Malta bans spring hunting

The Prime Minister of Malta, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, has announced the first self-imposed ban on spring hunting of Common Quails Coturnix coturnix and Turtle Doves Streptopelia turtur in the Maltese islands. The PM said that no spring hunting could take place while the European Court of Justice case against Malta was pending (in April last year the ECJ applied an interim measure banning spring hunting for the first time since Malta joined the EU, in 2004). ‘The Prime Minister’s decision gives us hope that Malta is starting to take serious action for the protection of the EU’s common natural heritage,’ said Joseph Mangion, BirdLife Malta President. ‘We ask all political parties to join together on this issue and stop seeing spring hunting as a conflict between two sides, but as a serious conservation issue.’

The RSPB has been working with partners, especially BirdLife Malta, to bring illegal hunting in Malta to an end. In January 2007, the RSPB delivered a 115,000-strong petition requesting an immediate halt to illegal spring hunting and for Malta to comply with the EU’s Birds Directive. Alistair Gammell, director of the RSPB’s international division, said: ‘BirdLife hopes that Maltese hunters, like their fellow hunters in the EU, will respect the Birds Directive protecting wild birds during their breeding and spring migration periods. This will benefit the conservation of wild birds across Europe and thus there will be more birds in the autumn, when hunters can hunt legally.’

Birds Directive celebrates 30 years

The good news from Malta came as conservationists were preparing to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the EU Birds Directive. Passed into law on 2nd April 1979, the Birds Directive remains the cornerstone of wildlife legislation in the EU (and was followed by the Habitats Directive in 1992).

The European Commissioner for the Environment, Stavros Dimas, attended a BirdLife event in Brussels to mark the 30th anniversary. ‘The Birds Directive is one of the great success stories of EU environmental policy,’ he said. And, referring to discussions on the EU’s post-2010 biodiversity policy, he stressed: ‘The Birds Directive is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago and has a key role to play in delivering our biodiversity policy for many years to come.’

African conservationists also conveyed their gratitude to the EU, for protecting African birds during their summer stay in Europe. Hamidou Mamousou, from the BirdLife partner in Burkina Faso, said: ‘We wish that we could have a Birds Directive too.’

Stone crush traps in France

Despite the progress made by the Birds Directive, it’s a return to the Stone Age for bird conservation in France. Stone crush traps used in the Massif Central were banned for a century, yet illegal poaching continued. So, the French Government legalised the practice in 2005 and the poachers became the custodians of a ‘traditional hunting method’ (!).

The now-legal traps, called tendelles, are one of the most brutal instruments in the bird-trapper’s arsenal. A trap consists of a limestone slab, weighing some 3–10 kg, which is propped up on a structure of twigs and wood slivers and strewn with fresh juniper berries as bait. Birds coming to eat the berries brush against the twigs and are crushed under the slab or trapped in a small cavity beneath it. Many birds do not die instantly but haemorrhage, suffocate or die of thirst.

Numerous birds also die from hypothermia as the temperatures in winter on the plateaux of the trapping region rarely rise above 0°C, even during the day.

The permitted quarry species are Blackbird Turdus merula, Fieldfare T. pilaris, Song Thrush T. philomelos, Redwing T. iliacus and Mistle Thrush T. viscivorus. But these appalling traps are indiscriminate and other bird species are often victims, especially Meadow Pipit Anthus pratensis, Robin Erithacus rubecula and Chaffinch Fringilla coelebs, but also more uncommon species such as Alpine Accentor Prunella collaris or Ring Ouzel T. torquatus. Since these species are protected under the EU Birds Directive, the use of stone crush traps is strictly forbidden throughout the EU. However, 32 communities in southern France are once again officially permitted to set up a total of 20,000 tendelles.

The Environment Ministry in Paris justifies this on the basis of a new type of trap that allegedly catches the smaller protected species alive. And, the French Government has convinced Brussels that this trapping method is selective. But the German Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) has done its own research in France to disprove the trappers’ claims.

Between December 2006 and January 2009, CABS teams visited several dozen trapping sites with some 2,000 stone crush traps and recorded the trapping results. The results were unambiguous. As expected, not only thrushes were found in the traps: almost 20% of birds trapped were of protected species. And the claim that the heavy limestone slabs would trap the smaller protected species alive was also disproved: 75% of all trapped
birds were dead, thrushes and protected species alike. Those that had survived were usually so badly injured that they could not be released into the wild. Not a single bird of a protected species was found alive.

CABS spokesman David Conlin commented: ‘What the French Government “sold” to the European Commission as “selective, humane and traditional” is in fact a barbaric and unnatural custom that is cruel to the birds (and animals) involved. The traps are unquestionably in contravention of EU legislation and the French Government has pulled the wool over the eyes of the Commission with its untrustworthy studies.’


News and comment

Sociable Lapwings in the firing line

More alarming news comes from Syria, where RSPB fieldworkers have encountered hunters shooting Sociable Lapwings Vanellus gregarius that were discovered in the region as recently as March 2007.

