

# Evaluation of BirdLife Malta's EU LIFE+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping



*A Triggered Finch-Trapping Station*



*Coccothraustes  
coccothraustes*

*Carduelis spinus*

*Carduelis carduelis*

*Carduelis chloris*



*Fringilla coelebs*

*Serinus serinus*

*Carduelis cannabina*

December 2011

## **Evaluation of BirdLife Malta's EU LIFE+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping**

### **The Need of this Evaluation**

In January of 2009 on the approval of the Maltese Government, BirdLife Malta (BLM) together with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (UK) and Media Today (Malta), and in consultation with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) embarked on a thirty-month EU LIFE+ Project, LIFE07 INF/MT/000554, which has cost the European taxpayer €375,000.

BLM's ultimate aim was the total eradication of a Maltese indigenous socio-cultural way-of-life, the passion of live-finch capturing through the use of manually-operated and legally regulated traditional clap-nets, for the purpose of keeping the caught finches alive in captivity for eventual use as call-birds, live-decoys, for their song and to guarantee the supply of genetic-diversity stock for captive-breeding enthusiasts.

To reach this final objective the Project's stakeholders, both local and foreign, disregarded one crucial issue, the human element – the thousands of Maltese trappers. The same Maltese trappers who prior to casting their Yes vote for Malta's EU Membership were continuously being reassured by all relative authorities, including the Maltese Government and the Malta/EU Information Centre (MIC) that the future of their passion was not simply being pledged with EU Membership, but that it would thrive, in that a longer period of time for the practise would be permitted [vide MIC's public reassurance at [MIC Fact Sheet](#)]. The Malta Prime Minister also guaranteed trappers that Malta had secured one of seventy-seven special arrangements in its negotiations with the EU, whereby the future of their passion would not be abolished because of EU Membership. The Prime Minister did this by means of a personal letter addressed to all trappers and hunters in March 2003 just prior to the EU Membership Referendum, and through a similar letter in April 2003 just prior to Malta's General Elections [vide *free* translations to English – [EFA Letter March 2003](#) and [EFA Letter April 2003](#)]. Even though the EU may have had other interpretations in respect of these assurances, it never transmitted different versions to the Maltese people, thus demonstrating tacit agreement to the information being supplied at the time.

The Federation for Hunting & Conservation – Malta (FKNK) which also stands for the rights of its thousands of trapper-members besides the hunters, was adequately informed that with Malta's EU Membership both local traditional hunting, but especially live-finch capturing (colloquially referred to as trapping) practices would have to change. The FKNK was also alert to BLM's lifetime extremist mission – the total abolition of hunting and trapping from the Maltese islands. Notwithstanding a signed declaration by the Maltese Prime Minister to the contrary, the FKNK's involvement in Malta's EU negotiations crucial stage was severed. Also, and despite the assurances mentioned above plus other [vide full list [here](#)], the FKNK did its very best to inform trappers with the factual situation by using all the means at its disposal. Still, FKNK's information was not believed, in fact belied by several, and most trappers, but also hunters, cast their votes according to the incorrect information given by the powers that be.

Therefore now, the FKNK cannot ignore this BLM Project's Final 10-page Report full of colourful photographs, also because the same unchallenged Report has been unfairly used by the Commission to commence infringements procedures against Malta by means of its Letter of Formal Notice last June, which in turn has lead Malta to unjustly not permit the live-capture of the otherwise legally *hunnable* species turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) and golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria altifrons*) this autumn for the first time in living memory, based on totally illogical grounds. This latter issue has been dealt with ad nauseam by the FKNK through the supply of several scientific and other documents, including draft legislation for the correct application of derogation for Malta to permit the live-capture of *hunnable* species. Therefore this Evaluation will address BLM's Project Final Report vis-a-vis live-finch capturing.

## **Introduction**

On the off-set it should be explained that the Report findings are supported by scant, at times uncorroborated evidence. The FKNK had in fact already addressed most and more of the 'findings' in its [Dossier re-Finch-Capturing](#).

Still this Evaluation will address the Final Report in a chronological order.

## **The Layman's Report and Cultural Redress**

BLM titled their Layman's Report of the Project "Changing cultural attitudes to trapping...". This is a positive sign wherein BLM admit that trapping is an established cultural practice, however one does not change the attitude towards a cultural practice by abolishing it, but rather by adaptation to the times, especially when as in this case there exists no other satisfactory alternative solution.

