



## Monitoring illegal trapping of birds in Cyprus

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# Illegal bird trapping

## Overview



**Illegal, non –selective methods** (mist nets, limesticks, calling devices)

- At least 157 birds species affected, 90 unfavourable conservation status

**Large scale trapping**

- Hundreds of thousands of migratory birds killed / year

# Illegal bird trapping

## Overview



**Demand & Supply** – restaurants, key economic driver

Organised **criminal networks** involved

- 15 million euros per year black market



# MONITORING PROGRAMME

They are a common sight in every garden. But each autumn millions of these delightful songbirds are smeared with glue and left to die – to be served up as a culinary delicacy

## WINTER OF THE ROBINS

**W**hen you see a robin hanging upside down from a tree, it is not a sign of good luck. In the depths of an ancient tree, a robin hangs upside down, his feet inescapably fastened to a glue-smeared stick wedged in the branches. The little bird, no bigger than a man's thumb, is limp and exhausted, but his eyes are still bright with fight. His mouth opens in a silent scream.

To his fellow victims in the most merciless killers in the Mediterranean, every year, Cyprus hunters trap or bait out of the sky an estimated 20 million birds, many of them migrating from back gardens like yours and mine to spend winter in Africa. They end up in a taverna delicacy called *Ambovollos*, or pickled and stuffed into jars like onions.

Unlucky birds caught on these so-called limesticks have their heads crushed between the hunter's fingers or their throats cut with a penknife before being tossed aside.

All around the struggling robin, in this killing tree in Cape Greco on the south-eastern tip of Cyprus, are more birds familiar to British gardens. A female blackcap – worth £1.50 to the trapper – hangs breast down, her feathers a sticky, tangled mess. A stonechat has pulled out his tail feathers in the hopeless struggle to escape. It is almost 12 o'clock and, in a temperature of 27 degrees, a yellow cliffhanger fights to avoid death in the afternoon. He weighs as much as a teaspoon of sugar, but he has the courage of a tiger.

For these half-dozen birds there is no chance of escape.

It is a grim scene. The trapper, Guy Shorrocks, who is now an investigations officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), it was he who led us to the trapped birds.

At sunrise he had spotted a sticky local trapper planting limesticks around the site. The man then disappeared to sit hidden in a juniper bush, occasionally emerging to check his victims. He left at about 7.30am for his day job. Just after noon, he would return in his lunch break to check again.

But before the trapper returned, Guy Shorrocks removed 70 limesticks and tenderly pruned the birds free. One by one he raised the glue off their bodies, sometimes using his own saliva.

The glue is a mixture of honey and the fruit of a local plant. It is rolled on thin straight sticks about 15cm long plucked from the pomegranate tree.

When he was satisfied the birds could fly, Guy opened his cupped hands and we watched them joyfully take off. I never lose the thrill of seeing them fly free, he says.

This such a little thing you can do for them in the face of the enormity of this horrible trade?

**W**HAT is surreal about the scene is that only half a mile away I can see the tourist mecca of Ayia Napa, with its beach hotels and nightclubs.

One-third of the million-plus British tourists who come to Cyprus, an island and Turk, head for this resort. They fill the sunbeds and swim in the tropical sea. It is the epitome of the holiday-taking place just off the beaten track.

And in Cyprus it is a serious business. A man earned £2,000, a sum a fortune that was a prime lure for many of the holidaymakers.

Holidaymakers know nothing of the village taverna and smart restaurants songbirds arrive on the plate around a pool of yellow sauce like blaudy ignorant of the fact that you can walk into a grocery store and order a bird in 15 minutes.

Out in the hills, we find a male and

from June Southworth

female blackcap struggling in a mist net, so called because the fine black filament used to trap millions of birds is almost invisible to the naked eye. Sometimes birds are removed so roughly that their feet are left embedded in the net.

We release the blackcaps and Guy furiously pulls down the nets hanging between poles at Cape Greco, where Britain has a military base.

It was here that local police made a great show recently of burning 50,000 seeds in a large field.

In the past three months, the police have made 26 arrests and seized 11 shotguns, 48 mist nets and 132 limesticks on the base.