The Sociable Lapwing is listed as Critically Endangered, with a world population estimated at 11,200 birds. The birds migrate through the Middle East between their wintering grounds in northeast Africa and their only breeding area, the steppe grasslands of central Asia, principally Kazakhstan. A satellite-tagged bird from Kazakhstan was located in Turkey in October 2007 in a flock of 3,200 individuals. This followed simultaneous counts of over 1,500 in northern Syria and 1,000 in southeast Turkey in March 2007. Two tagged birds were then tracked to winter quarters in Sudan in February 2008.

Martin Scott was a member of the RSPB survey team in Syria. He said: ‘It seems clear that hunting could be a major threat to the species. During our visit we met government officials, police chiefs and religious leaders and everyone we spoke to recognised the plight of this bird and was keen to take action to prevent further deaths.’ The RSPB’s Rob Sheldon leads a research team studying Sociable Lapwings, funded by the UK Government’s Darwin Initiative. He added: ‘The Sociable Lapwing faces many threats and clearly hunting is emerging as a key danger. Thankfully, Syrian Government rangers moved rapidly to the area and were able to negotiate with the hunters and avert a worse disaster, which could have affected the hundreds of Sociable Lapwings passing through Syria on migration.’

Meanwhile, what could be a valuable tool in winning hearts and minds in Syria is the first dedicated field guide to the birds of the country. Written in Arabic, it’s been jointly produced by the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW) and BirdLife and covers nearly 400 species. ‘The release of the “Birds of Syria” field guide gives a significant boost to hopes of protecting threatened birds in the country, and presents opportunities for the developing conservation movement in Syria,’ said Dr Akram Darwish, vice-chair of the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife.

Heat is on for upland birds

Warm summers are dramatically reducing populations of craneflies (Tipulidae), which is having a severe impact on upland birds like the European Golden Plover Pluvialis apricaria that rely on them for food. Previous research has shown how changes in the timing of Golden Plover breeding, as a result of increasing spring temperatures, might affect their ability to synchronise with the spring emergence of the craneflies. New research by the RSPB shows that the effects of increasing late summer temperatures, which cause the surface of the peatland soil to dry out, killing the cranefly larvae, are even more problematic, resulting in a drop of up to 95% in the numbers of adult craneflies emerging the following spring.

Average late summer temperatures in the Peak District study area have increased by 1.9°C over the last 35 years, and this has become the most important climatic factor affecting local Golden Plover populations. If these trends continue, as predicted by current climate models, plover populations will decline, or even face extinction, particularly in the south of their range, where temperatures will be highest.

Dr James Pearce-Higgins of RSPB Scotland said: ‘Many studies predict dire effects of climate change upon wildlife but this study provides a rare example where such predictions are based on a detailed understanding of a species’ requirements, linking the effects of climate on food...
resources to changes in breeding success and population size. However, by understanding these processes, we now have the chance to respond. If we can maintain good-quality habitats for craneflies, then we can help the birds too. For example, by blocking drainage ditches on our Forsinard reserve in northern Scotland we hope to raise water levels and reduce the likelihood of the cranefly larvae drying out in hot summers. The fight against climate change will increasingly mean strengthening habitats to protect vulnerable species, as well as trying to reduce [carbon] emissions.

Meanwhile, the RSPB has risked a gale of protest by calling for a large increase in the number of onshore windfarms to tackle climate change. The Society commissioned a report from the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), which found the UK lagging far behind in the drive for wind power.

Wind turbines met just less than 2% of the UK’s electricity demands in 2007, though deployment levels varied, with Scotland significantly outperforming other parts of the UK. The UK was 13th in a European league table of wind power per head of population, trailing Estonia and just ahead of Belgium. The three countries at the top of the table were Denmark, where wind power met 29% of demand, Spain (20%) and Germany (15%).

After looking at the ways in which those countries had facilitated onshore wind through their planning systems, and drawing on good practice from the countries of the UK, the report reached some conclusions on how to protect wildlife and deliver wind power on a large scale. It recommended that the planning system should take a strategic approach, identifying areas where new turbines should be given priority as well as those where they are most likely to conflict with wildlife. There should also be an expectation that developers discuss proposed developments before planning applications are submitted, to reduce conflict. And there should be more ways for communities to benefit from the windfarms on their doorstep through direct ownership of the turbines, reduced bills, improvements to the local environment and/or money for local facilities.

Ruth Davis, Head of Climate Change Policy at the RSPB, said: ‘The need for renewable energy could not be more urgent. Left unchecked, climate change threatens many species with extinction. Yet, that sense of urgency is not translating into action on the ground to harness the abundant wind energy around us.

This report shows that if we get it right, the UK can produce huge amounts of clean energy without time-consuming conflicts and harm to our wildlife. Get it wrong and people may reject wind power. That would be disastrous.’

RSPB scientist wins BOU medal

An RSPB research scientist has been awarded the BOU’s Godman-Salvin Medal – making him only the 24th recipient in nearly 90 years. The honour bestowed on Rhys Green came at the recent BOU conference and celebrates his work studying the effects of human activities on bird populations.

