Oryx

Social media posts reveal the alarming extent of illegal wildlife hunting in Lebanon

By André F. Raine, Lloyd Scott & Axel Hirschfeld, 11th February 2025

Lebanon may not immediately spring to mind as a world class location to view spectacular bird aggregations, but the country lies within one of the largest migratory routes on Earth: The Eastern African–Eurasian Flyway. On peak migration days in the spring and autumn, tens of thousands of raptors, storks, cranes and a multitude of other species fly over the country as they move between their Eurasian breeding locations and African wintering grounds. Each day during their journey, as late afternoon approaches, diurnal migrating species settle in large flocks at key roosting areas to rest.

A flock of common cranes, a species that can be seen soaring over Lebanon during its migration. Photo: Tasha Sinchuk/Adobe Stock.

Unfortunately, this high concentration of birds in Lebanon during their migrations has led to the

country becoming a poaching hotspot, where birds are illegally killed at a scale rarely seen elsewhere in the region. Hunters travel to the mountains and valleys in their thousands, armed with shotguns, automatic rifles and an eagerness to shoot down as many birds as they can. The scale of the slaughter has to be seen to be believed, with whole flocks being decimated and the countryside littered with carcasses, feathers and cartridges. Photos and videos on the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) website and social media channels give a sense of the enormity of the issue—but be warned, it makes for shocking and upsetting viewing. CABS has been working on this problem in Lebanon since 2017 and all of the authors in our paper have witnessed the scale of the problem first-hand. Importantly, we have also noticed how open many poachers are about their activities, proudly flaunting photos of their crimes and trophies on social media platforms—a surprising behaviour given the illegality of their activities. However, despite their harrowing content, these social media posts can also be used as a tool for conservation. By compiling and analysing publicly available images posted by hundreds of hunters on Facebook and Instagram, we have been able to gain insights into the bird species that hunters are selectively targeting in Lebanon.

A white stork (left) and European bee-eater (right), two bird species that migrate along the Eastern African–Eurasian Flyway and are often shot down by hunters along the way. Photos: AB Photography (left) and Piotr Krzeslak (right), Adobe Stock.

Our results are staggering: we reviewed 1,844 photographs showing 29,542 individual birds shot by hunters. We were able to identify 212 bird species, ranging from the lesser spotted eagle *Aquila pomarina* and white stork *Ciconia Ciconia*, to the colourful European bee-eater *Merops apiaster* and the barn swallow *Hirundo rustica*. The vast majority of trophies posted by the hunters were species that are protected under Lebanese law, and 19 of the species are listed as threatened or Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List. Thirty-three per cent have a decreasing population trend in Europe, highlighting the impact that illegal hunting is having on these migratory species. Although

a broad range of bird species are targeted by hunters, we found that raptors are disproportionately affected. We identified 35 raptor species in the images, including significant numbers of the European honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* and Eurasian sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus.* Hunters also proudly displayed other large species such as storks, pelicans and cranes, and sometimes hundreds of dead birds were piled up in a single photograph. Many of these photos were truly shocking and difficult to look at, and often included elements of cruelty and torture. We reported many of these posts via the appropriate reporting channels but have not yet seen any specific action taken.

The Eurasian sparrowhawk was one of the most common raptors posted on the social media pages of Lebanese hunters. Photo: A. Raine.

The fact that hunters are so openly displaying their crimes on social media highlights the challenges of tackling this issue. Working with our Lebanese partners at the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon and the Middle Eastern Sustainable Hunting Centre to establish a dedicated Anti-Poaching Unit, we have spent several years collecting and presenting evidence to law enforcement agencies. Encouragingly, this is making a difference. Illegal hunting has reduced in some of the worst poaching areas, and awareness is increasing amongst the government, general public and the hunting community. However, this is just the start; a long road lies ahead to make Lebanon a safe place for migrating birds.

Piles of illegally shot birds were widely posted on Facebook and Instagram. Photo: A. Raine.

Although—as we have seen—social media can facilitate or encourage wildlife crime, they can also be a vital tool to help tackle this issue and benefit wildlife conservation. As well as enabling law enforcement officers to identify and target offenders, social media platforms are being used by NGOs such as the Committee Against Bird Slaughter to bring the devastating impact of illegal hunting to the attention of a local and international audience. Lebanese groups such as the Middle Eastern Sustainable Hunting Centre have also been using social media to encourage legal hunting, applaud individuals who are adhering to the country's hunting laws, encourage hunters to attend workshops, and promote alternative ways of spending time outdoors and engaging with nature, such as wildlife photography. Similarly, multiple Lebanese bird conservation groups, including the Society for the Protection of Nature and the Association for Bird Conservation, regularly use social media to encourage people to take up bird watching, visit nature reserves and enjoy observing the bird migration. In these ways, social media can be an effective method of countering illegal hunting and promoting change in local peoples' perception about nature and wildlife conservation.

A Lebanese conservationist holds a freshly shot Lesser spotted eagle in Danniyeh, Lebanon. Photo: A. Raine.

Lebanon is a microcosm of the Mediterranean when it comes to the challenges associated with the poaching of migratory birds. The recent war in the country reminds us of the resilience and determination of Lebanese conservationists in the face of adversity. Even during peak times of bombing, our Lebanese colleagues continued to transport injured birds to veterinary care and rehabilitation centres, despite the enormous risk to their own safety. With a ceasefire currently in place, we are hoping that the country can now begin to recover from the damage it has sustained and we look forward to renewing our collaborative work in Lebanon again in the near future.

The article 'Digital trophies: using social media to assess wildlife crime in Lebanon' is available open access in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation.*

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Lloyd Scott is Campaigns and Operations Officer and a board member of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter. Lloyd has been co-ordinating a range of volunteer-led bird protection camps throughout the Mediterranean since 2013 and has had a particular interest and focus on Lebanon since 2017. He also manages the Committee's English language social media channels. Lloyd's background is in Ecology, Conservation and Environmental Regulation and Enforcement.

Axel Hirschfeld is Chief Press Officer and a board member of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter. Axel has led bird protection campaigns and operations across Europe and the Mediterranean for more than 30 years. With a background in biology and conservation, he is a leading expert in combatting illegal wildlife crime such as the trapping, shooting and poisoning of migratory birds. Axel also has experience in broadcasting, press and international media work.