

Foundation for Wild Birds' Conservation

Following several discussions between BirdLife and the FKNK (Federation for Hunting and Trapping), a Foundation for Wild Birds' Conservation has been set up between the two organisations under the patronage of the Ministry of Environment. The aim of this Foundation is to carry out projects that will improve the situation of protected species of wild birds in Malta.

This agreement will not stop BirdLife in any way from further campaigning for changes to the hunting regulations that will help to save more wild birds.

The Foundation will be launching four projects, namely:

Establishment of a Monitoring Board for Hunting

The most important project will be a government board to

- a) monitor the hunting situation and
- b) step up law enforcement.

This board will comprise a Chairperson, an Assistant Commissioner of Police, a high-ranking officer from the Armed Forces and representatives of the Environment Ministry and the Environment Protection Department. There will also be two persons from BirdLife and two from the FKNK.

This body will not be simply a consultative or advisory committee. It is to have executive powers, which means that it can actually give instructions directly to the police or other government bodies. It will be able to collect information, analyse and tackle problems and take concrete and active steps to prevent or halt any infringements of the hunting regulations.

Re-Introduction of the Barn Owl

This project aims to breed barn owl for eventual release into the wild. If the project is successful, this magnificent bird may start breeding on its own and establish a wild population in the country. This bird used to breed in Malta but was exterminated by hunting in the mid-eighties. In the past, BirdLife often debated the feasibility of such a project because it believed that any re-introduced bird would be immediately shot down. However, with the new attitude that the FKNK seems ready to adopt, there may be a good chance that such birds will survive. Barn owls adapt easily to living in close proximity to humans and often nest in buildings.

Breeding of Quail

The FKNK will set up and manage a project to breed domestic quail for game hunting purposes, and see that this is done in an organised and strictly controlled manner. If implemented properly, the hunting of reared game will reduce the destruction of wild quail. Since BirdLife is a wild bird society, the farming of domestic quail (as that of domestic poultry) is essentially beyond its scope. However, the only reason why BirdLife has accepted to include the quail-breeding programme as part of the Foundation package is that the project will divert pressure from declining wild populations of quail. This has in fact happened in other countries where similar strategies have been adopted and BirdLife International is fully backing the Foundation because of this experience. Whether the farming of quail (or any other animal for that matter) is morally right or wrong is another question altogether, and is something which only strict vegetarians can condemn with any credibility.

International Support

The initiative that BirdLife Malta has taken in setting up the Foundation for Wild Birds Conservation has been noted by several other organisations abroad. We are here reproducing two letters we received from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and from BirdLife International. We thank these organisations and all the others who have expressed their support for BirdLife Malta.



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The Times,
Progress Press
Malta

8/6/2000

Dear Sir,

It is sad that some individuals do not support efforts to find ways to stop killing of migratory birds in Malta. BirdLife Malta's discussions with the FKNK are aimed at reducing the serious impact that shooting can have on bird populations in Malta and across Europe. This cannot have been an easy decision for BirdLife Malta to take, but it is a pragmatic one: the alternative is more years of arguing during which millions more birds will die.

From a conservation perspective there is a big difference between killing wild birds and raising birds in order to shoot them. World Animal Conscience is concerned about the killing of any bird, irrespective of whether it is wild, released or domestic, whereas BirdLife International partners focus their efforts on maintaining sustainable populations of wild birds. Whatever people's views on the rights or wrongs of hunting, they should welcome any move that reduces the killing of wildlife. The quail release scheme, providing it results in hunters not shooting wild birds, is an innovative step forward. Let's now ensure that it works and that hunters play by the rules.

Your faithfully,

Julian Hughes
Head of Species Policy
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
(BirdLife International Partner in the UK)



Together for birds and people

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The Times
Valletta
9 June 2000

Saving the Birds

I was deeply disappointed to read your article "BirdLife accused of betraying birds" (7 June 2000).

It completely fails to recognise the major achievements of BirdLife Malta in protecting your country's wildlife and the purpose of BirdLife Malta's objective in joining forces with the hunting organisations.

BirdLife Malta's aim is to conserve wildlife. This sometimes requires working with other organisations and individuals who are destroying that wildlife. I suggest to you that the establishment of a foundation for bird conservation under the auspices of the Ministry of the Environment has far-reaching benefits for wildlife conservation. First, it engages the hunting organisations in a programme to uphold and enforce Maltese legislation which, if successful, will save the lives of thousands of birds every year. Secondly, this initiative brings the authority (and money) of the Maltese government to a new wildlife conservation initiative. Thirdly it strengthens the authority and capability of BirdLife Malta to undertake other projects and programmes for the conservation of birds.