**B**UT in only two days, the Daily Mail found 150 limesticks and saw hundreds of mist nets. A short drive around the area next to our hotel in Ayia Napa showed only too clearly the scale of the abuses.

We uncovered evidence at every turn. There are something like five miles of nets stretching across Cape Greco.

At one villa, where guard dogs could be heard, the two-acre garden was devoted to trapping birds. Nets were strung between poles on movable concrete bases, and paths constructed beneath the bird death trap. Loudspeakers are used to blast out the song of a blackcap to entice victims.

The trappers will tell you that it is traditional. But this is no longer subsistence hunting. It is, if you will excuse the expression, a cut-throat business.

That is evidenced by a British ornithologist living in Cyprus. He makes a point of removing mist nets and sticks and releasing trapped birds.

He has been chased for miles by trappers, who, he tells me, wishing to remain anonymous. These people are ruthless. One day I treated me the limesticks. Another knocked me to the ground and kicked me. One man stood over me with a stone. There is total impunity from the authorities.

There is one lever the RSPB believes could be used against Cyprus. The island is a sign to join the European Union, which could make it a condition of entry that the killing stops.

Birds know no territorial boundaries. They are free spirits, and that is the way the civilized world wants to keep them. Down to every last robin.

**■ YOU can register a protest by writing to President Glafcos Clerides, Presidential Palace, Nicosia, Cyprus. For more information, the RSPB website is www.rspb.org.uk**

Restaurants in Cyprus serve up birds such as this trapped female blackcap, inset left

Rescue: Guy Shorrocks of the RSPB works to free a blackcap from the limestick trap

Above: A migrating robin hangs trapped by its feet on a limestick

Right: A stonechat's tail feathers are pulled out as it tries to escape

Pictures: NICK SKINNER

- Started in autumn 2002 - RSPB survey team undertake 1<sup>st</sup> field survey with BC input
- RSPB and BirdLife Cyprus develop a **‘Bird Trapping Monitoring Protocol’**
  - sets the sampling methodology for field survey & analysis of data
- Ongoing systematic monitoring
  - long term trends
  - Longest running IKB monitoring dataset (20yrs)

# MONITORING PROGRAMME



**Autumn** – main trapping season  
 Survey focus on hotspot areas 1 & 2  
 Area revised in 2005 and 2007 to cover larger area

Spring monitoring started in 2003  
 Winter monitoring in 2007

# DESCRIPTION OF MONITORING PROTOCOL

Survey area covers 406 km<sup>2</sup> and includes 436 1x1km squares (some squares include sea)

**Stratification:** Out of 436 squares, 301 'possible' and 135 'unlikely' bird trapping areas

'Possible' → based on assessment of vegetation cover alone

Focus on location of **mist netting activity**

# MONITORING PROTOCOL - SAMPLING



Random selection of 1x1km squares

Sample size varies depending on season

Autumn (main) season - 60 squares

Spring season - 40 squares, now spot checks

Winter season - 40 squares, now spot checks

Sample of 'possible' squares **stratified** between Republic, Dhekelia SBA & 'Joint'

- Geographic, representative coverage

# MONITORING PROTOCOL — FIELD SURVEY

Survey undertaken from car and on foot, daytime hours, 2-person team

ALL trapping finds reported to competent authorities. No intervention by BC team.

