



# **THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN WILD BIRDS FOR FOOD**

**through South-east and Central Europe**

## Introduction

The hunting and smuggling of song birds for food is an issue of serious conservation concern in Europe, but one which, to date, has received insufficient attention. It involves highly organized criminal activity in South-east and Central Europe: hunters are illegally shooting birds and smuggling them to northern Italy and Malta, where they are consumed as a delicacy. Many of the affected species are protected by European Community (EC) legislation and national legislation, and some species are very rare. The scale of this trade is huge – hundreds of thousands of birds are illegally shot and exported every year. Birds seized in trade are estimated to be worth



**Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: a frequent victim of illegal hunting for the songbird food trade (Richard Thomas / TRAFFIC)**

EUR 2-3 million<sup>1</sup> per year; the industry as a whole is estimated to be worth around EUR 10 million per year<sup>A</sup>.

## Where does this trade occur?

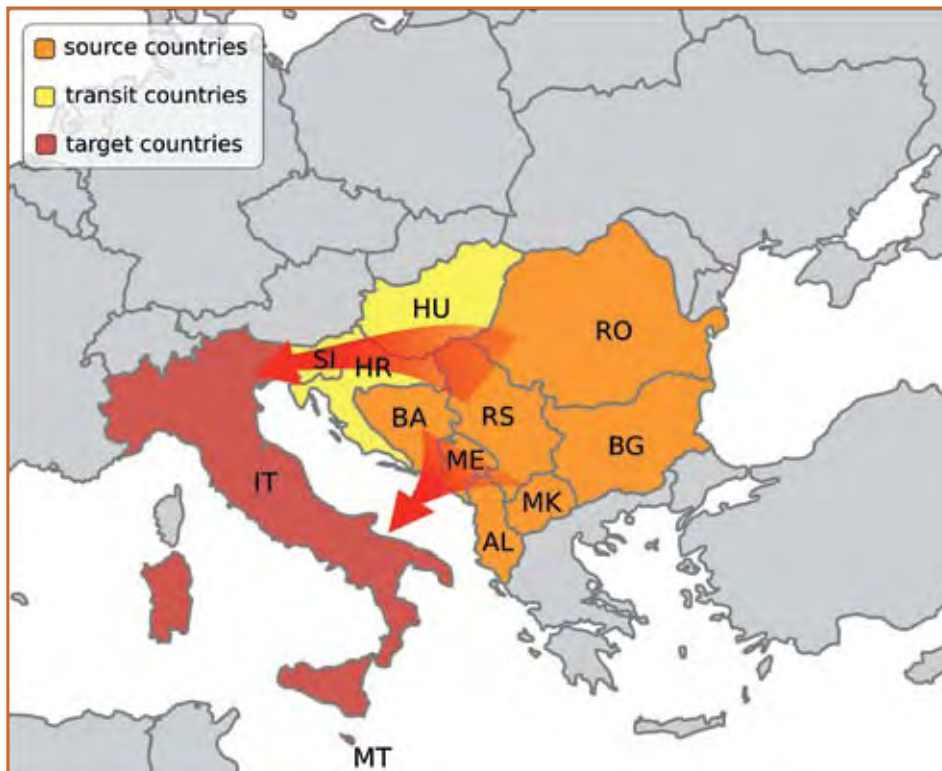
**The illegal hunting and trade in wild birds affects many countries in South-east and Central Europe.**

In recent years, the main illegal hunting hotspots 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<sup>B</sup> (see Map 1).



**Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: huntable but not tradeable in designated EU countries (Simon Stirrup)**

## Map 1: Hunting and trade in birds for food in South-East and Central Europe



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).

Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Europe\\_countries.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Europe_countries.svg) blank map produced by: Júlio Reis  
Created by Mihály Zentai

<sup>1</sup> Values estimated using an average retail market price in Italy of EUR8.50 for one specimen (price range EUR3-14)

## Illegal hunting & smuggling

Hunters targeting small birds for the food trade often use illegal hunting methods to maximise the number of birds killed in each attempt. Illegal methods include the use of recordings to attract birds – ‘tape lures’, very fine nets known as ‘mist nets’, birdlime, automatic or semi-automatic shotguns, and hunting from a moving vehicle or boat<sup>B</sup>. Dead birds are concealed in a variety of ways for smuggling across borders: often hidden in cars or in refrigerated trucks or among other products<sup>C</sup>.

