

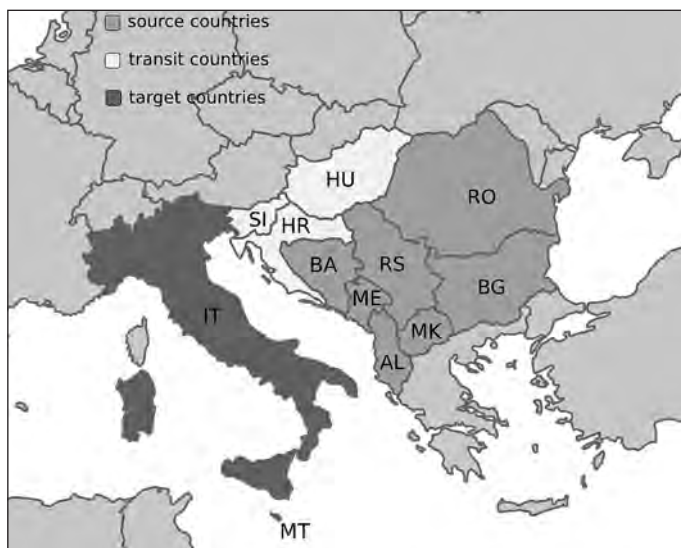
THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN WILD BIRDS FROM SOUTH-EAST AND CENTRAL EUROPE FOR FOOD IN THE EU

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The hunting of songbirds for consumption as a delicacy in restaurants, principally in Italy, is an issue of serious conservation concern. This activity, which involves highly organized criminal activity in South-east and Central Europe, has received insufficient attention to date, however. Hunters are illegally shooting birds and smuggling them to northern Italy and Malta. Many of the affected species are protected by European Community (EC) and national legislation, and some species are very rare. The scale of this trade is huge. Hundreds of thousands of birds are illegally taken and exported every year. Birds seized in trade are estimated to be worth EUR2–3 million¹ (USD2.8–4.2 million) per year and the industry as a whole is estimated to be worth around EUR10 million per year (N. Pierotti, Corpo Forestale Service, pers. comm., July 2008).

In order to bring this issue to the attention of a wider audience, including wildlife trade regulation and other enforcement authorities in the EU and neighbouring countries, TRAFFIC has produced an English language brochure about the problem



< MEADOW PIPIT *Anthus pratensis*.

The hunting of all pipits is prohibited in the EU. Meadow Pipits were among 120 700 birds seized in Italy in 2001 as part of the Balkan Birds Operation. Like many songbirds, the species is considered a delicacy and is consumed in restaurants.

based on two earlier studies (Steiner, 2006; Rocco and Isotti, 2006), as well as recent research on seizures and prosecutions, undertaken with the kind financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The brochure will shortly be distributed to enforcement officials in South-east and Central Europe and will be available on-line via the TRAFFIC website and to designated enforcement officials through EU-TWIX (EU Trade in Wildlife Information eXchange), an EU enforcers' intranet run by TRAFFIC for exchanging information on wildlife seizures across all 27 Member States.

Principal hunting areas and trade routes

In recent years, the main illegal wild bird hunting hotspots in South-east and Central Europe have shifted from Hungary to Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, but illegal hunting also occurs in other countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania and Croatia. The main transit countries are Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary, from where the birds are exported to Italy (Steiner, 2006) (see Figure 1).

Illegal hunting and smuggling

Hunters are permitted to hunt some species in certain seasons. However, hunters targeting small birds for the food trade often use illegal hunting methods to maximize the number of birds killed in each attempt. Illegal methods include the use of recordings, or tape lures, to attract birds, very fine nets known as "mist nets", birdlime,

< FIGURE 1. COUNTRIES INVOLVED IN THE HUNTING AND TRADE IN BIRDS FOR FOOD IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE.

MAP KEY:

Source countries: Albania (AL), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Bulgaria (BG), the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (MK), Montenegro (ME), Serbia (RS), Romania (RO).

Transit countries: Croatia (HR), Hungary (HU), Slovenia (SI).

Target countries: Italy (IT), Malta (MT).

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Europe_countries.svg
Map created by Mihály Zentai based on a blank map produced by Julio Reis.

¹Values estimated using an average retail market price in Italy of EUR8.50 for one specimen (price range EUR3–14).

and automatic or semi-automatic shotguns, sometimes shot from a moving vehicle or boat (Steiner, 2006). Dead birds are concealed in a variety of ways for smuggling across borders, often hidden in cars or in refrigerated lorries or among other products (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

Species in trade

The vast majority of bird species illegally hunted and traded in Europe—mainly to northern Italy—are song-birds (such as finches *Carduelis* spp. and *Fringilla* spp.) (M. Rocco, Corpo Forestale Service, *in litt.*, May 2008) protected under international treaties, EU and national legislation.

One of the rarest species hunted is the Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis* (M. Rocco, Corpo Forestale Service, *in litt.*, May 2008). The European population of the Corncrake *Crex crex*, also hunted, once numbered over 1 300 000 pairs, but suffered extreme declines in Europe from 1970 to 1990 mainly due to habitat loss. The population has still not recovered and is classified as “Depleted” in Europe in the list of *Species of European Conservation Concern* (Anon., 2004a). The situation is similar for European populations of the Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Anon. 2004b). Some 38 000 Common Quails were shot in Serbia during two months in 2004—more than the entire breeding population of Serbia (Simic and Tucakov, 2005). It is estimated that over 90% were shot illegally, using tape lures and semi-automatic shotguns (Simic *et al.*, 2003).