Aim: cover each square in 1-2 hours, minimise detection of survey team

Each square surveyed once each season

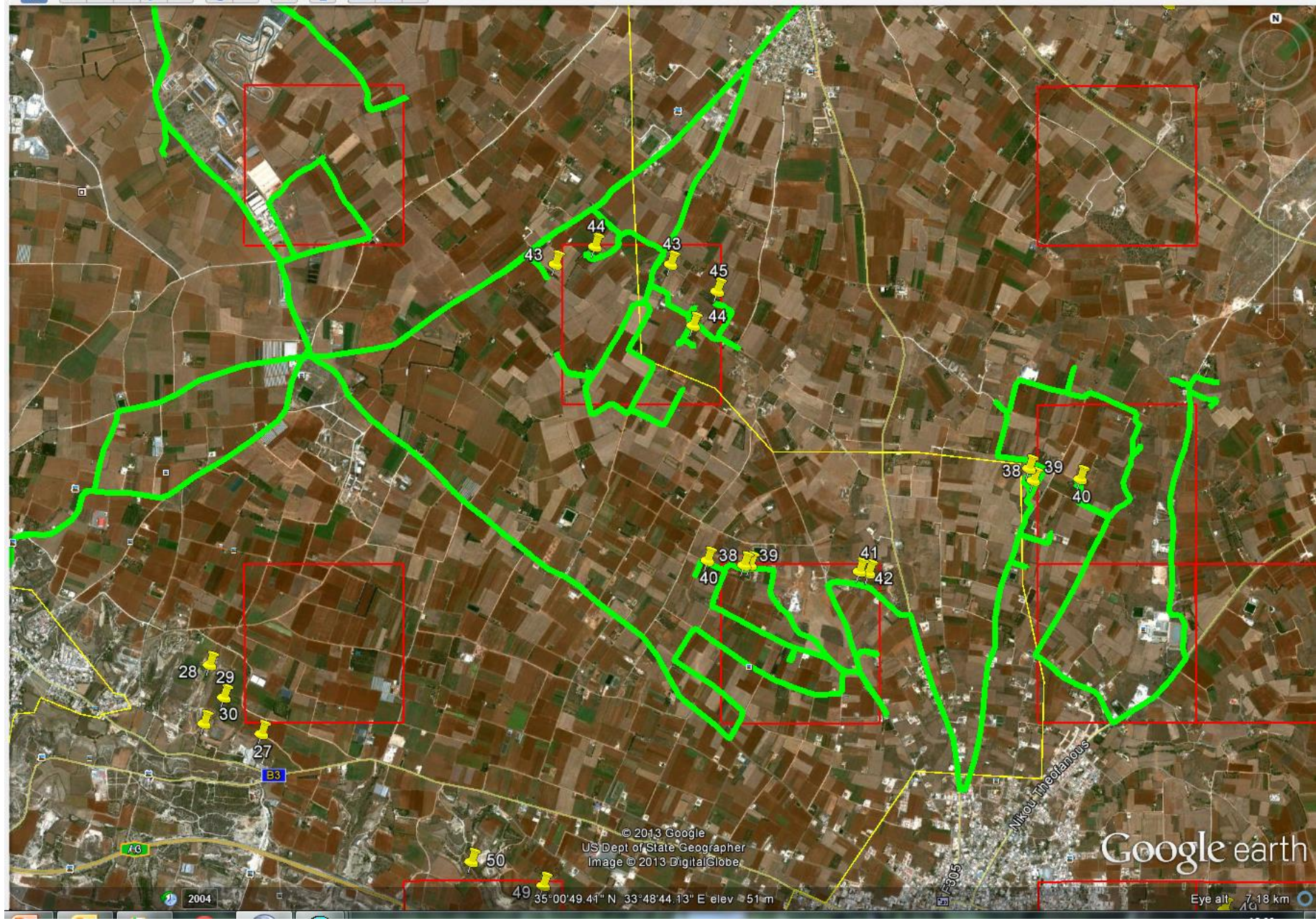
Avoid confrontation → if people present, team moves on (comes back another day)

No entry into fenced areas, but perimeter check

Trapping finds reported to relevant officers via telephone & email (info in table format+ Google Earth map locations)

Use of GPS technology & Google maps





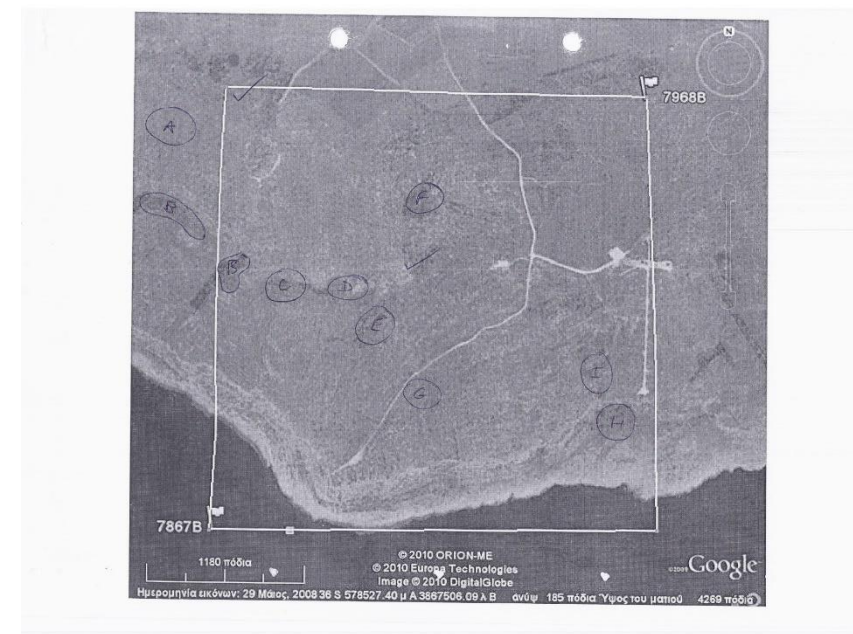
Google Earth map with trapping finds & GPS tracks within & outside selected survey squares

