minimum of seven officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and a maximum of seven officers and a minimum of four officers in the field at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. From 20 October until 31 December 2023<sup>9</sup>, the daily field deployment ranged between a maximum of 53 officers and a minimum of 49 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and a maximum of 55 officers and a minimum of 47 officers in the field at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. Throughout January, the daily field deployment ranged between a maximum of 34 officers and a minimum of 10 officers in the field at any point in time from 05:00hrs to 15:00hrs and 32 officers in the field at any point in time from 15:00hrs to 21:00hrs. The indicated number of officers deployed includes all other non-field staff assigned on-duties related to the supervision of the season but excludes field staff on shift rotation.

In addition to this complement, the 14 environmental rangers were deployed daily on a twelve-hour shift from 06:30hrs to 18:30hrs on patrols in Terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, other protected and scheduled areas and public ODZ sites, whilst WBRU officers were active daily from 07:15hrs to 16:00hrs and provided on-call service during other hours. These officers reported illegal activities directly to the Police. The WBRU ensured effective operational liaison between enforcement entities and other stakeholders and provided 24/7 on-call enforcement service to the Police, the public, and NGOs.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2023, the Golden Plover live-capturing season was closed on 23 December as soon as the national bag limit was reached (the statutory period was until 10 January 2024). The Song Thrush live-capturing season was closed within the statutory period of 31 December.

### 5.3. Patrols, inspections and spot-checks conducted

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

Enforcement authorities assigned a higher priority to spot-checks on individual licensees since 2018, and in 2023 this resulted in a total of 4,600<sup>10</sup> spot-checks on individual licensees (3,607 in Malta and 993 in Gozo).

The below figure presents a comparison of the number of spot-checks, including road-checks, conducted over the past ten years during autumn hunting seasons (1 September – 31 January). It is important to note that this enforcement effort does not include routine patrols (including covert patrols) in hunting areas, enforcement efforts of District police, Rapid Intervention Unit or Mobile Squad carried out past EPU / Gozo police shifts<sup>11</sup>, enforcement efforts carried out by Ambjent Malta’s Environmental Rangers<sup>12</sup> or hunting marshals deployed by NGOs.

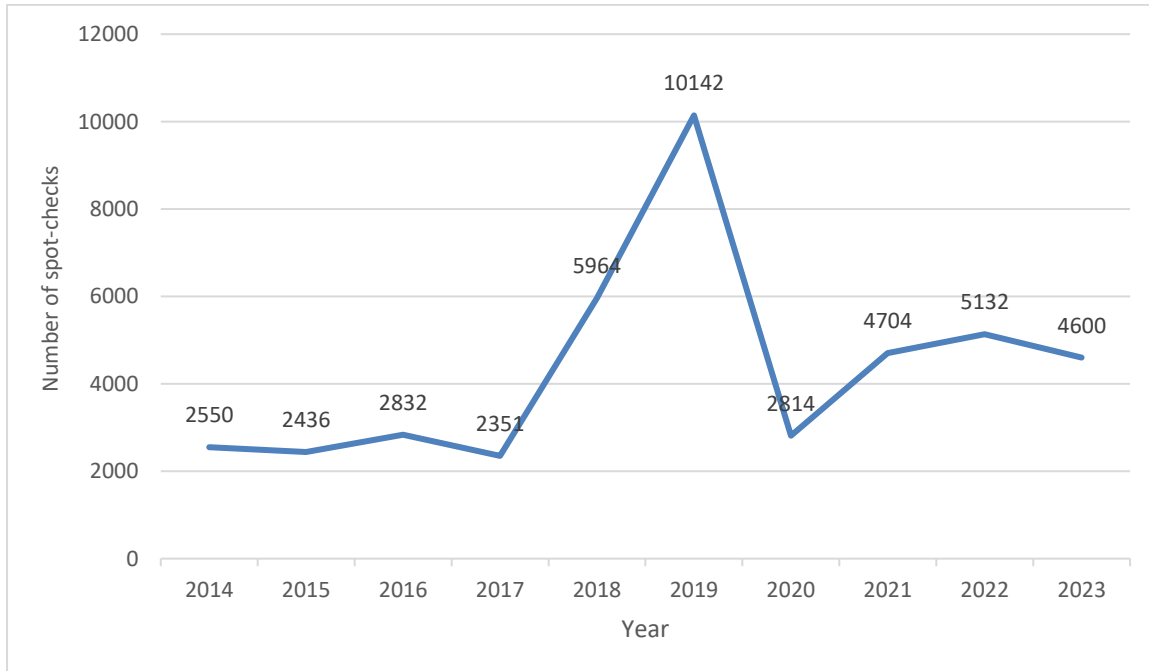


Figure 8 - Comparison of the number of spot-checks (including road checks) conducted over the past ten years during autumn hunting seasons (1 September – 31 January).