BirdLife Malta has the support of a global network of over 70 nature conservation organisations with a special focus on birds who, together make up the Birdlife International Partnership. It is a serious, professional and dedicated conservation organisation working for the long-term survival of birds and other wildlife. BirdLife Malta have done a great deal to raise public awareness and concern for the plight of millions of birds who live in or pass through Malta each year. To be sure that species and habitats are protected for future generations to enjoy, collaboration is required. In this case BirdLife Malta is entering into negotiation with both the government and other organisations that represent the people who, through their policies and practices, affect the state of these birds. This initiative is a bold first step in the right direction. I strongly encourage the people of Malta to support it. If you really want your children and grandchildren to see birds and other wildlife in Malta, such initiatives are one of the vital ways of achieving it. Do not be distracted by those who are interested only in short-term publicity and are driven purely by emotions. If you really love your wildlife and want to keep it, you need organisations like BirdLife Malta to be closely engaged in the politics that will make Malta better place for birds and people.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Michael Rands
Director and Chief Executive
BirdLife International

Publication of a Countryside Code

A walk in the countryside is often a unique chance of coming in contact with wild plants and animals and this is why it is so popular with Maltese and tourists. The heavy influx of people cannot but put a certain amount of stress on the ecosystems found in the agricultural fields and garigue areas and it becomes therefore imperative that everyone "uses" this resource without causing too much damage. The publication of a code of conduct is meant to address this need and provide the average Maltese (and tourist) family with a set of guidelines on how to enjoy our countryside without destroying it.

Why is the Monitoring Board so important?

On page 1 of this issue of BirdTalk we explained the composition and terms of reference of the new Monitoring Board for Hunting. BirdLife considers this board crucial for wild birds: it is the first time in Malta that the hunting regulations are being treated in this manner and that offences against them are being given such importance.

Traditionally, hunters' associations in Malta have always been something of a "trade union" for shooters, a sort of ex-ufficio defender of hunters, whatever the situation. It is not so long ago that these associations were denying outright that many hunters break the law! It is only very recently that they have started publicly urging hunters to respect the law, and condemning law infringements. Now, the principal hunter society (FKNK) not only admits that abuses exist but is actually offering to help in curbing them. They have apparently come to realise that it is after all in their own interest that such abuses are halted.

BirdLife has long been pressing the authorities for better enforcement. Some encouraging progress has been registered last spring, especially with hunting at sea but there can be no real improvement of the situation as long as the hunting lobby adamantly refuses to cooperate. One of the reasons

that law enforcement is difficult is because the police do not have enough resources. BirdLife frequently assists them but there is no collaboration from the hunters' associations. On the contrary, such associations invariably condemn any action by the police as a direct threat to their hobby. This has effectively hampered proper enforcement but will now hopefully change.

Another reason for the lack of enforcement is that the political parties are evidently fearful of losing votes in their eternal competition for power. In 1994 we witnessed genuine efforts by the then Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment, Dr Stanley Zammit and the results were very satisfactory. Dr Zammit however paid a heavy price at the polls and this experience has conditioned politicians ever since. The hunters' inclusion on the Monitoring Board will make law enforcement less of a thorny issue politically.

BirdLife therefore considers it significant that the FKNK is taking part in the Monitoring Board, which indeed would not have been set up without such participation. Hopefully, law-abiding hunters are realising at last that they have to disassociate themselves from the elements in their midst who commit abuses and excesses.

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BirdLife Malta is the Society for the protection of birds and the natural environment
BirdLife Malta is the partner of BirdLife International in the Maltese Islands

Supplement
to

BirdTalk



Questions our members have been asking us regarding the Foundation for Wild Birds' Conservation

Is it true that BirdLife will be breeding quail as game birds?

No. This is a programme that the shooters will be setting up with Government help. BirdLife will have nothing to do with it except that it is one of the projects organised under the general 'umbrella' of the Foundation and, as such, the quail farm may be partially funded by Government.

What is BirdLife going to gain from this agreement with hunters?

The main objective of BirdLife is to ensure that the Hunting Regulations are properly enforced as this would reduce most of the negative environmental impact of hunting. We know that this is technically possible because during 1994 and the first months of 1995, the police did manage to control most of the infringements being committed. The whole issue however had become politicised by the 1996 elections and a situation has now developed where each political party is unwilling to clamp down on abuses for fear of giving advantage to the opposing party.

The only way that the stalemate can be broken is to render enforcement less controversial and more of a routine operation. This can come about if law-abiding hunters cease condoning abuses and protecting their more irresponsible colleagues. In this way, any Government that sets out to enforce the law will not find the entire hunting category against it and would not have to fear a political backlash.

The whole idea of meeting hunters and reaching an agreement with them is to break the misplaced solidarity that has existed between the law-abiding shooters and the "cowboys". This is not an easy notion to accept and we understand that certain people may feel uneasy and uncomfortable to see BirdLife associated with a hunting federation. However, the lessons learnt over a 40-year period of continuous campaigning against hunting indicate that this is the most effective road to take at the present time.