# METHODOLOGY – FIELD SURVEY

SBA

SQUARE	7867	SECTOR	3	DATE	23/4/14	START	4.30	END	1.30	TOTAL	2 hours			
Area	Compound or Unfenced	Agricultural plot (Y/N)	Mark with one X if couldn't check all of compound and two X if couldn't check at all	Net Code ANN, AUN, ASN, P	Exact GPS co-ords	Length metres (in brackets if estimated)	No of nets	PB, P, C	Tape lure P, Y, U, L, W, B	Limesticks (in brackets if old)	Habitat	Birds caught	GF or SBA informed	People present?
A	U	N			778677			PB x many			A			
B	U	N			779675			PB x many			A			
C	U	N		P x 5	781675	5 x 20m (100m)					A			
D	U	N		P x 2	782675	2 x 20m (40m)					A			
E	U	N			783674			PB x many			A			
F	U	N			784677			PB x many			A			
G	U	N			784673			PB x many			A			
H	U	N			789672			SUNKEN PB x many			A			
I	U	N			788673			SUNKEN PB x many			A			
J														
K														

Notes (include why ANN classifications were made above):



## Field data gathered:

- Compound or Unfenced area
- Fully Checked or Partly checked
- **Net ride code**
- Exact GPS coordinates
- **Length (m)**
- No of set/unset nets
- Trapping paraphernalia (pole bases, poles, wires, loudspeakers etc.)
- No of limesticks
- Habitat
- Birds caught
- People present

# METHODOLOGY - NET CODE CATEGORISATION

## 4 active net codes

- Prepared: trapping paraphernalia present, clear corridors & ready for setting at any time BUT no current activity evident
- Active No Net: evidence of activity from early morning or previous days e.g. fresh feathers, blood, scattered pebbles, loudspeakers & wires
- Active Unset Net: net present *in situ* but furled
- Active Set Net: net present *in situ* and ready for catching birds
- Old: Net rides that have been abandoned

