

## The 'joys' of trapping



Dead hawfinches stashed in cramped conditions that were intercepted last week by Italian authorities in southern Italy, some which might have been destined for Malta as trapping decoy birds.

When Parliamentary Secretary for Animal Rights Roderick Galdes, who loses no opportunity to lash out at Birdlife for 'exaggerating' their claims about abuses by hunters and trappers, boldly asserted that he had 'found a crack' in existing EU law such that Maltese trappers would once again man their outposts this autumn, little did he anticipate the repercussions such a rash decision would have on Malta's natural environment and beyond.

Trapping resumption supporters would have us believe that checks are in place to prevent abuse, with 60 enforcement officers trained to monitor that the conditions of the 'derogation' unilaterally applied by Malta are religiously adhered to; that the total bag limit of trapped finches has been set at almost 27,000 birds and that no new trapping sites will be allowed on garigue or in Natura 2000 sites.

Considering that the enforcement set-up has failed to thwart illegal trapping ever since the 'traditional practice' was phased out in 2009, such assurances fail to convince. For instance, in a reconnaissance exercise by Birdlife in 2011, at least 24 illegal trapping sites were discovered. And last March and April, the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) reported 30 incidents of illegal trapping, three of which were in protected areas.

But Galdes would have us believe that, six months later, the situation will be much better due to a revamp and capacity-building exercise in his supervision facilities. He seems to have learned nothing from the sham that was the opening of a limited trapping season for golden plover and song thrush by the previous administration, which led to widespread abuse, namely the targeting of other species besides the two permitted ones.

Eyes roll when one hears the way by which trappers are meant to report each finch they catch – by sending a text message, and entering the numbers in carnet de chasse logbooks. The 27,000 finches for the 4,625 Maltese trappers who applied for a licence translates into just under six finches per trapper for the entire two-month season; in other words, each trapper is to catch less than a finch per week. Do the authorities really expect trappers to send text messages when they make a catch, so as to make the ice they are skating on even thinner?

The alternative is not to increase the bag limit but to cap the number of trapping licences that should have been issued to, say, 2,000, especially since almost half of the 4,625 trapping licences have been issued to new trappers. The latter figure somewhat rubbishes the argument bandied around that the phasing out of all trapping as a result of EU accession had inflicted untold misery on the trapping community, who were resorting to antidepressants. The 1,900 newcomers to the trapping community this autumn have surely not suffered psychologically from the closure of the trapping season five years ago.

Contrary to the widespread perception, the environmental impacts of trapping are even more insidious than that of hunting. I give two justifications for my assertion: Firstly, rectangular swathes of natural vegetation are cleared so as not to allow any obstacles to the laying of nets deployed in the trapping season.



The aftermath of a garigue vegetation clearing exercise, just outside the precincts of the Ghadira bird sanctuary, presumably to pave the way for bird trapping activities.

In some cases, trappers resort to extreme measures in their quest to clear natural vegetation. For instance, a few weeks ago, a trapper was apprehended just outside Ghadira bird sanctuary in Mellieħa, equipped with a blowtorch and an LPG gas tank, as he was happily torching an expanse of garigue.

Incidentally, this area is reputed to be one of the last places where the giant orchid grows. Furthermore it contains (or, at least, used to contain) populations of endemic plant species, such as the Maltese fleabane and the Maltese spurge.

The cliffs are littered with disused trapping hides, where natural vegetation was recovering ever since trapping was phased out five years ago, but which will once again be subject to the devastation trapping inflicts on the natural environment. One can hardly be accused of hyperbole when equating the habitat destruction of bird trapping with that of trawling in the sea.

Secondly, in the past few weeks alone, in three different incidents, about 1,300 songbirds have been seized by Maltese law enforcement authorities as they were being smuggled from Sicily to Malta via the catamaran. It seems the reopening of the trapping season in Malta this autumn is fuelling an onslaught on the wild populations of songbirds in Sicily and southern Italy to meet the demand in Malta.

Some of the songbirds fetch much higher prices in Malta as they are deployed as decoy birds during trapping (a single hawfinch reputedly rakes in €100 to €150).

Only last Monday, a large consignment of 600 different songbird species was intercepted by the Guardia di Finanza in southern Italy, bound for Sicily.

Presumably, given the ongoing proven trafficking of such bird species to Malta

via the catamaran, some of them were ultimately destined for the local market. Of these 600 birds, which were stashed in cramped conditions (in boxes only a few centimetres wide – see photo above), 100 had already died by the time the law enforcement officers stepped in. The rest were taken to bird conservation NGOs in Messina, where they were released in protected areas in Sicily.

### *Environmental impacts of trapping are even more insidious than of hunting*

What never ceases to amaze me is the degree of straw-clutching trapping supporters resort to when someone dares to highlight the detrimental impacts the reopening of the trapping season is having. Their tactics include blaming Sicilian and Italian trappers and authorities, since the birds were caught outside Malta, completely disregarding the fact that every so often Maltese traffickers are apprehended as well, and that Malta is compounding such traffic by creating a market for decoy birds.

Granted, poaching of songbirds in Italy and elsewhere still continued even when there was no trapping season in Malta but the demand for such birds caught in the wild obviously will not diminish when trapping is allowed on our shores. This farcical train of thought is like drug traffickers and users in Malta pleading when they are caught that they should be let off the hook because the drugs were grown in Colombia (I am obviously not equating trappers and hunters with drug traffickers or users).

Other tenuous arguments resorted to include the claim that the media seems to have a knack for highlighting trapping and bird hunting infringements, while turning a blind eye to other environmental problems they perceive as being more insidious in nature, such as illegal and unsustainable fishing techniques, the use of pesticides in agriculture and overdevelopment.

I beg to differ when it comes to media coverage, which is increasingly addressing the plundering of our seas through the use of trammel nets (parit), for example, with this column taking a leading role in this, while overdevelopment is a staple feature of the media nowadays; in any case, the time-honoured adage that 'two wrongs don't make one right' applies in this situation.

While Galdes will probably have secured his long-term political future, he should mull over the following questions: does he think his stint in power will ultimately be remembered for his laudable stance against animal circuses and his promotion of horse shelters, or for his consistent shoring up of the trapping and hunting lobbies?

Doesn't he consider his job title (which includes reference to the protection of animal rights) as being somewhat a misnomer, and that it should be tweaked to 'Parliamentary Secretary for the Regulation of Hunting and Trapping'?

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