BirdLife International has also abetted and encouraged this strategy as the best way to save wild birds, given the particular situation in Malta.

BirdLife has always distinguished itself among environmental NGOs for its militant anti-hunting position and street protests. Have its principles changed?

No. The final aim of BirdLife was, is and will always be the evolution of Maltese society until nobody feels the need to take up hunting or trapping as a pastime. We have never made any secret of this as the FKNK are well aware and the agreement hasn't taken away our rights or will to fight for bird protection.

The Foundation is not the result of any change in our principles but represents a different, innovative approach: instead of fighting bird crime in opposition to all the hunting community, we're fighting abuses in agreement – indeed with the active co-operation – of those hunters who do observe the law. Meanwhile BirdLife is going to be carefully assessing the situation as it develops and will take all necessary steps to safeguard wild birds. We do not exclude pulling out of the Foundation if it turns out to be ineffectual.

This agreement sounds like a political move. Is it?

Bird protection should have nothing to do with partisan politics and political parties but the whole concept of conservation is of course a political one as it involves the administration of our country and the very notion of a civilised, orderly society.

In fact, the first steps towards reaching some form of understanding with hunters were taken back in 1997 during a Labour administration; our only aim is to save as many wild birds as we can and we try to cooperate and work with whoever is in government. That the Foundation for Wild Bird Conservation has now been launched under a Nationalist administration is a coincidence. BirdLife tries to maintain good relations with both political parties as this is the only way to have a lasting impact on conservation. The Monitoring Board is autonomous and, if successful, will continue to operate irrespective of which party is in government.

What difference will another board make in this country and what powers will it have?

The Monitoring Board will have executive powers: it will take decisions and carry them out itself. BirdLife will have two members on this Board and they will be continually receiving information through our network of volunteers and birdwatchers. BirdLife is finally in a position to exercise some direct, concrete influence on what happens in Malta regarding nature protection. We believe that effective law enforcement can reduce a lot of the destruction wrought by hunting and save hundreds of thousands of birds every year.

Why did BirdLife have to come to an agreement with the hunters? Couldn't the Monitoring Board have been set up solely between BirdLife and Government?

No, because it would not have been effective. The sad truth is that neither one of the political parties, when in government, has shown any inclination to enforce the regulations effectively. The active, public involvement of the hunters' Federation is sending a signal to all hunters in Malta: what they are actually saying is that the situation is now changing and whoever commits abuses cannot expect the Federation to stand up for him. Thanks to the agreement we have reached with hunters therefore, politicians will not have to choose between counting votes or birds' lives.

Did BirdLife consult anyone before taking such a bold step?

Before adopting this strategy and during the negotiations themselves, BirdLife Malta was in close contact with BirdLife International headquarters in Cambridge and Wageningen (Netherlands). It is not the first time that BirdLife partners in various countries have worked with hunters' associations (see Dr Rands letter on page 3 of this issue of BirdTalk). Our move was backed by, amongst others, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds of the UK and Vogelbescherming, the BirdLife partner in the Netherlands.

Why weren't BirdLife members informed about this agreement before it was launched?

The talks were a lengthy and very delicate process. There are several interests involved and there are those who would have preferred to maintain the present confrontational situation with the resulting tension and the possibility of political blackmail. Any information that leaked out could have been misinterpreted and the whole process sabotaged. However, during this year's Annual General Meeting we did inform our members that talks were being held with the hunters and that agreement was imminent.

Will my membership money and donations be used for the Foundation?

No. BirdLife will not be funding any of the projects in the agreement. These will be sponsored by Government.

Is there any connection between the Foundation and the changes in the hunting regulations?

There is no connection whatsoever except that the Minister of the Environment saw fit to announce the amendments a few days after the Foundation was launched. The agreement with the FKNK was finalised several weeks ago – when there was still no talk of amending the hunting regulations – and we were only waiting for the hunters to agree when to make it public.

Other Changes in the Bird Hunting Regulations

By a curious coincidence (which might not have been so accidental), a few days after the Foundation was launched, the government issued two amendments to the Hunting Regulations of 1993. These lower the hunting age from 21 to 18 and allow shooting near secondary country roads under certain conditions.

There is no connection whatsoever between these new concessions and the Foundation for Wild Birds' Conservation.

BirdLife is not happy about these amendments: they have come at a time when the hunting community still has to prove that it seriously intends to respect its commitments. If this does not happen, the Government would have done nothing but compound the problem by allowing even more shotguns in the hands of even younger (and brasher) people.

BirdLife feels that such concessions should not have been given before hunting in Malta becomes a strictly controlled practice.

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