

Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)

Measure to Protect

Monitoring Illegal Bird Killing





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The Threat

Migratory birds cross continents and depend on safe conditions along their flyways, regardless of borders. The Mediterranean is a crucial passage for these birds, offering both a significant natural challenge and essential places to rest and feed. Each spring and autumn, millions of birds—including birds of prey, waterbirds, warblers, and doves—migrate between Europe, Asia, and Africa, relying on wetlands, coasts, and forests as stopover sites.

Many migratory birds crossing the Mediterranean are illegally killed or trapped, mainly for food, as pets, or for sale. According to BirdLife International's 2016 study¹, up to 25 million birds may be killed each year in this region. This illegal activity is a major concern for the conservation of those species, undermining species protection and hindering population recovery.

The Intergovernmental Task Force on Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean (MIKT)

To address the issue, the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) adopted Resolution 11.16 (Rev. COP14) on Preventing the Illegal Killing, Taking, and Trade of Migratory Birds in 2014. This resolution promotes international cooperation to reduce the illegal killing, taking, and trade of migratory birds (IKB), bringing together many stakeholders to develop a shared approach to tackle this complex challenge. The adoption of Resolution 11.16 (Rev. COP14) led to the creation of the Intergovernmental Task Force on Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean.



A Wild Ducks for sale at the Damietta markets, Egypt

The Rome Strategic Plan

MIKT's work is guided by the Rome Strategic Plan 2020–2030 (RSP), titled Eradicating Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade in Wild Birds in Europe and the Mediterranean Region. This plan serves as a shared framework between MIKT and the Council of Europe's Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats.

The goal of the Rome Strategic Plan for 2030 is a 50% reduction of the scale and scope of IKB compared to a 2020 baseline.

While the specific measures needed to tackle IKB vary by country, the RSP establishes a common framework built around five result-oriented Objectives, with each Objective accompanied by a set of Indicators and time-bound Actions. Monitoring IKB is the first objective².



B Honey Buzzard

Why monitoring matters

Illegal activities are difficult to monitor due to a lack of reliable data and unwillingness of perpetrators to report them. However, effective monitoring is essential to determine the scale and scope of the issue and inform appropriate action within a country.

Monitoring the level of illegal taking is central to deciding if, by who, what, where, how, and when action should be taken.

Monitoring can provide information to help understand:

- which types of illegal taking are most common in a country;
- which species are affected and in what numbers;
- where the hotspots of illegal activity are located;
- when the activity is taking place;
- and what the motivations for illegal taking are.

Matching monitoring to IKB method

When a country is in the process of deciding on a monitoring method, it is very important to use a systematic approach that produces comparable results, to help estimate trends. This can be challenging because different illegal activities may require different monitoring approaches.

The Rome Strategic Plan recommends that all countries develop a monitoring system for IKB so that they can have an accurate picture of the size of the problem with IKB. Each country is recommended to choose a method that fits its capacity and the level and quality of data available.

Which method is best for me? Developing a National Monitoring System

MIKT endorsed a position paper³ in 2022, which outlines the different approaches to developing a monitoring system and recommends that countries consider the two main options:

- attempt to estimate the full scale and magnitude of IKB across the country.
- choose indicators of scale that allow tracking of the trend and therefore progress over time without extrapolating to national scale.

Establishing a national baseline

Establishing a national baseline of the level of IKB in a country is crucial for assessing progress. In order to ensure meaningful comparisons between years, the baseline needs to be based on reliable, solid data. To be credible, a baseline must be:

- Based on consistent data collection
- Transparent and replicable
- Supported by multiple stakeholders

Although monitoring IKB is a challenge there are various successful examples to share across the Mediterranean. NGO BirdLife International has developed a detailed guide to developing a methodology and analysing the data from monitoring⁴ IKB, offering numerous best practice examples.