# METHODOLOGY - NET CODE CATEGORISATION



Prepared net ride



Active No Net –  
fresh feathers



Active No Net –  
fresh feathers



Active Unset Net

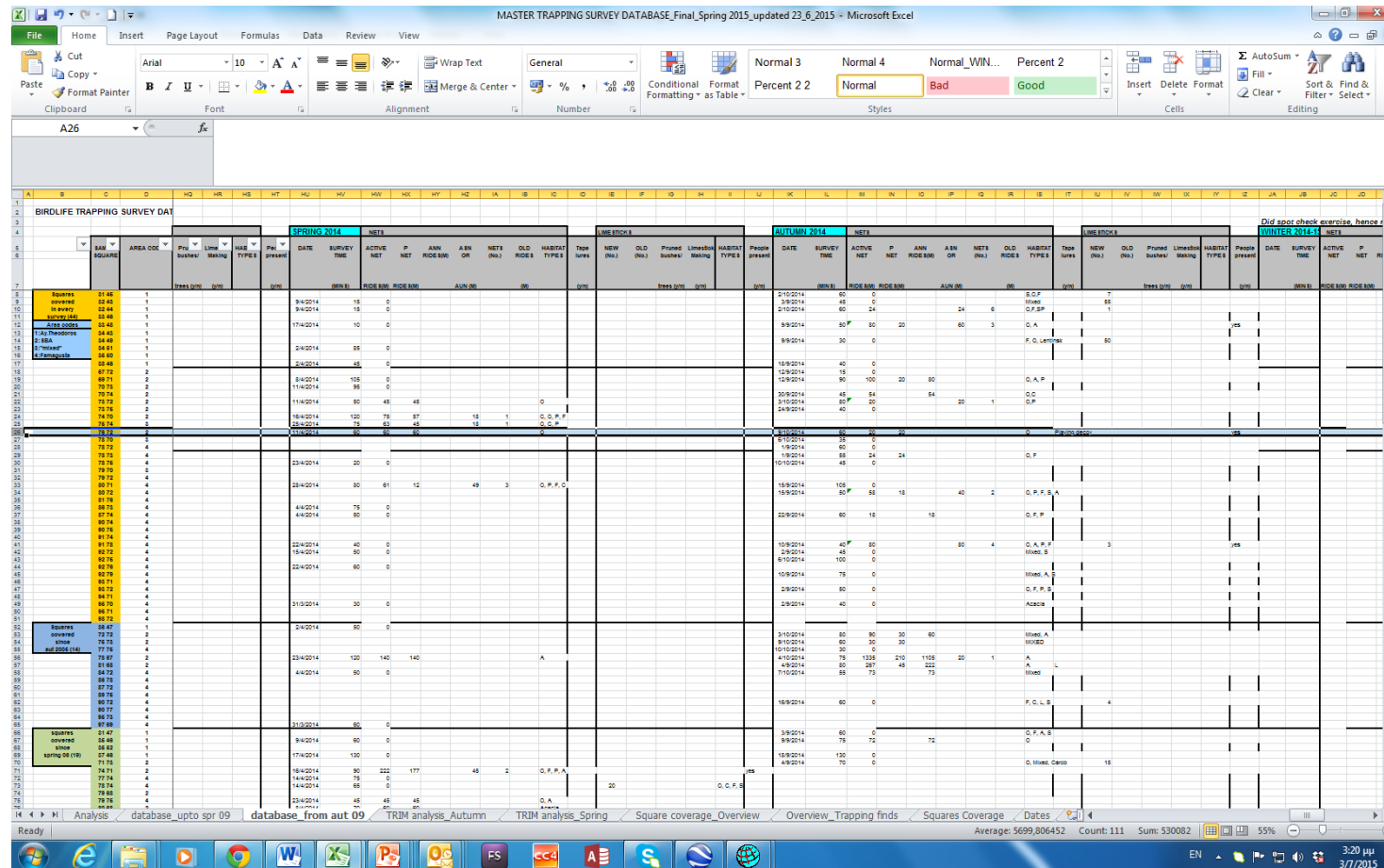


Active Set Net



Limesticks in carob tree

# DATA ANALYSIS



The screenshot shows a detailed data table with the following structure:

Area Code	Date Survey Time	SPRING 2014				SUMMER 2014				AUTUMN 2014				WINTER 2014-15			
		Active Net	Ann Ride/Sur	A.M. Nets	Old Habitat	Active Net	Ann Ride/Sur	A.M. Nets	Old Habitat	Active Net	Ann Ride/Sur	A.M. Nets	Old Habitat	Active Net	Ann Ride/Sur	A.M. Nets	Old Habitat
8074	18/4/2014	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0
8074	22/4/2014	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0
8074	23/4/2014	120	140	140	A	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	80	0	0	0

Main result: trends in trapping activity (mist netting)