## Which species are involved?

The vast majority of bird species illegally hunted and traded in Europe, mainly to northern Italy are songbirds (such as finches *Carduelis* spp. and *Fringilla* spp.)<sup>D</sup> protected under international treaties, EU and national legislation (see Table 1 and Table 2).



**Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, a non-huntable species under EU legislation (Richard Thomas / TRAFFIC)**

One of the rarest species hunted is the **Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis***<sup>D</sup>, classified as Endangered by IUCN. The European population of **Corncrake *Crex crex*** once numbered over 1 300 000 pairs, but suffered extreme declines in Europe from 1970-1990 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*<sup>E</sup>. The situation is similar for European populations of Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, especially in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>F</sup>.

**38 000** Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* were shot in Serbia during two months in 2004 – more than the entire breeding population of Serbia<sup>H</sup>. It is estimated that over 90% were shot illegally, using tape lures and semi-automatic shotguns<sup>I</sup>.



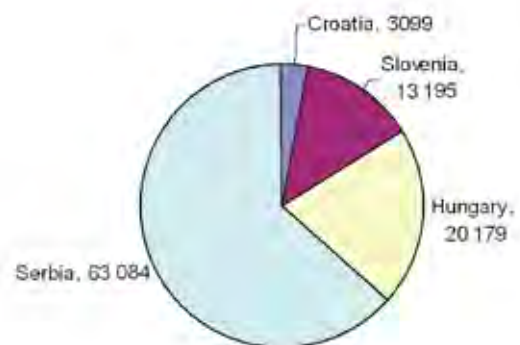
**European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*, traded illegally in significant numbers (Richard Thomas / TRAFFIC)**

Unless further attention is given to this trade, other European bird populations may meet the same fate – such as the **European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur***. This species is classified as ‘**Declining**’, yet is in trade legally in significant numbers<sup>G</sup> (e.g. as ‘hunting trophies’) and there are also very high levels of illegal trade<sup>C</sup>.

## Seizures and prosecutions

From 2000 to 2006, Croatia, Hungary, the Republic of Serbia, and Slovenia seized over 100 000 specimens of wild birds (see **Figure 1**). Some single seizures have been very large too, including around 60 000 birds seized in Serbia in 2001<sup>C</sup>.

**Figure 1. Number of seized specimens in selected source and transit countries (2000-2006)**



## The Balkan Birds Operation

In 2003, an Italian court determined that two hunting tourism firms had facilitated the **smuggling into Italy of over two million birds, shot in Serbia**, over six years. The operation was unearthed after Italian police seized a trailer carrying 12 tonnes of deep-frozen birds: 120 700 specimens comprising 83 different species, including Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* and Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, Skylark and other songbirds as well as Common Quail and European Turtle-dove<sup>C</sup>.



**Some of the 120 700 birds seized during the Balkan Birds Operation by Italian Customs (Massimiliano Rocco / WWF-Italy)**

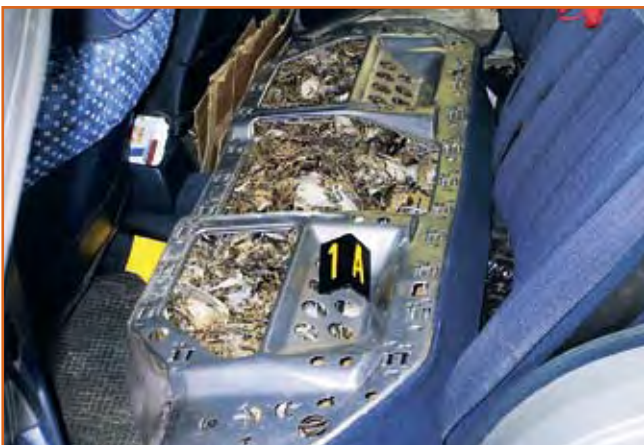
Many of the locations where the birds were shot are key wild bird habitats designated as **Important Bird Areas (IBAs)**. Among the dead birds seized, 68 species were under permanent hunting prohibition, 33 were very rare species, and the rest represented various species of songbirds. The birds were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

### **Prosecution in Hungary**

In 2001, Hungarian Customs intercepted 11 800 frozen bird specimens 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. Of the 11 people arrested, 7 were prosecuted for damage to the natural environment. Sentences ranged from six months to over two years imprisonment, and total fines of over EUR70 000 which were paid to Kiskunság National Park<sup>l</sup>.