<sup>10</sup> Twelve of which were road-checks.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Environmental Rangers work from Monday to Friday between 0630 – 1530 and on day-in-day-out shifts from 0630 – 1830.

## 5.4. Offences detected

During field surveillance, inspections and spot-checks, the authorities disclosed a total of 85 offences. Legal action was taken against 65 offenders, of which 25 persons were subject to criminal prosecution and 40 persons subject to administrative fines. No legal action could be taken on 20 cases given that the perpetrator/s remained unknown to the police.

Additionally, during the limited hunting season for Turtle Dove (from 1 to 20 September 2023, inclusive of both dates) no infringements directly related to the hunting of this species were detected.

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

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

Offences detected and confirmed during autumn hunting season	2023–2024		
	(01.09.23–31.01.24)		
	Cases in Malta	Cases in Gozo	Total number of cases
Hunting within prohibited distances / prohibited areas	1	0	1 <sup>13</sup>
Hunting without licence	1	0	1 <sup>14</sup>
Illegal shooting of protected birds	2	0	2 <sup>15</sup>
Hunting using illegal means / firearms irregularities / other breaches of licence conditions	53	0	53 <sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Case refers to a hunter caught within 200m of a habitable area, carrying a firearm outside of its case.

<sup>14</sup> Case refers to a person caught hunting without a general licence and carrying a firearm without the relevant permit.

<sup>15</sup> Cases refer to a person caught shooting for a domestic Rock dove (*Columba livia domestica*) which was wearing a closed ring and another person caught shooting for a Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*).

<sup>16</sup> Cases refer to 37 cases of use of bird caller whilst hunting and 4 cases of firearm irregularities (2 cases referred for court action and 2 cases subject to administrative fine), whilst 12 cases refer to the use of bird caller while hunting where culprit remained unknown.

Offences detected and confirmed during autumn hunting season	2023–2024		
	(01.09.23–31.01.24)		
	Cases in Malta	Cases in Gozo	Total number of cases
Hunting during closed season or outside permitted hours	0	0	0
Trapping before the opening of the seasons and after the closing of the trapping seasons	12	3	15
Illegal possession of bird carcasses / stuffed birds	7	0	7
Illegal possession of live birds	6	0	6
Illegal sale of protected birds	0	0	0
Smuggling of protected birds	0	0	0
Failure to report game caught	0	0	0
<b>Total offences disclosed</b>	82	3	85 <sup>17</sup>
<b>Persons against whom legal action was taken</b>	63	2	65 <sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Total consists of 85 cases, 65 committed by known individuals leading to legal action and 20 cases committed by unknown individuals where no further legal action could be taken.

<sup>18</sup> 40 administrative fines and 25 court cases.