What however surprises the FKNK is how the EU can concede to a cultural change when the European Union was party to the UNESCO [Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#), whereby in Paris, 20 October 2005, among other it was clearly highlighted that:

"Conscious that cultural diversity forms a common heritage of humanity and should be cherished and preserved for the benefit of all,

Recalling that cultural diversity, flourishing within a framework of democracy, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect between peoples and cultures, is indispensable for peace and security at the local, national and international levels,

Recognizing the need to take measures to protect the diversity of cultural expressions, including their contents, especially in situations where cultural expressions may be threatened by the possibility of extinction or serious impairment,

Taking into account the importance of the vitality of cultures, including for persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples, as manifested in their freedom to create, disseminate and

distribute their traditional cultural expressions and to have access thereto, so as to benefit them for their own development”

Furthermore, the EU Commission in its communication on a European Agenda for culture in a globalizing world, addressed to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, 10.5.2007, justly acknowledges that:

“Culture lies at the heart of human development and civilisation. Culture is what makes people hope and dream, by stimulating our senses and offering new ways of looking at reality. It is what brings people together, by stirring dialogue and arousing passions, in a way that unites rather than divides. Culture should be regarded as a set of distinctive spiritual and material traits that characterize a society and social group. It embraces literature and arts as well as ways of life, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

The originality and success of the European Union is in its ability to respect Member States' varied and intertwined history, languages and cultures, while forging common understanding and rules which have guaranteed peace, stability, prosperity and solidarity - and with them, a huge richness of cultural heritage and creativity to which successive enlargements have added more and more.

Through this unity in diversity, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity and promotion of a common cultural heritage lies at the very heart of the European project. This is more than ever indispensable in a globalizing world.”

It also highlights Article 151 of the Treaty of the European Community (TEC) which manifestly addresses distinct cultural and traditional traits.

"The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common heritage to the fore."

Even more directly correlated to the present issue is the following provision, clearly put in place to safeguard cultural practices and distinctions:

"The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures."

The Treaty of Lisbon consolidated the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union. It seeks to redress a greater integration within the European Union. Nonetheless, Article 167 which replaces previous Article 151, clearly highlights, that the Union is bound to respect the national and regional diversity irrespective of its efforts towards a common cultural heritage.

"Title XIII

Culture

Article 167 (Ex Art 151 TEC)

1. The Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore."

The same article once more stress something of particular relevance to the present issue in that it implies that the Union has to take cultural aspects into account under other provisions of the Treaties, in this case the "Birds" Directive.

"Art 167 (4)

The Union shall take cultural aspects into account under other provisions of the Treaties, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures."

## **The Layman's Report as transmitted into the Final Report**

Initially it has to be said that the FKNK considers certain malicious declarations and false inaccurate statements made in the Report aimed to negatively affect the very lives of trappers as very serious.

*The Maltese archipelago is situated on Europe's central Mediterranean flyway:*

It certainly is not.

The following are the three major routes taken by birds migrating across the Mediterranean Sea:

1. The West Mediterranean flight-way, from West Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, encompassing the narrow stretch of sea between the Southern tip of Spain (Gibraltar/Tarifa) and Morocco (Tangiers).
2. The Central Mediterranean flight-way, from Central Africa to the Italian Peninsula, encompassing the channel between the Cap Bon Peninsula in Northern Tunisia (El Houaria) and Western Sicily (Marsala).
3. The East Mediterranean flight-way, from East Africa to the European mainland, encompassing the Strait of the Bosphorus between the Asian side and the European side of Istanbul (Turkey).

Birds migrating over the Mediterranean basically engage in two types of migration.

**Narrow-front migrants** cross the Mediterranean in large concentrations along the three major routes described above. Such birds constitute most species and include those birds of prey that utilize the air thermals prevalent over the channels between large land masses.

**Broad-front migrants** do not congregate at any of the major flyways and depart on their journey across the Mediterranean from random points along the vast coastline. The Mediterranean stretches from where it meets the Atlantic Ocean in the West to where it meets the Red Sea (via the Suez Canal) in the East.

The narrow-front migrating birds crossing the Central Mediterranean depart from Cap Bon in Tunisia, and invariably head north (N, NNW, NW, WNW, NNE, NE, ENE). Because of that fact, and because the Maltese archipelago lies about 250 kilometres away and in the south-east, **Malta cannot be considered as being on that Central Mediterranean migration route<sup>1</sup>.**