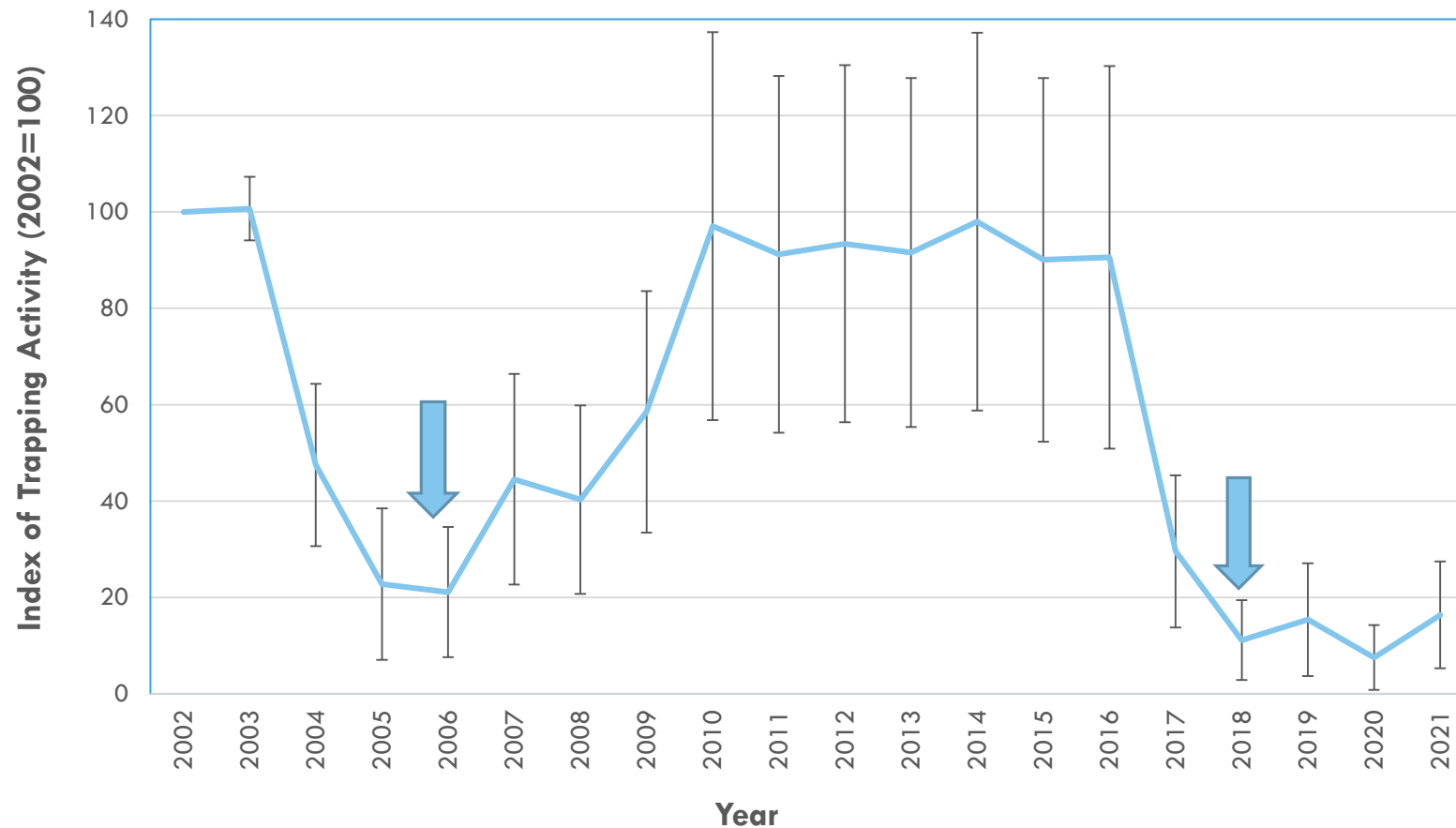
Comparisons always between years, for the same season