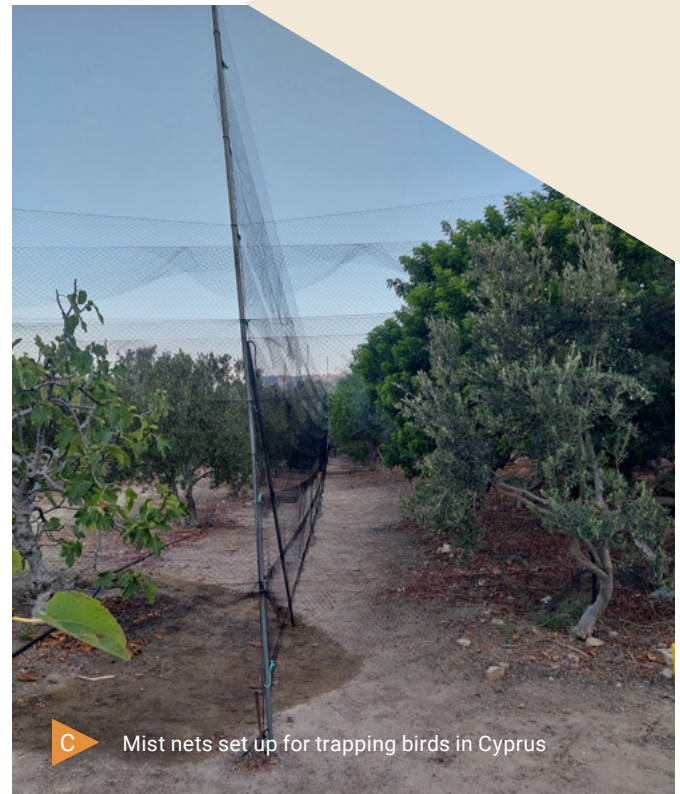
Below are some key examples of data sources that can contribute to setting a baseline and to successful and systematic monitoring of IKB in a country developing a monitoring method.

Full scale or hotspot systematic monitoring in the field

NGO BirdLife Cyprus has been running a systematic, continuous surveillance programme regarding illegal bird trapping in Cyprus since 2002. The monitoring uses standard methodology, people patrolling in the field and data collection focusing on the use of illegal mist nets for trapping birds. The data are subjected to statistical analysis to uncover trends in illegal trapping. Based on the sampling, BirdLife Cyprus can extrapolate islandwide and estimate the number of birds illegally trapped by nets each year⁵. Even though this kind of monitoring is very accurate it is quite rare. However, many of the regular and systematic IKB monitoring programmes, especially of IKB hotspots are run by NGOs. Ground-level information from NGOs or volunteers, is a very valuable information resource.

Wildlife rehabilitation hospitals

Experience from Spain suggests that data on admissions to wildlife hospitals are closely linked to the levels of illegal killing and taking of wild birds. There are around 40 wildlife hospitals in Spain, either managed by authorities or by private entities with collaboration agreements with the government. Data are collected and analysed every two years and provide important trends in illegal taking of birds. Wildlife hospitals treat animals that have been victims of shooting, poisoning, poaching from nests and any illegal activity. The wildlife hospitals often also receive dead animals for diagnosis and registration of causes of death. Systematic data from a country's wildlife hospitals can provide very valuable information on the main types of IKB in the country, the seasonality, the species and numbers affected.



C Mist nets set up for trapping birds in Cyprus

- ▶ A study in 2024 which analysed 1704 mortality records, found that almost

40%

were due to illegal killing and poisoning

Satellite transmitters

Every year, millions of birds die because of human activities – putting many species in danger. With the help of modern tracking technology, e.g. satellite transmitters which scientists fit on the birds, we can uncover where, when, and why these losses happen. A study in 2024 which analysed 1704 mortality records, found that almost 40% were due to illegal killing and poisoning⁶. Data from satellite transmitters can be very effective at detecting hotspots of IKB, and through ground inspection can acquire much more detailed information. Due to the size of the transmitters these are mainly appropriate for larger bodied birds, like birds of prey, cranes, pelicans and storks, although they are constantly becoming smaller and lighter and can be fitted on smaller species too.