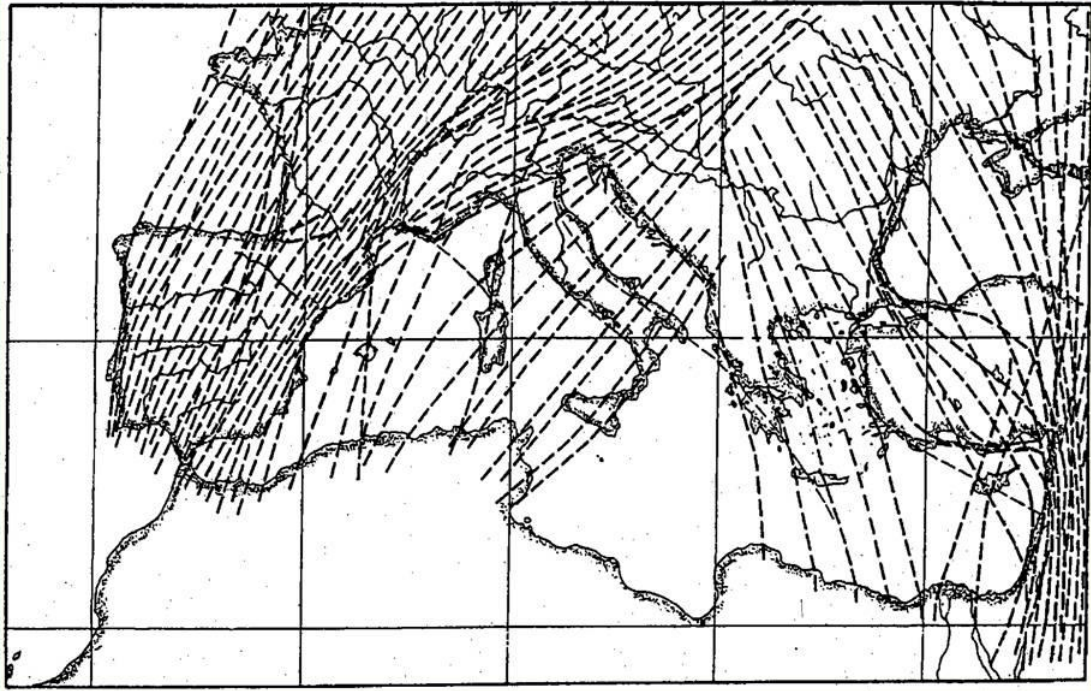
Malta gets a small share of some of the birds that migrate on a broad front. The evidence that points convincingly to this conclusion was collected over the years by Malta-based ornithologists<sup>2</sup>.



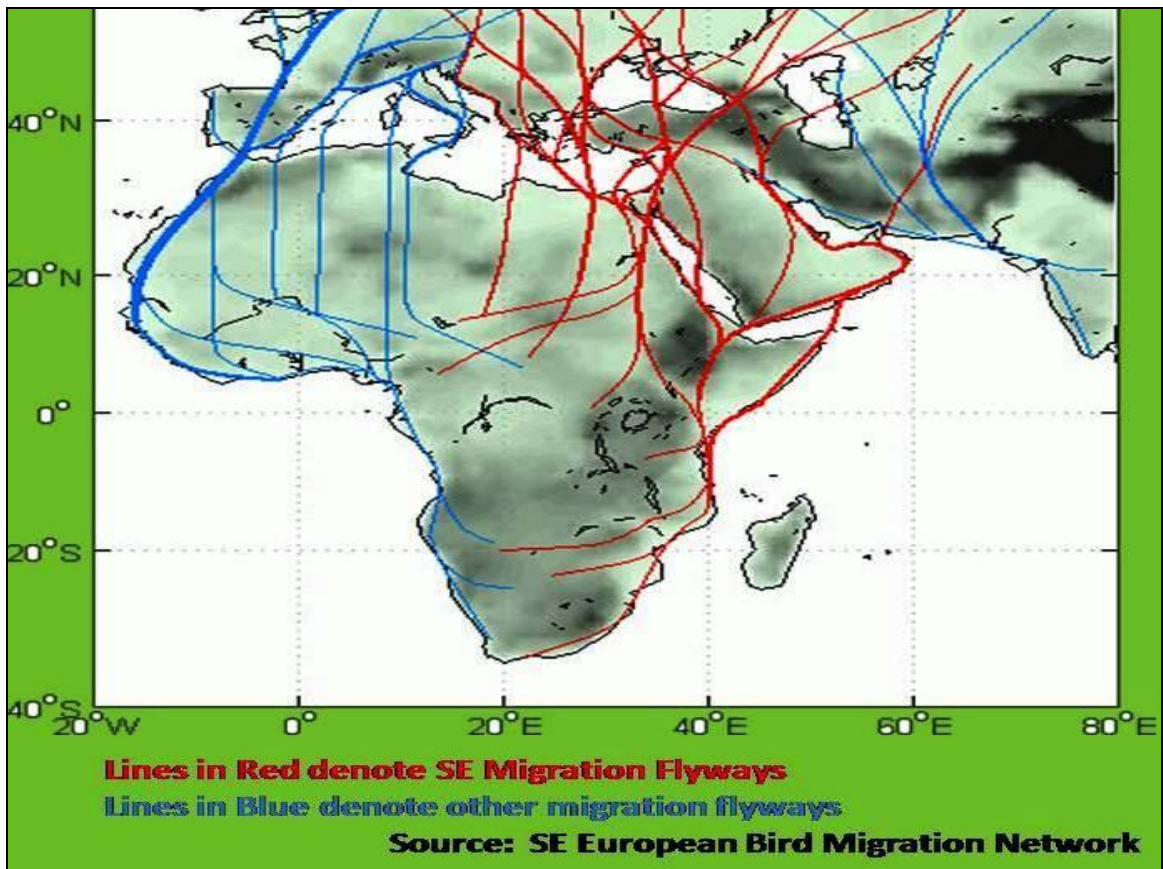
Central Mediterranean Map

<sup>1</sup> Refer to map of Central Mediterranean and other maps

<sup>2</sup> "There is little indication that the Maltese islands receive any regular concentration of migrants" (*The Birds of the Maltese Islands* - J.Gibb 1941 - 1945)