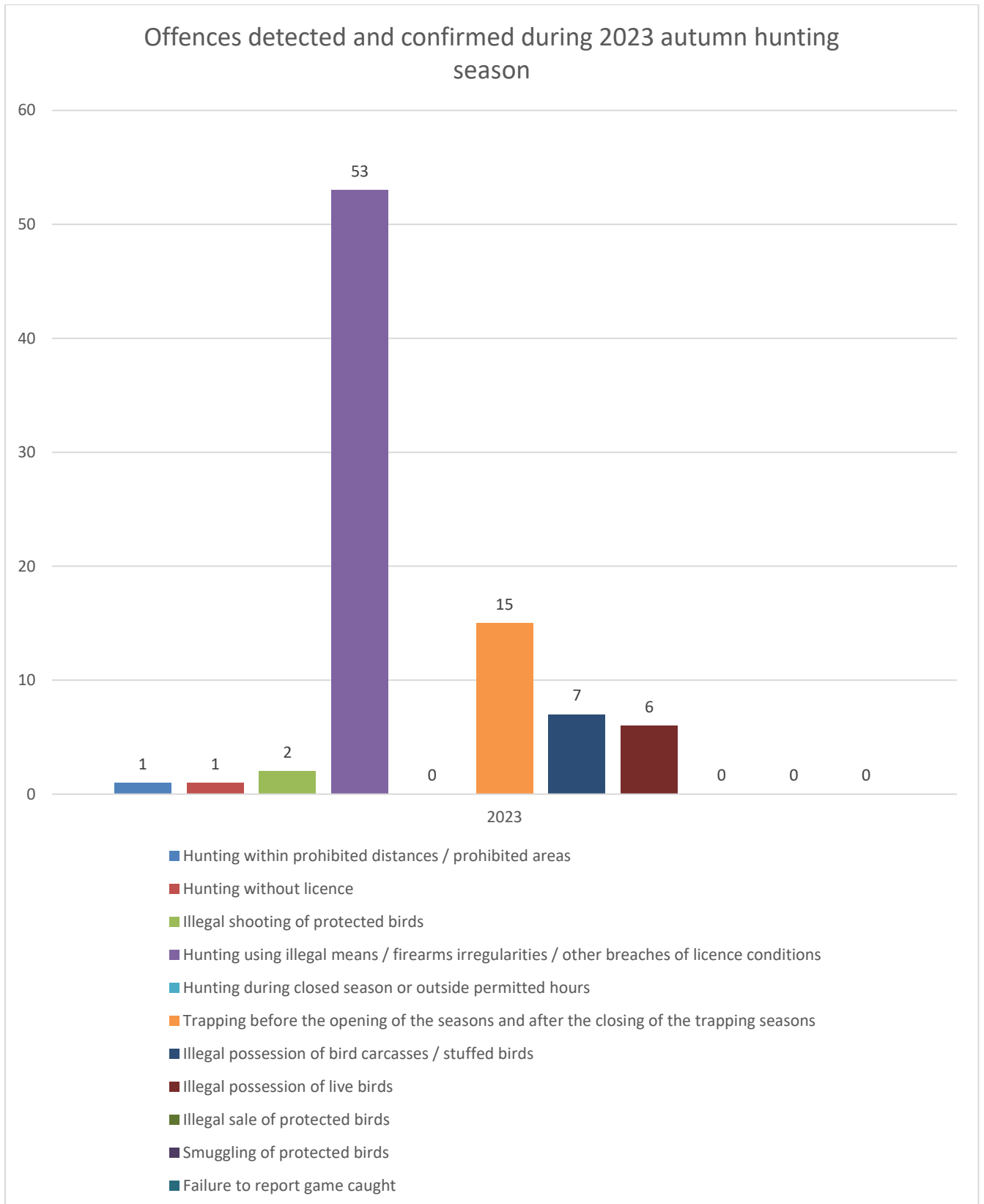


Figure 9 - Offences detected and confirmed during the 2023 autumn hunting season.

### 5.5. Illegal killing of protected birds during the 2023 autumn hunting season.

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

During the 2023 autumn hunting season, 262 injured wild birds belonging to 61 species were referred to the government-appointed veterinarian. These birds were provided with the appropriate veterinary care and in a number of cases, were successfully rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Of these, 81 protected birds (31%) were confirmed to have sustained gunshot wounds.

The below figure illustrates the number of illegally shot protected birds during the autumn hunting season over the past five years (2019–2023).

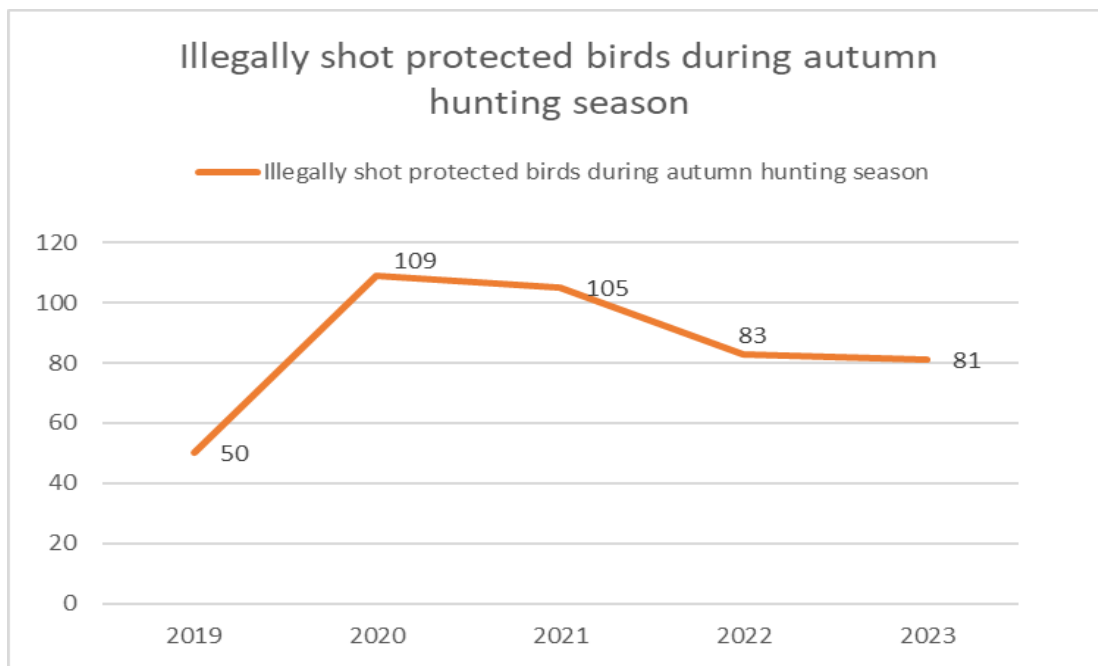


Figure 10 - The number of illegally shot protected birds during autumn hunting season recovered by the authorities over the past five years (2019-2023).