Dog patrols

Multiple EU LIFE projects have shown that poison-detection dog patrols (team involving a trained dog that can detect poisoned baits and a handler) are very effective in detecting poison baits, raising awareness about the problem and acting as deterrents for potential offenders. Dogs can be trained to perform many duties, including to detect poisoned baits, cadavers or even smuggled live birds⁷. The method is particularly important for the illegal use of poisoned baits. Cadaver dogs are used to monitor poaching across large sites in some countries, whereby the IKB victims are thrown aside or hidden to avoid detection. Similarly, dogs that can sniff dead or live birds can help in customs or borders. Systematic patrols can provide very important comparable information between years.



D Poison detection dog patrol

Drones can cover remote or inaccessible areas, much quicker and methodically by flying transects above the areas, and provide very useful information.

Drones

Illegal trapping and shooting often takes place in remote, inaccessible or dangerous places. Use of drones has enabled monitoring to take place in those places from a safe distance.

Apart from producing good data drones also act as deterrents⁸. Drones have been used to monitor illegal shooters, use of mist nets and/or traps in different countries. In most countries a permit from government authorities is necessary if used by non-government actors.

E Drone above fields



Acoustic means

The Forest Research Institute in Greece, in collaboration with HOS/BirdLife Greece used acoustic recording sensors in 2021, in the Ionian islands in Greece. Illegal, shooting of European Turtle doves *Streptopelia turtur* takes place in those islands every spring. The European Turtle dove is a huntable species in Greece, but hunting is only allowed in the autumn, spring hunting is illegal. The acoustic sensors were accurate and discrete, recording the number of shots heard, as observers could not approach the area safely, and monitoring lasted for more than a month. Any shots fired during spring constituted illegal shooting. The sensors confirmed that in spring 2021 up to 57,095 turtle doves were killed or injured illegally across the region⁹.

Customs seizures

Random searches at customs or searches with warrants, have at times provided crucial data about transport of IKB victims across borders. Data from customs seizures can indicate trade routes, species traded and numbers. Training of custom officers so they know what to look for and the use of technology or dogs for searching can be very helpful in monitoring illegal trade routes.

Online monitoring

Many birds that are illegally taken end up being traded online or used for media trends such as posing for 'likes' with a bird, especially raptors. Consequently, monitoring online markets, websites and social media has become an important element in monitoring IKB. Online monitoring of sales or imports of trapping equipment, like mist nets, can also indicate trends in IKB pressure.



Market surveys and customs seizures

In many countries birds are traded illegally in markets, even if the selling of those species might be illegal. In some of these markets the practice is quite open. Monitoring the markets can be a key tool for collecting important information about IKB, such as the species traded, the reasons why they are traded and whether they are dead or alive, and the numbers. In the Mediterranean, the species more commonly traded in markets are finches and waterbirds, like ducks and waders. Dead passerines, such as warblers, Golden orioles, and shrikes, are often traded in specialised shops. Regular, systematic market surveys can provide crucial data to assess the scale and scope of IKB.

Enforcement agencies and court cases

Oftentimes enforcement patrols and intelligence gathering produce important information about illegal taking activities. Registries of prosecutions and court cases provide valuable information on the kinds of illegal taking but are not very reliable in terms of calculating the exact numbers of birds killed or taken in a country, as prosecution cases represent a very small number of actual IKB cases. Enforcement agencies provide valuable information on all aspects of IKB. Good record keeping of detected incidents, signs of illegal activities, reports by the public, and data from informants or covert activities (e.g. trail cameras in areas of activity), can help build a complete picture about IKB in a country.