Unless further attention is given to this trade, other European bird populations may experience similar declines—such as the European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*. This species is classified as “Declining”, yet is in trade legally in significant numbers (UNEP-WCMC, 2008), (e.g. as “hunting trophies”) and there are also very high levels of illegal trade (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

Law enforcement

From 2000 to 2006, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovenia seized over 100 000 wild birds (see Figure 2). Some single seizures have been very large too, including around 60 000 birds seized in Serbia in 2001 (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

In 2001, Hungarian Customs intercepted 11 800 frozen birds on the border with Croatia. The original, legal, cargo with Customs documentation had been switched for illegally hunted species. This shipment of protected birds was valued at EUR1.2 million (USD1.7 million). Of the 11 people arrested, seven were prosecuted for damage to the natural environment. Sentences ranged from six months to over two years’ imprisonment, and fines totalling over EUR70 000 were imposed which were paid to Kiskunság National Park (M. Kardos, Kiskunság National Park, *in litt.* to TRAFIC Europe, November 2007).

In 2003, an Italian court determined that two hunting tourism firms had facilitated the smuggling into Italy of



OVEN-READY SNIPE SEIZED IN SLOVENIA AT OBREZJE INTERNATIONAL BORDER CROSSING WITH CROATIA, SEPTEMBER 2007.



SOME OF THE 120 700 BIRDS SEIZED IN VICENZA, ITALY, DURING THE BALKAN BIRDS OPERATION IN 2001.



DEAD BIRDS HIDDEN IN THE BACK SEAT OF A CAR SEIZED IN SLOVENIA AT OBREZJE INTERNATIONAL BORDER CROSSING WITH CROATIA, OCTOBER 2002.

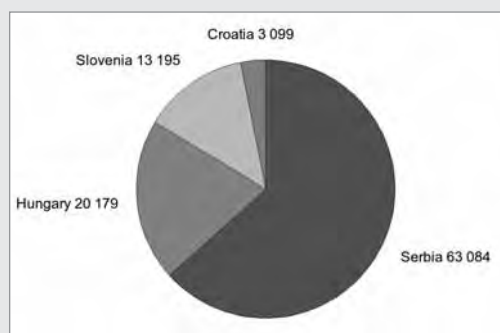


FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF SEIZED BIRDS IN SELECTED SOURCE AND TRANSIT COUNTRIES (2000–2006).

over two million birds, shot in Serbia, over six years. In the so-called Balkan Birds Operation, the Italian police seized a trailer in Vicenza in November 2001 carrying 12 t of deep-frozen birds: 120 700 specimens comprising 83 species, including Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* and Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* and other songbirds, as well as Common Quail and European Turtle-dove (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

Many of the locations where the birds were shot are key wild bird habitats designated as Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Among the dead birds seized, 68 species were under a permanent hunting prohibition, 33 were very rare species, and the rest represented various species of songbirds. The birds were caught in nets or attracted with tape lures and then shot—both prohibited means of hunting (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

Eight people were found guilty of smuggling over 7000 birds from Slovenia during 2002 to 2003. Four people were fined and sentenced to between six and 12 months' imprisonment (Rocco and Isotti, 2006).

In August 2008, the CITES Management Authority of Slovenia published a report that presents cases of attempted smuggling of endangered wild birds into Slovenia that have been uncovered by Slovenian Customs authorities at the international border crossings with Croatia. *Report on the Attempts of Smuggling of Wild Birds into the Republic of Slovenia: 2002–2006* is available in both Slovenian and English at, respectively, <http://www.arso.gov.si/narava/poro%c4%8dila%20in%20publikacije/Cites%20-%20Ptice%20SLO.pdf> and <http://www.arso.gov.si/en/nature/reports%20and%20publications/> or via the Slovenian Management Authority: cites.arso@gov.si.

Bird hunting ban in Malta

Malta is located on an important bird migration route in the Mediterranean. Hunting during the breeding and spring migration period is prohibited under EU law, in all Member States. In January 2008, based on a complaint by BirdLife, the European Commission took the Maltese Government to court for having allowed, every spring since the country's accession to the EU in 2004, hunting and trapping of European Turtle-dove and Common Quail, in direct contravention of the EU Birds Directive (RSPB, 2008).

According to the RSPB (2008), the Maltese Government was ordered by the European Court of Justice on 25 April 2008 not to allow the spring hunting of birds—a practice which is in direct contravention of European bird protection laws. A final ruling is not expected before 2009.

Recommendations

1. Italy and Malta should carry out activities to increase the awareness of consumers, enforcement officers and the judiciary about this illegal trade and its impact on wild bird populations, as well as measures taken against offenders.

2. Italy should promote an information campaign in collaboration with hunting agencies and hunters' associations to inform hunters of national hunting laws outside Italy;
3. Italian enforcement authorities should carry out inspections at border crossings based on risk analysis assessments (Arih *et al.*, 2008);
4. Enforcement officers in source, transit or final destination countries should be informed about the equipment used by illegal hunters, including nets, tape recorders, concealment methods, etc.;
5. Consumer, transit and source countries should:
 - a. use existing channels, including workshops, on more general wildlife trade issues, to exchange information regarding hunting and smuggling techniques, tools for identification and detection, and sharing intelligence; and
 - b. make use of existing communication tools such as INTERPOL's Ecomessage (a reporting system that systematically accepts environmental crime data and enters the figures into a computerized data collection facility at the General Secretariat (http://www.interpol.int/public/environmentalcrime/pollution/Eco_message.pdf); Customs Risk Information Forms; and, for monitoring seizures, the EU-TWIX database;
6. Wildlife management and scientific authorities should liaise with enforcement agencies to ensure that management plans take into account offtake from illegal activities. Management plans for migratory species (e.g. European Turtle-dove) should involve all geographical areas where the species migrate.

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