**Map of suggested directions and concentrations of migratory streams in Europe and the Middle East, primarily based on radar, infrared and moon-watch data. – Bird migration across the Mediterranean, Bruno Bruderer & Felix Liechti 1999**



Only rarely during the spring and post-nuptial migration does the odd western based bird fly over Malta. This theory was further strengthened last summer when 5 UK tagged cuckoos were tracked during their post-nuptial migration, when BLM had hoped that one of these cuckoos would reach our islands. Proof has it that not even one got close to our national waters let alone the islands. This proof confirms that most of the birds reaching the islands are from the north and north-east of the European continent, especially the Balkans.

*Many wild birds die after being trapped:*

Once the bird captured is safely taken home, the age-old custom of acclimatizing the bird starts, a custom which is handed down from generation to generation. The reality is that an extremely low percentage in actual fact die, and this is mainly due to the finches' adaptable behaviour, once its fight or flight mechanism no longer activates the bird, it will settle down to its new surroundings, much like the age-old process of domesticating the wild canary or budgerigar for that matter. These finches far outlive their wild counterparts even reaching 6 to 8 years, whilst the average mortality of finches in the wild is established at 2 to 3 years. (Popular Birds in Aviculture, P. Lander and B. Partridge, 1998).

*Trapping sites grew in size and trapping's traditional roots:*

Finch-trapping sites number possession and sizes are regulated by legislation and all trapping sites have been duly registered with the competent authorities. As for trapping's traditional roots, here another good sign is evident in that BLM acknowledge that trapping is a local tradition.

*Trapping is a very effective means of removing birds from wild populations:*

Here BirdLife's ignorance about trapping is manifest. Any experienced trapper will tell you that trapping requires patience and total commitment. Every trapper will admit that finch trapping entails over 85% of waiting in anticipation (bird-watching), and that nearly half of all attempts could result in failure. External human-made disturbances in the vicinity and bad weather will inevitably ruin any chance of a catch. Weather phenomena plays a decisive factor with regards to all migrating birds, and when finches are fleeing bad weather they will not even glimpse at any live-decoys, let alone descend within the trapping area. They simply do not decoy (in

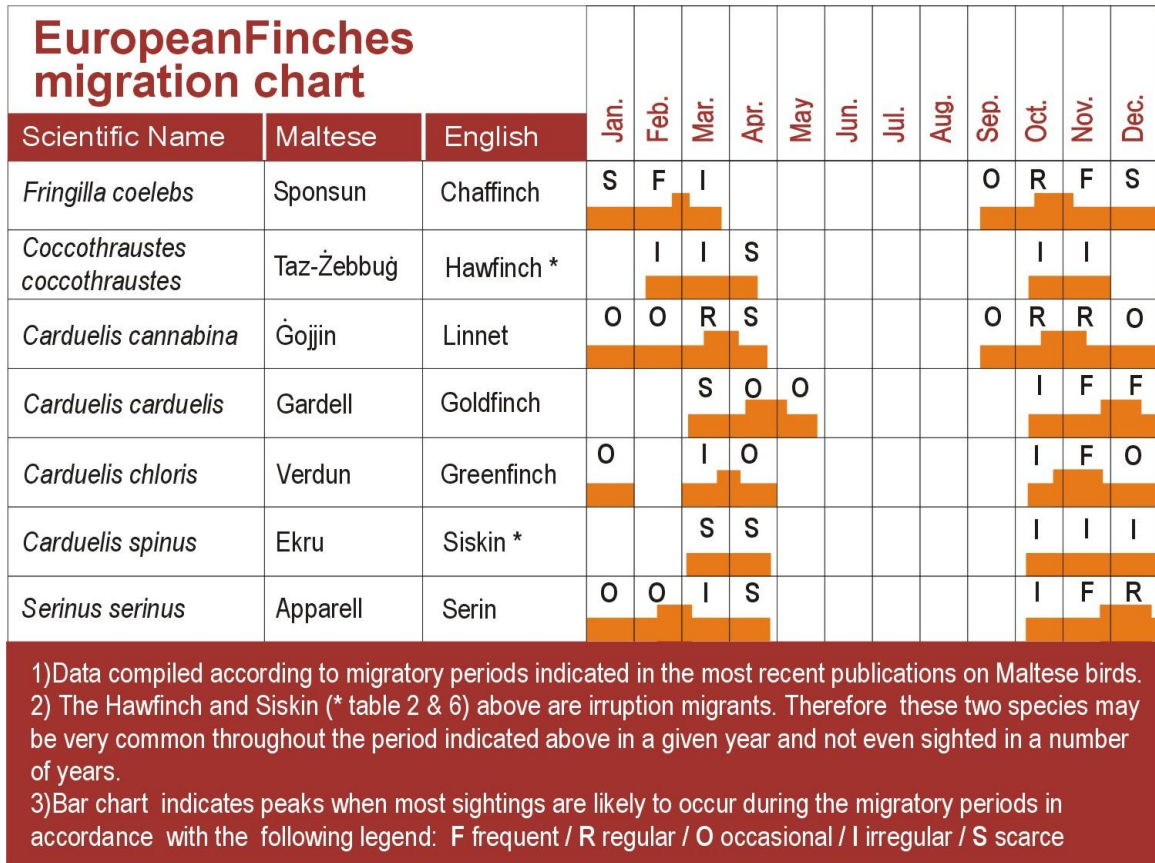
Maltese trappers' jargon *ħorox* and *għandhom il-maltemp warajhom*). Any finch that escapes capture might indeed visit the same trapping site or a different one, however it will never be attracted again to the tethered decoy and caught again. Trappers refer to such birds as having already been targeted (in Maltese trappers' jargon *għandu qelba*). These 'jolted' finches will eventually continue their journey. No traditional trapping will ever re-capture these birds that season.