Notwithstanding that the number of illegally shot protected birds during the 2023 autumn hunting season is lower than that of autumn 2020, 2021 and slightly lower than that of 2022, data shows that the problem of illegal killing of protected birds is still evident and thus the issue continues to merit the urgent attention of all stakeholders at national level since **there is a much-needed concerted effort to actively curb IKB-related crime.**

## 5.6. Ensuring sustainability of hunting tourism and aviculture

Aware of the fact that some Maltese hunters opt to travel on hunting trips abroad and the increasing trend of people interested in keeping different bird species for aviculture, the WBRU continued to maintain a very active role in disseminating information amongst hunters and individuals involved in aviculture on the procedure concerning the importation of live or dead birds. The WBRU also made use of its social media, including the Unit's Facebook page and website, which were routinely updated with the latest information<sup>19</sup>. In order to better reach the hunting community, the WBRU collaborated with hunting organizations in the dissemination of information through their social media.

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

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

Several cases were referred to the Police for further investigation.

## 5.7. Investigations concerning illicit possession of protected birds

Recognising the fact that illicit trade and taxidermy of illegally acquired protected birds is a substantial driver behind illegal targeting of protected birds, the law enforcement authorities

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<sup>19</sup>Official website of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit. Available at: <https://wbru.gov.mt/>.

continued to dedicate substantial effort towards preventing, detecting, and curtailing any potential abuse.

During 2023, the WBRU together with the EPU and ERA officials inspected 2,004 bird specimens held in seven private collections. Five of these investigations were concluded and a total of 155 unregistered stuffed bird specimens were found to be illegally possessed. Specimens were seized and legal action was initiated against the individuals. The other two cases are still under investigation.

During the same period, the WBRU assisted Police during 11 investigations concerning possession of live birds. During these inspections a total of 103 live birds were examined, of which 71 birds were subsequently seized since they were not fitted with a closed ring or fitted with a ring larger than that required for the species or fitted with an illegal R16U ring not supplied by WBRU in 2016/17. The birds were taken for rehabilitation prior to being released back into the wild and legal action was initiated against the individuals.

During the year, the compliance team also assisted the police and the government-appointed veterinarian in identifying and verifying the legality of other specimens pertaining to pending investigations.

### **5.8. Judicial action against bird-related crime**

During 2023, officials of the WBRU attended and testified during various Court sittings for which assistance was requested by police. The Unit also issued administrative fines to 57 offenders, of which 56 were settled within 21 days and one was referred to the police for further proceedings in the Law Courts for failure to settle the fine within the statutory time period. Regulation 27A of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations regulating administrative fines was amended via the [Conservation of Wild Birds \(Amendment\) Regulations, 2022](#) (Legal Notice 86 of 2022) to include an aggregate penalty point system up to twelve (12) penalty points. Each administrative offence category carries a number of points as listed in Schedule VIII and if at any time during a two (2) year period a person accumulates in aggregate twelve (12) penalty points or more, WBRU assisted by the Executive Police will immediately suspend the relevant general licence for a period of one (1) year in line with Regulation 11(9).

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

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

Below is the outcome of some of the cases related to bird-related crime decided by the Maltese Law Courts in 2023:

- On 20 June 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case concerning hunting within the boundaries of Għadira bird sanctuary in September 2019. The accused was found guilty of hunting within a bird sanctuary and was ordered to pay €3,000, had his hunting licence issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.

- On 23 February 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case concerning illegal killing of a European Turtle-dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) in April 2022. The accused was found guilty of hunting of a protected species and was ordered to pay €1,500, had his hunting licence issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years, and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.
- On 06 November 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case of illegal taxidermy of protected species that occurred in October 2021. The accused was found guilty of all charges, including the illegal possession of protected specimens, and was ordered to pay €2,000, had his taxidermy licence issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years, were ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.
- On 04 April 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case involving two individuals found hunting at sea using illegal means in November 2021. The accused were found guilty of all charges brought against them and were ordered to pay a fine of €1,500 each, had their hunting license issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years and were ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.
- On 14 September 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case of illegal shooting of a Mediterranean Gull (*Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*) in Naxxar in November 2021. The accused was found guilty of all charges brought against him and was ordered to pay a fine of €5,000, had his hunting license issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws permanently revoked, and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.
- On 07 March 2023, the Law Courts decided on a case of hunting during prohibited hours in April 2018 and illegal possession of various protected bird specimens discovered in May 2019. The accused was found guilty of all charges and was ordered to pay €2,000, had his hunting licence issued under the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations and Schedule XV of Code of Police Laws suspended for two years, and was ordered the confiscation of the *corpus delicti*.