

When doves die

This year's British Birdwatching Fair is raising funds to tackle the illegal killing of birds in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and Lebanon.



For those who like killing things, the photograph is presumably excitement itself. But for those who prefer their birdlife well, *alive*, the image circulating on social media is unequivocally shocking. Beaming towards the camera, four men—an entire arsenal slung casually over shoulders—proudly display the day's feathered haul: the corpses of 30 White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*. Thirty. In another image, a five-year-old boy clasps a young Black-crowned Night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* in his right hand. The bird is dead. With his left arm, the boy just about steadies a rifle that dwarfs him. The boy is smiling.



European Turtle-dove
populations have declined by
30% in the last 15 years
(David Tipling)

Spotted Eagles *Clanga clanga*, plus popular species such as Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, are among 37 species of 'migratory soaring birds' (raptors, storks, pelicans) using the Rift Valley–Red Sea flyway. In terms of absolute numbers of soaring migrants, this thoroughfare between two continents is the second most important route in the world.

Such stats and ranking are enough to set alarm bells ringing. What makes them holler loud and clear is that populations of one-third of the 188 migrant passerine species using the flyway are in freefall. Many have already vanished from swathes of their range. Species such as European Roller *Coracias garrulus* and Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur* and Eurasian Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* all fly the gauntlet of the Eastern Mediterranean's killing fields. What proportion of these migrants departing Europe will actually survive two migrations and make it back next spring to breed?

The scale of the problem

A recent BirdLife International assessment of illegal killing of birds in the Mediterranean estimates that more than 25 million individual birds may be illegally killed here each year. In Cyprus, Egypt and Lebanon—the death toll is thought to exceed two million birds. In the Middle East overall, says Ibrahim Khader (Regional Director, BirdLife International Middle East Division), "illegal killing has been and continues to be the single most significant direct threat to bird species".

The BirdLife analysis goes deep, investigating an abyss of slaughter. It demonstrates that each of the top five culprit nations has a particularly notorious 'black spot': an area where more than 400,000 birds are killed each year. BirdLife has identified at least three species with more than

one million birds killed in the Mediterranean annually. Prominent among these is the European Turtle Dove. Since the turn of the century, "Turtle Dove populations have declined by 30% overall", says Richard Grimmett (BirdLife International's Director of Conservation), "yet still one million are killed illegally each year—and that's in addition to the legal take with hunting of this species permitted in many countries in the autumn".

The Eastern Mediterranean is one enormous blackspot for two chief reasons: geography and culture. The combined lie of land and sea restricts many species to a narrow migration corridor. Others need to rest and feed prior to, or after, crossing the Sahara Desert or Mediterranean Sea. And thus birds become concentrated at 'bottleneck' sites or oases and other vegetated locations, which exaggerates their vulnerability. Depending on the area in which the birds find themselves, migrants may be shot, trapped in mist-nets or cages and enticed to perch on limed sticks. They are lured by decoys, by playback of voice-recordings and by bright lights projecting into the darkest of nights.

A long tradition

As for culture, the Eastern Mediterranean has a long tradition of hunting birds—

stretching back to the Pharaohs in the case of Egypt. "Bird-hunting", says Assad Serhal (Director General, Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon; SPNL, BirdLife in Lebanon), "is socially accepted in our country", as it is in others across the region. Serhal reckons there may be as many as half-a-million active hunters in Lebanon: this translates to one-ninth of the population. With so many hunters among the electorate, it would seemingly take a politician as rare as a Northern Bald Ibis to make a stand against the practice.

In the region, birds are hunted for food, fun and finance. "In Lebanon", says Serhal, "passerines are mainly targeted for sale to restaurants or for personal consumption." In Egypt", says Noor Noor, Executive Coordinator of Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE, BirdLife Affiliate in Egypt), "Common Quails are viewed as a delicacy". Thanks to high market demand, quail-hunters earn well above the average annual income. Eurasian Golden Orioles *Oriolus oriolus* are prized due to a belief that they represent a natural avian alternative to Viagra. Falcon-trapping is an even more lucrative business, with Saker Falcons *Falco cherrug* reportedly being sold for US\$5,000 or more.

Welcome to life—and death—in the Eastern Mediterranean. This autumn many millions of migratory birds will cross the Mediterranean Sea from Europe to Africa, heading to wintering quarters further south. As you read this, their post-breeding movements will already have started—as will their massacre.