*Malta used to have small populations of several finch species which have disappeared because of widespread trapping:*

The local occurrence (presence of species during the migration period) has remained static ever since records started being kept. The local conservation status of the Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*, Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*, Serin *Serinus serinus*, Siskin *Carduelis spinus*, Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* and Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* ranges from 'fairly common' to 'very common'.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) designates all seven finch-species under the *taxon* of 'Least Concern'.

<b>Local occurrence during migration of the Seven Finch species according to various ornithological authorities</b>							
<b><u>Author/s</u></b>	<b><i>Carduelis cannabina</i></b>	<b><i>Carduelis chloris</i></b>	<b><i>Fringilla coelebs</i></b>	<b><i>Carduelis carduelis</i></b>	<b><i>Serinus serinus</i></b>	<b><i>Carduelis spinus</i></b>	<b><i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i></b>
<b>Roberts 1953</b>	Common	Common	Common	Uncommon	Common	Uncommon / Some years numerous	Irregular
<b>Sultana/Gauci/Beaman 1975</b>	Very common	Common	Common	Fairly common	Common	Irregular numbers	Frequent
<b>Bannerman/Vella-Gaffiero 1976</b>	Very common	Common	Common	Annual	Common occasional abundant	Annual visitor in small numbers	Frequent
<b>Sultana/Gauci 1979</b>	Very common	Generally common	Common	Fairly common	Common some years very common	Irregular	Annual
<b>Sultana 1979</b>	Common	Common	Common	Frequent	Common	Frequent	Scarce some years frequent
<b>Fenech 2010</b>	Common	Common	Common	Frequent	Common	Frequent	Frequent



*Many birds and animals die as victims of by-catches in trappers nets:*

Any accidental by-catch can very easily be released back into the wild as a result of it still being alive when caught. This release system can also be used if bag-limits are imposed in trapping. But then again BLM even opposed the release of over 100 finches that had been previously trapped legally.

The FKNK has already instructed trappers that at the end of a trapping day the nets have to be released from their trigger to avoid accidental by-catch, (releasing the top pinion from the trapping pole will prevent other creatures from getting entangled in the unattended nets).



**A hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) happily grazing within a triggered trapping site**  
(Photo: Joe Lia)



**Captured Finches being released back into the wild at Buskett Bird Sanctuary**  
(Photo: Charles Gaffero)

*Trapping sites negative impact on habitats:*

FKNK's Ecological Measures:

- i) Trappers are urged to avoid using herbicides or pesticides to clear a path for the nets.
- ii) A trapping hide must be built/converted on the FKNK guidelines issued for such purpose – [Hides/Blinds Position Paper](#).



**A Trappers' Hide**  
(Photo: Lino Farrugia)

- iii) Dumping of material to create a swept-path for a trapping site should not be allowed, especially on *karstland/garigue* habitat. In fact on such land trapping-sites should not be permitted by legislation.
- iv) A trapper must clear his trapping area from any unwanted or unsightly material, e.g. disused oil drums, rusting metal, etc....
- v) At the end of each trapping season a trapper must clear the area from trapping equipment such as ropes, wires, etc., except for that equipment of permanent fixture. This measure will allow the habitat to regenerate itself.
- vi) A trapper will be urged to keep his site's watering trough (*hawt*), where applicable, regularly replenished even out of season, especially during the dry periods, to provide a regular supply of water for all wild-bird species.

An unused trapping site will regenerate within a few months to its original state, the only irreversible habitat is the one that is covered permanently under tons of concrete or road surfacing, not the ones that have weeds removed to lay nets.