Use of TRIM (TRends & Indices for Monitoring data) trends

→ reliable trends developed

# RESULTS – TRENDS IN TRAPPING ACTIVITY

Trends for Autumn mistnetting activity for whole survey area



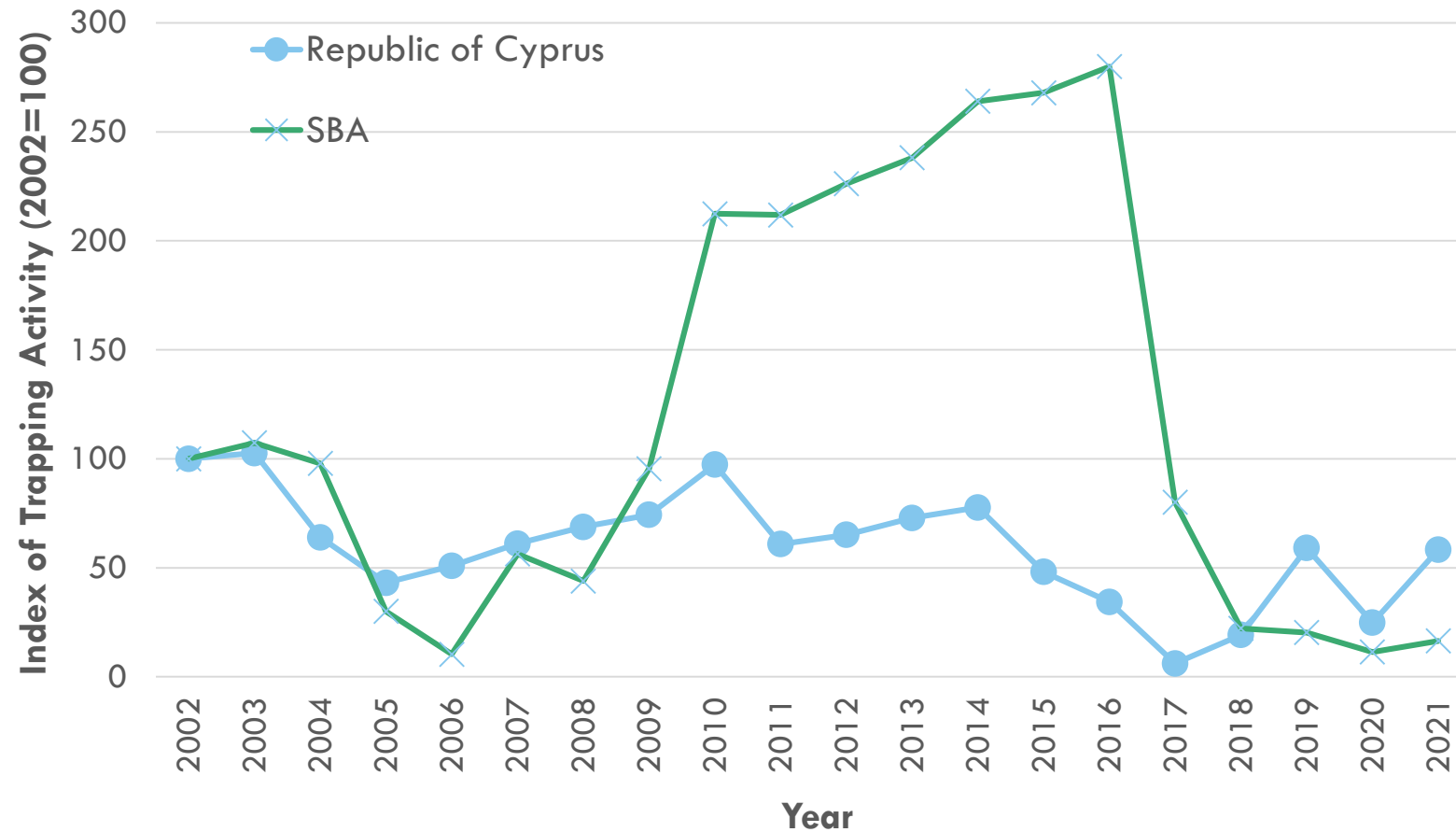
- 84% decrease autumn 2021 vs autumn 2002;
- Enforcement action 2021: 66 arrests, 109 mist nets 1,938 limesticks confiscated;