### **Slovenian sentences**

Eight people were found guilty of smuggling over 7 000 bird specimens from Slovenia during 2002-2003. Four people were fined and sentenced to 6-12 months imprisonment<sup>c</sup>.



**Dead birds hidden in the back seat of a car seized by Slovenian Customs**

## **Recommendations**

TRAFFIC calls upon wildlife management, scientific and enforcement bodies to pay focused attention to this illegal trade, with the following specific recommendations:

1. **Italy and Malta** should carry out focused activities to increase the awareness of consumers, enforcement officers and the judiciary about this illegal trade and its impact on wild populations, as well as taking measures 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 of Italy;
3. **Italian enforcement authorities** should carry out focused inspections at border crossings based on risk analysis assessments<sup>k</sup>;
4. **Enforcement officers in source, transit or final destination countries** should be informed about and be on the look out for 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,
  - b. Make use of existing communication tools such as Interpol's ECOMESSAGE, Customs' Risk Information Forms and, for monitoring seizures, the European Union Trade in Wildlife Information eXchange (EU-TWIX) database, and
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.

**Table 1. International treaties and EU legislation**

Type of legislation	International		European Union		
<b>Legislative instrument</b>	<b>The Washington Convention</b> (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), 1975)	<b>Bern Convention</b> (1979, The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats)	<b>EU Wildlife Trade Regulations</b> (Council Regulation EC 338/97 and Commission Regulation EC 865/2006)	<b>Bird Directive</b> (Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds)	<b>Habitats Directive</b> (Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora)
<b>Main Aim</b>	To ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.	To conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, especially those species and habitats whose conservation require the co-operation of several States.	To implement the provisions of CITES in the EU and regulate internal EU trade.	To provide a framework for the conservation and management of, and human interactions with, wild birds in Europe (implementation of Bern Convention in the EU).	To contribute towards ensuring bio-diversity through the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (implementation of Bern Convention in the EU).
<b>Which countries implement</b>	States which have ratified (173 countries as of May 2008)	States which have ratified	EU Member States	EU Member States	EU Member States
<b>What species are covered</b>	Species listed in Appendices I, II and III	Species listed in Annexes I-III	Species listed in Annexes A, B, C and D	Species listed in Annexes I-III	Species and habitats listed in Annexes II, IV and V
<b>What protection is provided</b>	Appendix I: No commercial trade; Appendix II: trade regulated through a system of permits; Appendix III: trade regulated for species suggested by different states	Annex I: lists strictly protected flora species, Annex II: strictly protected fauna species, Annex III: protected fauna species, Annex IV: prohibited means and methods of killing, capture and other forms of exploitation	Annex A: No commercial trade; Annex B: trade regulated through a system of permits; Annex C: trade regulated for species suggested by different states (import notifications); Annex D: monitoring of trade level of certain species.	Annex I: Species that require the designation of SPAs (Special Areas for Protection) for survival; Annex II: Hunttable species in EU; Annex III: trade is allowed in case of certain hunttable species.	Annex I: Habitats that require the designation of SACs (Special Areas of Conservation); Annex II: Fauna and flora species that require the designation of SACs; Annex III: Criteria for SACs; Annex IV: protected fauna and flora species; Annex V: partly protected fauna and flora species.
<b>Where can more information be found?</b>	<a href="http://www.cites.org">http://www.cites.org</a>	<a href="http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=104&amp;CM=86DF-9/23/2008&amp;CL=ENG">http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=104&amp;CM=86DF-9/23/2008&amp;CL=ENG</a>	<a href="http://www.eu-wildlifetrade.org/">http://www.eu-wildlifetrade.org/</a>	<a href="http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm</a>	<a href="http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/index_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/index_en.htm</a>

**Other international legislation:**

Under the **Bonn Convention** (1979) contracting parties recognise that the effective conservation of species require the concerted action of all States within which species spend any part of their life cycle. Immediate protection is to be provided for migratory species threatened with extinction.