The act of burning brush is a common practice in the Maltese islands, any farmer can confirm this practice. Although the practice is dwindling, the act itself is in no way detrimental to the habitat, the

flames actually regenerate the germinating seeds after a long and hot summer and immediately, after the first rains, the area returns to its natural state.



**Cleared Trapping-Site**



**Another cleared Trapping-Site**



**Same above site regenerated**



**Same above site regenerated**

*(Photos: Lino Farrugia)*



**Cleared trapping site and eventual regeneration**

*(Photos: Joe Lia)*



*The densely packed trapping sites result in large scale taking:*

Notwithstanding that the official figures of caught finches for the years 2002 to 2008 average out at 38,000 finches from seven species per annum, BLM still maintain that the densely packed trapping sites result in large scale taking, basing their theory on a 2004 National Statistics Office (NSO) Survey that showed that in that particular year, and when finch-capturing was permitted for 222 whole days, as much as 100,000 finches were caught.

The Maltese archipelago lies virtually at the centre of the Mediterranean, with Malta 93km south of Sicily and 288km north of Africa. The archipelago consists of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino with a total population of 400,000 inhabitants over an area of 316sq km. This fact makes Malta the smallest and most densely populated EU Member State. The demographic density of the Maltese archipelago stands at 1300/sq km, none of the land mass being devoid of human activity. (Malta Tourism official website, 2010).

The Maltese archipelago also boasts of 18 nature reserves, comprising 20% of the total land mass, with another 22% of built up areas and over 120 parks and public gardens. Innumerable roads and public footpaths make every corner of the islands easily reachable (MEPA 2010).

These geographic and demographic facts indirectly contribute to the sustainability of live-finch capture. The 5000 registered trapping sites (MEPA 2008) have to be categorised into their specific trapping orientation.

Live-finch capture sites, although comparatively using the same techniques, differ completely from Turtle Dove, Golden Plover, Song Thrush or Quail trapping sites. Live-finch capture trapping sites are in themselves species-specific; and it is a false impression given by antis and the non-versed in the subject that any trapping site for finches is capable of multi-species capture.

Arboreal finches, such as the hawfinch and siskin, are never caught from trapping sites situated where trees are lacking. The reverse applies to non-arboreal finches such as the linnet or goldfinch, which traditionally are never caught from trapping sites situated amongst wooded groves. Certain live-finch capturers do not even target the above finches if they have a trapping site situated as described above.

Birdlife Malta states that "putting all the registered trapping sites together would amount to covering the whole city of Valletta". Our capital city has a total area of 0.71sq km or 1306 m x 546 m (Mapquest, public mapserver generated on 14th September 2010).

Since it is legally and geographically impossible to construct trapping sites in Nature Reserves (63.2 sq. km.) and built-up areas (69.5 sq. km.), there remains only 183.28 sq. km. of land mass for potential trapping sites. Therefore, based on the BirdLife Malta estimate of 0.71 sq. km., the space actually taken up by existing trapping sites makes up only 1.3% ( $0.71 \times 183.28 \times 100\%$ ) of that remaining land mass. On this criterion bird-trapping cannot, therefore, qualify as widespread.

Finch capture is therefore restricted to only 1.3% of the Maltese Islands' land mass. This explains why aerial photography shows the densely clustered trapping sites in specific restricted areas.

Most live-finch trappers own more than one trapping site situated either on the northern or southern side of the islands, or eastern and western respectively due to the logistics of attempting to catch finches with 'the wind at one's back', literal translation in finch capture jargon means, *rih ma dahrek* therefore not all trapping sites are manned altogether at once for obvious physical reasons.

Large scale finch-capturing on the Maltese islands is just not possible for the simple reason that large scale numbers are never present as already demonstrated in the foregoing migration charts. Besides being common knowledge that migration numbers differ, at times considerably, from year to year, even the 100,000 figure is insignificant when compared to just the extremely large European population of these finches. This NSO figure also amply satisfies the in the order of 1% mortality rate criteria as established by the Commission's Guidance Document to the "Birds" Directive and as detailed hereunder:

<b>Finch Population</b> (individual)	<b>Finches caught</b> (NSO 2004)	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Chaffinch</b> ( <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> ) 270,000,000 – 480,000,000	15,370	0.0075%
<b>Serin</b> ( <i>Serinus serinus</i> ) 17,000,000 – 40,000,000	9,317	0.09%
<b>Greenfinch</b> ( <i>Carduelis chloris</i> ) 27,000,000 – 64,000,000	37,924	0.12%
<b>Goldfinch</b> ( <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> ) 23,000,000 – 57,000,000	2,266	0.015%
<b>Siskin</b> ( <i>Carduelis spinus</i> ) 20,000,000 – 36,000,000	2,357	0.015%
<b>Hawfinch</b> ( <i>Coccothraustes</i> ) 4,800,000 – 8,300,000	1,768	0.04%
<b>Linnet</b> ( <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> ) 20,000,000 – 57,000,000	34,538	0.12%

All percentages are reached by 'rounding-up' the number of finches caught; e.g. 37,924=38,000 and so

on. The minimum finch population is used in the working and all population dynamics are as at IUCN data 2004.