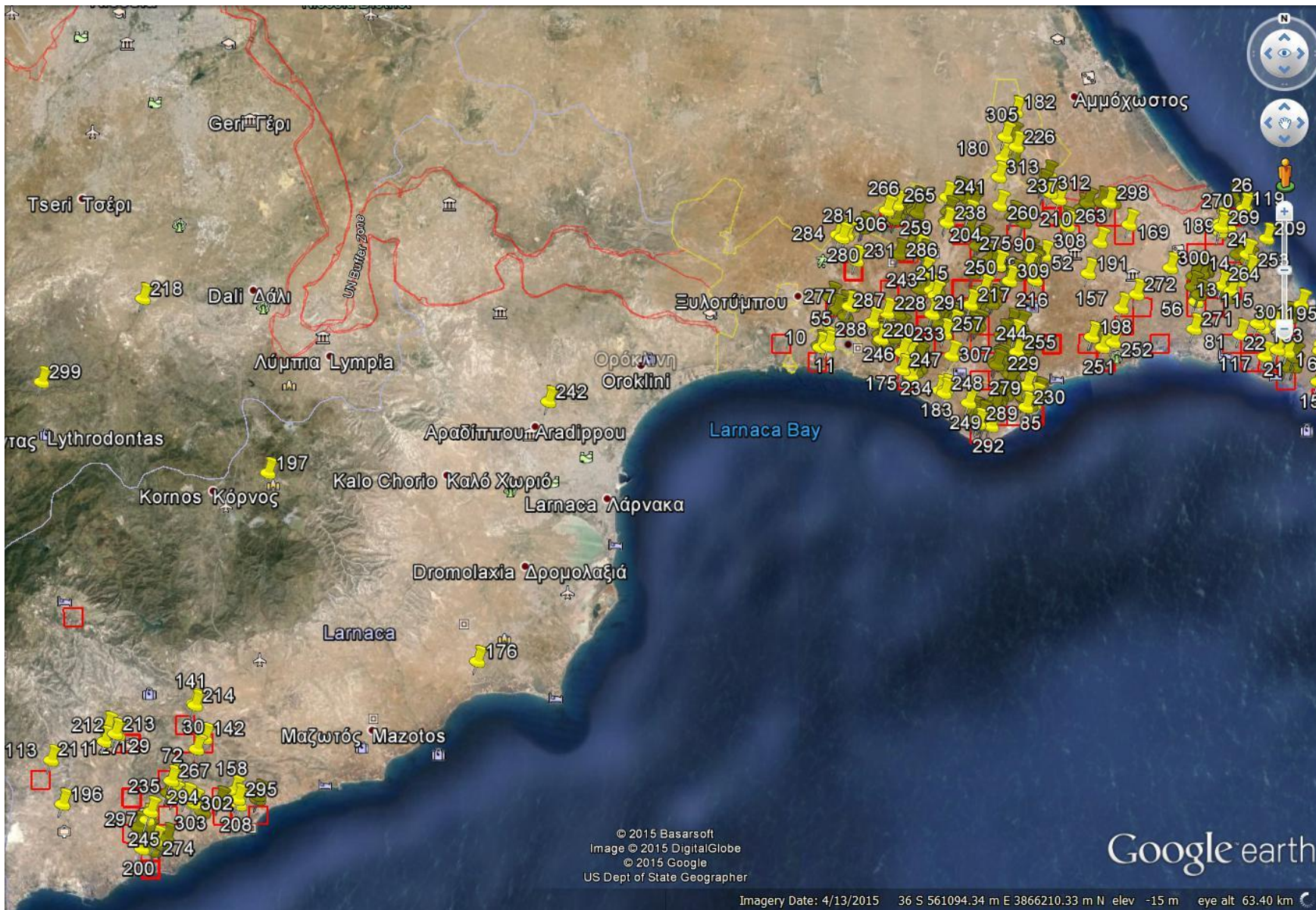
However, problems remain:

- Limited enforcement on restaurants
- Death estimate: >600,000 birds in survey area

# TRENDS – JURISDICTION LEVEL

Trends for Autumn mistnetting activity by jurisdiction





Google Earth Database – Trapping locations from BirdLife Cyprus monitoring



# RESOURCES

BLCy 2-person team (1 staff member, 1 volunteer)

Period: Autumn: 6 weeks; Spring: 2-4 weeks; Winter: – 2-4 weeks

Field car – replacement every few years + fuel expenses

# DIFFICULTIES

Illegal activity!

- Not possible to survey all areas at the same intensity – however, following the standardised survey methods produces reliable trend data

No survey can be perfect...but trends reliable if effort / method constant

Increased detection / trapping displacement

Observer bias – but methodology/training constant

Fencing of private properties

# USE(S) OF MONITORING DATA

- ✓ **Trends** for trapping activity, comparison within each season
  - ✓ Index for mist netting activity per year
- ✓ Law enforcement action— all trapping finds reported to authorities
- ✓ Lobbying tool
- ✓ Fundraising tool
- ✓ Awareness raising campaign

Country specific: each IKB and methodology developed