

Blackcaps, snared in an illegal mist net in Cyprus, are removed by a police officer

## OPINION

“It is illegal to kill most songbirds in the EU. But the legislation is hardly worth the paper it is written on”

# MARK CARWARDINE

**P**EOPLE OFTEN SAY YOU SHOULDN'T go to Iceland or the Faroe Islands because they kill whales. But that argument applies to almost every country in the world: we are just as bad in England for killing badgers. In the same vein, we certainly shouldn't be visiting anywhere in the Mediterranean. Every spring and autumn most Mediterranean countries permit the shockingly barbaric (and illegal) killing of tens of millions of songbirds. It's a wonder there are any left. Italy, France, Cyprus, Malta and many others are robbing the rest of Europe of their songbirds and, not surprisingly, driving many species to the brink of extinction.

Some of the techniques used are dreadfully cruel, too, resulting in unimaginably painful, lingering deaths. The hunters use 'lime sticks' covered in glue to capture any unsuspecting birds that land on them, as well as kilometre upon kilometre of 'mist nets'. They install speakers that play birdsong, and use songbirds in tiny cages as live decoys, to lure in their prey. In some countries, they even use wire nooses that strangle the birds and traps that crush them with stones.

Governments and hunters claim the hunting is 'traditional'. But that's utter nonsense. Most of the hunters are career trappers and many are accused of being involved in organised crime. The large-scale modern industry is a far cry from ancient tradition – driving a lucrative black market, it's all about money.

What's happening in Cyprus is particularly reprehensible and has been in the news recently. Bird trapping was banned there in 1974, but it continues on an industrial scale. According to a report

published by BirdLife Cyprus, a shocking 435,000 garden warblers, chiffchaffs, blackcaps and 155 other bird species were trapped on the island last autumn (up from 345,000 in 2022). The reason? The work of the anti-poaching unit of the British military base in Cyprus (where a lot of hunting takes place) was scaled back and, consequently, the hunters were given free reign.

It's a familiar problem. In theory, it is illegal to kill most songbirds in the EU. But the legislation is hardly worth the paper it is written on. Most governments either lack the political will to enforce the law or go out of their way to allow the slaughter to continue.

The most important legal instrument is the EU Birds Directive, which requires all Member States to protect all wild bird species. There are three critical regulations: wild birds must not be caught, killed or persecuted; traps, nets, cages and glue

of any kind, as well as electronic callers, are prohibited; and birds taken from the wild may not be sold in markets or restaurants. That makes most of the bird hunting in the Mediterranean blatantly illegal.

Unfortunately, though, the Directive allows for exemptions to these regulations and 'recognises the legitimacy of hunting wild birds as a form of sustainable use' (84 species are named specifically). These two loopholes completely scupper the protection and allow governments to sidestep the legislation to appease the powerful hunting lobbies (in other words, they appear to be more interested in buying hunting lobby votes rather than enforcing the law).


There are two obvious solutions. In the short-term, the best hope is non-profit organisations and volunteers – such as those from the wonderful Committee Against Bird

### → AT A GLANCE

- More than 25 million songbirds are shot, trapped and collected every year across 23 Mediterranean countries, including Italy, France, Greece, Cyprus, Malta and Egypt.
- Skylarks, song thrushes, redwings, goldfinches, bullfinches, blackcaps, garden warblers, redstarts and swallows are among the many species targeted.
- Most of the poaching hotspots are on major migratory routes between the birds' summer breeding grounds in Europe and wintering grounds in Africa.
- The birds are killed for food (they are eaten whole as a banned but popular delicacy known as 'ambelopoulia' – a platter of a dozen birds sells in restaurants for upwards of 80 euros). They are also hunted for sport and to sell as caged pets.

Slaughter and BirdLife – whose field teams disrupt hunters and help police to convict them, and seize thousands of traps, nets, weapons and decoys. Without these brave souls, there would be few birds left.

But the long-term answer has to be infringement proceedings by the European Commission, to force governments to honour their legal responsibilities. This is already happening. In 2021, European judges gave France a final warning (with the threat of fines) to outlaw the hunting of songbirds using glue sticks – which, eventually, worked. And it recently opened proceedings against Malta.

It's utterly ridiculous that EU funds spent on expensive bird conservation programmes in some countries are completely wasted because the very same birds are later killed, illegally, in other countries. It's scandalous on every level. 

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