*It is impossible for the present police setup to cope with proper law enforcement:*

Strictly supervised conditions are in place due to the stationary and passive socio-cultural tradition in itself which facilitates proper and effective monitoring by the Law Enforcement personnel (ALE). All trapping sites have been registered on site-plans and these maps are available to the Maltese Police Force, since it is a pre-requisite to obtain a re-issue of the existing trapping licence, further to which, the Maltese Islands are easily accessible throughout and within the hour. Law enforcement personnel can be physically on site anywhere in the islands using their off-road vehicles.

Moreover live-finch capture regulations are still in force, maximum size of trapping nets area, maximum size of cages (*gabjetti*), etc. Thus infringements can be dealt with accordingly and penalties applied according to existing local legislations.

*Billboards were set up in high traffic arterial routes:*

Suffice to state here that the Billboards in question were illegal and their removal was ordered and undertaken.

*'Meetings' with trappers:*

Since BLM set-off with their Project, they tried all tricks in the book to get trappers involved, since this was one of the conditions imposed for the success of the Project:

- without disclosing the real reason for the requested meeting they met FKNK officials, who immediately saw through BLM's deceit and refused further meetings;
- they unsuccessfully tried to meet Gozitan trappers through the island's Local Councils;
- BLM's President had said that trappers have been approaching him personally and BLM in general to request information about an alternative to trapping, which declarations has been totally belied by thousands of trappers in an FKNK Petition;

- BLM state that they have dialogued with 411 trappers about these pursuing other interests in replacement of trapping. The FKNK has openly challenged BLM to supply identities of these persons and the FKNK will supply identities of thousands of trappers who are in total disagreement as evidenced through an FKNK Survey.

Finally, on this issue, how can BLM expect to be to be seen as a credible organisation when they say that they hoped to continue their dialogue with various hunters and trappers and that their doors are open to any organisation, including the FKNK, when on several recent TV and Radio programmes and Government commissioned scientific Studies they refused to participate just because of FKNK and its members participation!

*Alternatives to trapping:*

**NOTHING is a Satisfactory Alternative Solution to Live-Bird Capturing (Trapping), still BLM:**

- instigated, again encouraged by government, a captive-breeding programme which costs several other thousands of Euros, which programme is a total failure and waste of money;
- sponsored the Malta Cage Birds Association (MCBA), in which are affiliated several trappers, (the other three similar organisations simply refused to be involved), however the MCBA eventually also came to realise BLM's malicious intent, and have severed any association with them [vide MCBA [Media Release](#)];
- ,as stated earlier, said that trappers have been approaching their President personally and BLM in general to request information about an alternative to trapping, which declarations has been totally belied by thousands of trappers in an FKNK Petition.

*Malta can once again have these finches become common breeders:*

Malta never had and can never have viable finch breeding populations, trapping or no trapping, and definitely not as a result of this Project.

This is clearly evidenced by the:

- i) Lack of breeding finches in most of the bird sanctuaries, including in BLM's managed Reserves;
- ii) Lack of breeding finches on the 2 sq.km. island sanctuary of Comino, where no trapping has taken place for over 20 years;
- iii) Maltese Islands dense population (1300p/km).

The title of the Project itself states that the Maltese islands are a migratory stopover, which is just that, a migratory stopover.

Consequently, with spring finch-trapping having been banned since 2007 and autumn/winter trapping since 2009 and based on the 25% of active sites claimed by BLM, 2010 had 75% of inactive trapping sites, therefore it should be assumed that the spring of 2011 should have yielded a relative number of breeding finches. During the spring of 2011, the FKNK commissioned a foreign biologist, who is very familiar with the Maltese scenario, to head a Pilot Study regarding finch-breeding activities on the Maltese islands. Whilst the Study is in its final phases of publication, may we be permitted to cite a part of the Study's conclusion:

“The allegations by Raine (2007) and Sultana et al. (2011) that finches do not breed on the Maltese Islands because of trapping and the statements by the historical ornithologists such as:

‘By the middle of November our valleys are quite full with linnets, but the greater part are wantonly taken by both the clap and bat net; ... the few birds that are left usually linger throughout the winter and for the greater part of spring, when they occasionally breed with us’ or ‘The serin has been known to nest here when fortune protects it, and it would assuredly be a more frequent breeder if it were not persecuted to such extent” by Despott (1917), are more wishful thinking rather than have a biological basis.

Actually, more finches may be drawn to land because of the use of live decoys, for otherwise they would probably have over-passed the Islands.

If the trappers, during spring, happened to have caught the odd pair of finches that was about to breed, I think that would hurt the Maltese national pride more, than endanger the survival of that particular species.