Captive breeding centre registries and the role of DNA

A landmark court case in 2014¹⁰ in Belgium uncovered a multi-country criminal network laundering wild birds stolen from nests and raised in captivity as captive bred. The network was then selling the birds at great profit in different countries in Europe. Keeping detailed DNA registries of the parental lineage of captive breeders, and monitoring number of birds at centres, is crucial for being able to detect laundered birds.

Public reporting

Establishing a public hotline can produce important information and engage the public. The public will report killed, trapped, injured or traded birds. If the hotline also offers anonymity, there could also be informants within the trapper or hunter community, who would otherwise might not come forward.





I Wheatear caught in trammel net



J Trammel nets at the Mediterranean coast of Egypt

Official EU information

EU countries are invited to submit standardized information on hunting quota and illegal killing data as part of the regular Article 12 report of the Birds Directive, which is submitted every six years.

Collaboration and transparency are key

Because good IKB monitoring usually involves data from different sources, success depends on coordination and collaboration between government agencies and stakeholders.

Key partners in any country can include:

- Government agencies (environment, justice, customs, police)
- NGOs and civil society monitors
- Research institutions and universities
- Hunting associations and local communities
- Regional and international bodies (e.g., CMS, Bern Convention, BirdLife International)

Finally, a country needs to consider regular reporting and transparency. The monitoring data ideally need to be published on a public website, while respecting regulations for data protection.

Monitoring IKB is challenging but good examples are regularly shared amongst MIKT countries. Establishing a method is a crucial step in combating IKB.

CMS Initiatives on the Prevention of Illegal Taking of Migratory Birds

Tackling illegal killing, taking and trade of migratory birds is challenging and differs by region. Contributing factors include unclear laws, weak enforcement, cultural practices,

poverty, profit motives, and low awareness. Solutions require varied approaches and strong collaboration among stakeholders.

The Convention on Migratory Species adopted in 2014 [Resolution 11.16 \(Rev. COP14\) on The Prevention of Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds](#). Based on the mandate of this Resolution, the CMS Secretariat convened the [Intergovernmental Task Force on Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean](#) in 2016, the [Asia Pacific Illegal Taking of Migratory Birds Intergovernmental Task Force \(ITTEA\)](#) in 2023, and the [Task Force for Illegal Taking of Migratory Birds in South-West Asia](#) in 2025.



Endnotes

- 1 Brochet, et al. (2016) Preliminary assessment of the scope and scale of illegal killing and taking of birds in the Mediterranean, Bird Conservation International, 26:1–28. A study of BirdLife International.
- 2 The first objective of the Rome Strategic Plan is to: To understand the scope, scale and motivations behind illegal killing, taking and trade of birds.
- 3 Paper on Baseline and Methodology for Assessing Progress toward Achieving the Rome Strategic Plan 2020- 2030, endorsed by MIKT in 2021.
<https://www.cms.int/document/paper-baseline-and-methodology-assessing-progress-toward-achieving-rome-strategic-plan-2020>
- 4 BirdLife International (2022) A best practice guide for monitoring illegal killing and taking of birds, 3rd Edition. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.
- 5 <https://birdlifecyprus.org/combating-bird-crime/surveillance-programme/>
- 6 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320724000867>
- 7,8 Combatting the illegal killing, taking of and trade in birds in the EU: A review of good practices on prevention (European Union, 2023).
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3287d532-fdd4-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- 9 <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/4/687>
- 10 Court of First Instance East-Flanders – Ghent division, PRESS RELEASE - 27 June 2014

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What is CMS?

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) is a legally binding international treaty under the United Nations. CMS is one of the most important global frameworks for wildlife conservation and plays a vital role in addressing the global biodiversity crisis. By fostering international collaboration, supporting research, and developing conservation agreements and actions among the Range States in which these species are found, CMS ensures the long-term survival of migratory species of wild animals and their habitats, and the vital benefits they provide.

Download this brochure



The European Union was recognized as Champion Plus for their generous support and commitment towards addressing Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean for the period 2015 - 2028.