**More information:** <http://www.cms.int/>

**Convention on Biological Diversity** (1992) is an international treaty to sustain the diversity of life on Earth.

**More information:** <http://www.cbd.int/convention/>

**Other:**

**The IUCN Red List** (Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature) aims to assess the conservation status of species, subspecies, varieties and even selected

subpopulations on a global scale in order to highlight taxa threatened with extinction, and therefore promote their conservation.

**More information:** <http://www.iucnredlist.org/>

**SPEC** (Species of European Conservation Concern (Ornithology)): BirdLife International has assessed the conservation status of species, subspecies and subpopulations of birds in Europe to highlight those taxa threatened with extinction in Europe. It lists species according to their conservation status in Europe (SPEC 1: Global conservation concern; SPEC 2 and SPEC 3: Unfavourable European conservation status), and their risk of depletion in Europe (Declining, Rare, Depleted, Localised).

**More information:** [http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/birds\\_in\\_europe/index.html](http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/birds_in_europe/index.html)

## Table 2. Selected bird species in trade and their protection status

Key species involved in illegal hunting and trade in Central and Eastern Europe							
Scientific name	Common name	SPEC <sup>1</sup>	IUCN <sup>2</sup> Red List	CITES <sup>3</sup>	EU wildlife trade regulations <sup>4</sup>	EU Birds Directive <sup>5</sup>	Bern Convention <sup>6</sup>
<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Eurasian Skylark	SPEC 3 (Depleted)	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	All larks non-huntable, except <i>Alauda arvensis</i> Annex II/2 (huntable in designated Member States)	III
<i>Anas</i> spp.	Dabbling ducks	<i>Anas acuta, strepera, clypeata</i> and <i>querquedula</i> are SPEC 3, <i>Anas platyrhynchos, crecca</i> and <i>penelope</i> are non-SPEC	Least Concern	non-CITES	<i>Anas querquedula</i> – Annex A	Annex II/1 and III /1 ( <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> only) III/2 ( <i>Anas acuta, clypeata, crecca, penelope</i> only)	III
<i>Anthus</i> spp.	Pipits	Secure	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Non-huntable. <i>Anthus campestris</i> Annex I (species of conservation concern that require the designation of SPAs)	II
<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Common Quail	SPEC 3 (Depleted)	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Annex II/2 (huntable in designated Member States)	III
<i>Crex crex</i>	Corncrake	SPEC 1 (Depleted)	Near Threatened – Globally, Depleted – European	non-CITES	No	Non-huntable and Annex I (species of conservation concern that require the designation of SPAs)	II
<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Common Snipe	SPEC 3 (Declining)	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Annex II/1 and Annex III/2 (huntable in all Member States and tradeable in some with EC's approval)	III
<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	Eurasian Woodcock	SPEC 3 (Declining)	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Annex II/1 and Annex III/2 (huntable in all Member States and tradeable in some with EC's approval)	III
<i>Perdix perdix</i>	Grey Partridge	SPEC 3 (Vulnerable)	Least Concern, European IUCN list – Vulnerable	non-CITES	No	Annex II/1 (huntable in all Member States) <sup>7</sup> and III/1 (tradeable in all Member States)	III
<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	European Turtle-dove	SPEC 3 (Declining)	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Annex II/2 (huntable in designated Member States)	III
<i>Sylvia</i> spp.	Warblers	Most species Secure	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Non-huntable. Five species are in Annex I (species of conservation concern that require the designation of SPAs)	II
<i>Turdus</i> spp.	Thrushes	Secure	Least Concern	non-CITES	No	Five species ( <i>Turdus merula, pilaris, philomelos, viscivorus, iliacus</i> ) Annex II/2 (huntable in designated Member States)	<i>Turdus torquatus</i> – II all other species – III

<sup>1</sup> Species of European Conservation Concern (Ornithology)

<sup>2</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature

<sup>3</sup> Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

<sup>4</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No. 338/97 and Commission Regulation (EC) No. 865/2006

<sup>5</sup> Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds

<sup>6</sup> The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

<sup>7</sup> *Perdix perdix* (Linnaeus, 1758) ssp. *hispaniensis* Reichenow, 1892 and ssp. *italica* Hartert, 1917 – Annex I

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**TRAFFIC**  
the wildlife trade monitoring network



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