The latest book on the breeding birds of Malta by Sultana et al. (2011), puts matters into a more realistic perspective – that the true cases of confirmed breeding of finches are in reality very few and far in between, chronologically. All other attempts of presenting cases of “possible” or “probable” breeding, while some being true, are nothing but purposeful attempts to inflate numbers of breeding finches.”

The breeding status of the seven finch species has remained static ever since records started being kept.

<b>Breeding status of the Seven Finch species according to various ornithological authorities</b>							
<b>Author/s</b>	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
<b>Roberts 1953</b>	Few pairs in Gozo	Never	Never	Never	Never	Never	Never
<b>Sultana/Gauci/Beaman 1975</b>	Few pairs	Rare 1-2 pairs on two occasions	Occasional 1-2 pairs	Very rare 1 pair on two occasions	Occasional 1-2 pairs	Never	Never
<b>Bannerman/Vella-Gaffiero 1976</b>	Few pairs	Reported on 1 occasion	Possibly on one occasion	Never	Rarely	Never	Never

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<b>Sultana/Gauci 1979</b>	Few pairs mostly in Gozo	Rare	Never	Very rare	Rare	Never	Never
<b>Sultana 1979</b>	Few pairs Gozo	Rare. 8 nests 30yrs	Few pairs	Never	Rare	Never	Never
<b>Fenech 2010</b>	Few pairs regularly	Occasional few pairs	Few pairs	Never	Irregularly few pairs	1 occasion	Never

Although some of the species do attempt to breed, and sometimes succeed in raising a brood locally, none of the seven species may be termed as regular breeders in viable numbers. Constant human disturbance coupled with lack of suitable food in the breeding period and the Maltese climate factor are determining issues.

*The Project's Results and Achievements:*

It is very true that trappers' licenses have decreased from 4,616 to the present 2,643 since government suspended autumn trapping of finches in 2008, however this is no achievement of BLM as is being self-proclaimed, nor as any direct or indirect consequence of the Project, plus the unannounced suspension of new trapping licenses on 1 August 2002, and Government's refusal to issue new licenses following the 5-year moratorium imposed by the same Government through Legal Notice 56 of 2003.

## Conclusion

As for the BirdLife Malta Project we believe to have shown, by facts, that this has been a complete failure coupled with incorrect, immoral and inappropriate use of taxpayers' money.

The live-trapping of birds, especially finches, has long been popular on our islands.

People enjoy the challenges presented by this activity, because it is not just a matter of laying down a net and catching the birds. Unless a trapper masters the art of capturing and employs all his skill to cover every requirement involved, he will not enjoy success. Luck, logistics, great patience and the year round meticulous care of the captive birds, play a predominant part as well.

It must be pointed out that only manually operated selective nets may be used to capture birds. In either case the quarry is always caught alive.

Trappers get great satisfaction from the fact that they themselves have caught the birds they keep. They also derive great pleasure from being able to listen to the birdsong all year round, and not just on the few days that the birds are migrating. Unlike people in northern countries who are fortunate in having wild finches present most of the year, Maltese live-finch trappers know that unless they first capture the birds from the wild, they cannot enjoy their beautiful birdsong. A marked difference since trapping was suspended in 2008 is the lack of birdsong one could hear from various trapping stations around our islands, besides the sorry sight of some abandoned areas around the trapping stations situation.

At any time it chooses to do so, the Maltese Government may apply a derogation permitting live-finch capturing in autumn for the seven traditional finch species under certain conditions in terms of Article 9 of the "Birds" Directive. The FKNK, which is proposing a very limited and restricted application of such derogation (from 222 days to a mere 60 days in autumn), has drafted and presented Government with a [Framework Legislation](#) for the application of the derogation and the [Derogation Application Legislation](#).

Live-finch capturing derogations are applied in various EU countries for the purpose of upholding local cultures. *Example:* the Salzkammergut region in Austria.

Finches captured on the Maltese Islands are invariably for keeping alive at home. No finch captured on Malta and Gozo ever ended on a dinner table or on a restaurant menu.

Maltese finch capturers are dedicated people who love the birds and consider them as their extended family.

Finches in captivity are known to live much longer than they do in the wild.

The majority of Maltese live-finch trappers are experts in their field, and they could be a great asset in the furthering of scientific knowledge on Mediterranean finch migration, with particular reference to Malta.

The benefits that bird-ringing may derive from live-bird trapping is still untapped owing to restrictive and biased legislation.

The seven finch-species, for which live-capturing was suspended at the end of 2008, were always the favourites with Maltese trappers. The FKNK will leave no stone unturned to reinstate this centuries-old socio-cultural tradition so passionately practised by Maltese trappers. It is no surprise that psychological repercussions and psychiatric disorders have increased within this section of FKNK Members.

Joe Lia  
Lino Farrugia  
Alfred Zammit  
Raymond Cordina  
Michael Cardona