The Africa–Eurasia flyway is used by some 25 globally threatened species. Their number includes such charismatic birds as Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gragarius* and Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*. Eastern Imperial *Aquila heliaca* and Greater

A socio-economic study finds out the importance of shot birds in local peoples food consumption (Wattar Al Bahry)





ABOVE There are an estimated 700 km of mistnets erected along Egypt's northern coast (Watter Al Bahry)

BELOW Waders and Quail await sale at an Egyptian market (Watter Al Bahry)



Sport hunting and tourism is commonplace; Lebanese hunters even travel elsewhere in the region to pursue their hobby.

The scale of illegal bird killing in the Eastern Mediterranean, in terms of both spatial extent and the size of the collective hunters' bag, is bad enough. But what truly terrifies is that, in some countries, the problem is intensifying. In Egypt, mist-nets have only recently become a prominent feature of bird-trapping, yet are now on widespread sale. In 2012, a German television crew discovered mist-nets erected in a near-continuous barrier lining 700km of Egyptian's northern coast. Let's reflect on that for a moment. Seven hundred kilometres is the distance that separates London

from Edinburgh. That's about 78,000 nine-metre-long mist-nets in a single line. From the perspective of a quail, oriole or dove, that's one heck of a deadly blockade.

There are other reasons for hunting getting worse. In Egypt, law enforcement has suffered from the political instability that has smothered the country in recent years, explains Noor Noor. Arms are more widely available. Desert travel is now by vehicle rather than camel, so even remote oases have become accessible to hunters. MP3 players and inexpensive speakers have made playback of bird calls commonplace and cost-effective. And, as those images of White Storks and the Black-crowned Night-heron demonstrate, social media is both facilitating information

exchange and exacerbating one-upmanship ('my catch is bigger than yours?'). "In Mediterranean countries of the Middle East", summarises Ibrahim Khader, "there is a thriving market for some species, easy accessibility to migration funnels and roosting sites, plus an ample supply of weapons". In brief, the prospects for many species of migratory birds are catastrophic.

Turning things around

But are they? This is where the BirdLife Partnership—and the British Birdwatching Fair 2015—comes in. The findings from BirdLife's recent evaluation provides clear evidence that illegal killing in the Eastern Mediterranean "is at a scale where we cannot stand back and let it continue", stresses Richard Grimmett. "The killing is undermining conservation efforts taken in northern and central Europe and in countries along the Africa-Eurasia flyway of which the Eastern Mediterranean is part." BirdLife is on the case.

This year the 'BirdFair' is raising funds for a project to tackle illegal hunting, co-ordinated by BirdLife's Middle East Division and implemented in their respective countries by SPNL and NCE. Part of a wider initiative on Migratory Soaring Birds and integrated into BirdLife's Regional Flyway Facility, the project seeks to significantly reduce the scale and impact of illegal and indiscriminate killing of migratory birds in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The focus on *illegal* and *indiscriminate* killing is significant. BirdLife International is not seeking an end to all hunting of migratory birds. Such an absolute goal would doom the project to failure from the outset. It is better, the thinking goes, to be realistic as oppose to idealistic. Perfection is the enemy of the good, and all that. Readers in some European and North

American countries—such as the UK, host of the BirdFair—may find such pragmatism unpalatable, but Grimmett reminds us that bird-hunting is also a longstanding feature of Britain's heritage. "Britons used to catch hundreds of thousands of larks, pipits and finches for sale in markets."

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Grimmett continues, "we have to accept that hunting is a strongly established and popular practice of economic and cultural significance—and focus instead on advancing a commitment to responsible and legal hunting". The principal conservation outcomes desired are the reduced killing of protected species, particularly migratory soaring birds such as White Stork (the figurehead of this year's BirdFair), and improved protection and law enforcement, particularly at key black spots for illegal killing.

In both Egypt and Lebanon, the problem is not a lack of legislation but its enforcement. Existing laws ban certain trapping devices and methods of killing, set strict seasons for hunting, and prohibit the killing of birds in reserves and of protected species anywhere. "An adequate legislative framework is essential", says Ibrahim Khader, "but without enforcement, it has limited impact." In both countries, the problem is one of woeful enforcement capacity. In Lebanon, Assad Serhal explains, "hunting has been banned for 20 years, but those charged with enforcement have insufficient staff to deal with such a huge problem". Noor Noor agrees. In Egypt, "in common with many environmental issues, the problem is not the lack of legislation, but rather the actual enforcement of laws".