Mark Avery, Director of Conservation at the RSPB, said: ‘Rhys has made a huge contribution to RSPB’s species recovery work, particularly on Stone-curlews [Burhinus oedicnemus], Corn Crakes [Crex crex] and Indian vultures [Gyps]. He’s that rare scientist who can make his work relevant to a room of nature-reserve wardens or a room of politicians – or even a room of both!’

Previous recipients of the medal have included pioneering ornithologist and founder of the World Wildlife Fund, Max Nicholson; current BOU president Prof. Chris Perrins; and Harry Witherby, founder of British Birds.

Rhys said: ‘It is a great privilege to receive the Godman-Salvin Medal. I have always worked as an applied ecologist, studying ways in which the effects of human activities on bird populations can be alleviated. Until recently, this honour was awarded as recognition for work carried out solely in the academic discipline of ornithology. The fact that the science applied to bird conservation is now also being recognised is a sign that ornithology has developed to the stage where it is playing a role in protecting species from population declines and extinction, and that is great news.’

RSPB calls for more windfarms

Seawatch SW annual report

The SeaWatch SW Annual Report for 2008 is now available to download from www.seawatch-sw.org This fully illustrated report is essential reading for anyone interested in UK marine wildlife, especially those based in the southwest or who are interested in migratory seabirds or marine mammals. SeaWatch SW 2009 is now underway and scheduled to run a full monitoring programme this summer and autumn. A few more volunteer observers are needed to assist with the Gwennap Head survey during 1st–30th August (bed and brunch near the watchpoint, and expenses equivalent to £70 a week are provided) and also to help with marine wildlife observation and recording during the survey phase in Cornwall.

SeaWatch SW is also looking to expand the sister sites network. If you seawatch regularly at a local site and would like to contribute to the project (ideally, sister sites should have more than 100 hours of coverage between mid July and mid October), then contact Russell Wynn at rbwl@noc.soton.ac.uk or visit the website.
In the last month, the project to build a new bird observatory on Fair Isle has received a significant boost, with the last major elements in the funding package being secured. The Scottish Government, through the Scottish Rural Development Programme, has stumped up a whopping £1.94 million (half the cost of the project), while Highlands & Islands Enterprise provided £400,000 on top of that. Together with £1.15 million from the Shetland Islands Council (SIC), this is sufficient to enable construction work to go ahead as planned in summer 2009. The planning application for the project was approved by SIC in mid April, and you can see drawings of the new building on the FIBO website. Demolition of the 40-year-old existing observatory is scheduled to start in May, and construction of the new building in the summer. If all goes well, the new Obs will be open for business in spring 2010.

However, the fundraising isn’t quite complete yet. So far, the FIBO appeal has garnered an impressive £250,000, meaning that a shortfall of around £300,000 still needs to be found. Compared with the initial £4m target, this now seems eminently possible, but it still has to be done! The FIBO directors and wardens Deryk and Hollie Shaw send heartfelt thanks to those who have already dipped into their pockets, and encourage anyone with links to the island or the observatory to help the project over this final hurdle if they possibly can. Thanks once again to the photographers who have donated fees from front-cover images used in BB this year, and also other photographers who have donated their fees to the appeal. It’s a testament to the perceived value of the observatory that, even in the depths of a recession, an ambitious project like this is still on schedule. Visit the FIBO website – www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk – for more details and an update on progress.

The price of your monthly issue of BB will not be increasing this year. Normally, a modest increase in annual subscriptions, in line with inflation (of production costs), comes into force at the start of the new financial year (1st July). However, at their last meeting, BB directors agreed that the cost of an annual subscription would be frozen for the financial year 2009/10 so that subscribers already feeling the pinch in a struggling economy would not be further hit. With a great mix of articles already planned for the next 12 months, it’s just one more reason to keep reading…

Bob Scott

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Bob Scott on 26th March, following a short illness. Bob, who was 70, spent almost 40 years working for the RSPB, beginning as warden of Dungeness (both the RSPB reserve and the bird observatory) and finishing up as head of reserves management. He had a long association with BB: he was a founder member of BB2000 Ltd, and remained an active and committed director of the company until his death; and, of course, he was a former compiler of News and comment. A full obituary will appear in BB shortly.

We are very pleased to welcome Brian Small onto the BB Editorial Board, with effect from 1st May. Brian will be well known to most readers for his contributions on various identification matters, most recently on ‘Ehrenberg’s Redstarts’ Phoenicurus phoenicurus samamiscus, in the February issue. Brian has just completed his term of office with BBRC but will continue in his role as the Committee’s Museum Consultant. Brian lives in Suffolk with his wife and family and works as an art teacher as well as an illustrator for a variety of projects, including HBW; he is widely travelled as a tour-leader and is a co-founder of the website www.surfbirds.com

The Birds of Scotland fund

The Birds of Scotland has been a great success, recognised by the award of the Neill medal by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London. And as over 80% of the stock has now sold, it has achieved financial success too.

Both SOC Council and the editors of the book wished this success to be a springboard for other projects, and have agreed that cash surpluses from The Birds of Scotland should be used as a special fund to support ornithological projects in Scotland. Details of the fund and how to apply can be found on the SOC website: www.the-soc.org.uk/birds-of-scotland-fund.htm

BB prices stay the same