A twin alliance

To tackle the problem, BirdLife International, SPNL and NCE are collaborating with public

authorities and the hunting sector. These twin alliances are already paying dividends. In Egypt, under the aegis of the Convention on Migratory Species, BirdLife has played a key part in establishing a new Action Plan to address the killing of migratory birds. Agreed in March 2014, the Plan includes the need for strengthened law enforcement, education and awareness, a socio-economic study, and field monitoring. The Egyptian Environmental Affairs agency has decided to establish a hunting unit to address the issue. The Agency is working closely with NCE, which is leading on awareness and monitoring, as well as working with the managers of protected areas managers to enforce hunting laws.

In Lebanon, SPNL has secured parliamentary approval for a new hunting law and enabling regulations. SPNL has complemented this with an approach that Assad Serhal terms “responsible hunting”, where “hunters become responsible for the sustainability of the game species and bag limits, respect non-game species and hunting seasons, and help protect their habitats”. Making this happen has required three decades of discussion, education and collaboration with key hunting representatives. “Responsible hunters are finally differentiating themselves from ‘shooters’, and have declared themselves willing to work with SPNL to deliver a more sustainable approach to hunting”, says Serhal.

These are not empty words. Hunting bodies, SPNL, municipal authorities and local communities have collectively identified a series of pilot ‘Responsible Hunting Areas’ (RHAs) across Lebanon. On 2 April this year, eight municipalities signed a declaration on responsible hunting and defined RHA boundaries. “The municipalities”, says Serhal,

“are ready to work with SPNL and hunters to establish and manage these areas for game and non-game species”. There is direct economic benefit to participating communities through new job opportunities as guards and guides. Hunters, meanwhile, see RHAs as “a practical way for their hobby to become legal—and sustainable”, says Serhal. With such a caucus of support, Serhal anticipates the model snowballing across the country. “Other communities are already expressing interest”, he enthuses.

Purists might consider that collaborating with hunters is akin to conservationists entering into a Faustian pact. Ibrahim Khader disagrees. “Working with responsible hunters, rather than fighting them, is the way to advance conservation in the region”, he says. Khader sees strengthening regional and national alliances with responsible hunters as a key tool to change behaviour—and thereby save migratory birds. Khader also sets BirdLife sights higher, setting an aspiration for the project “to secure high-level political support to address illegal killing at national and regional levels”. This might even involve a formal Declaration by the Arab Council of Environment Ministers.

Such an agreement would constitute a monumental step forward for the region as a whole. The conservation of migratory birds requires joined-up action in, and between, range states along the flyway. Achievements in one country or region can be undermined by threats and failures of conservation effort in another. Moreover, “lessons learned in one country”, says Khader, “should be shared and supported right along the flyway to bring national, regional and global benefits”. In this context, as in many others, the advantages of BirdLife International’s global Partnership are plain.

From Malta to North Africa

Equally evident is the contribution that BirdFair funding can make to efforts to halt illegal killing in the Mediterranean. “BirdFair funding is significant in its own right”, Richard Grimmett explains, “but it is also critical to help BirdLife leverage other donors, notably the Global Environment Facility”. Big funding bodies often put up major grants only if the recipient has secured money from other sources. The Global Environment Facility is willing to finance a second phase of the Migratory Soaring Birds project and jointly finance the Regional Flyway Facility—provided BirdLife secures co-financing. Which is where the BirdFair comes in.

Those with long memories may recall that the BirdFair has form on hunting in the Mediterranean. It is just over 25 years since the BirdFair’s first-ever project supported a campaign against illegal hunting in Malta. Although birds are still commonly shot in Malta and a referendum to ban spring hunting narrowly failed in March 2015, the overall situation is now one or even two orders of magnitude worse in both Egypt and Lebanon.

But not for much longer if the BirdLife Partnership gets its way. According to Assad Serhal, SPNL aspires to “Responsible Hunting Areas becoming fully operational” in Lebanon by 2020. “Our aim is that responsible hunters become the guardians of bird species and their habitats.” Richard Grimmett’s vision is that, by 2020, “legislation will be enforced, no hunting will occur within protected areas, and shifting public attitudes force an end to widespread illegal and indiscriminate hunting”. It won’t be easy, but those sickening images of White Storks will eventually become a thing of the past. “BirdLife has to play a long game with illegal bird killing”, concludes Grimmett, “but we are confident that things will change”.

WB

by James Lowen

Find out how you can provide a safer journey for Eurasian Turtle Dove, White Stork and other migratory birds by visiting www.birdlife.org/save-migratory-birds

Read more about this work on: migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org/en/

www.spnl.org/sustainable-hunting/

Teaching people how to identify the species that can be legally hunted can help reduce the number of threatened species being shot (Watter Al Bahry)

