

BBC ALBA, Eòrpa, Series 22, episode 13

Participating individuals:

- Alasdair Fraser – BBC ALBA Correspondent
- Nicholas Barbara – BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager
- Danny Rosso (Hunter based in Gozo)
- Romina Tolu (Shout Campaign)
- Mark Mifsud Bonnici (St Hubert's Hunting Association Chairman)
- Salvu Portelli (Hunter)
- Joe Sultana (Conservationist, ex-hunter)
- Unidentified individual discussing hunting for food

Alasdair: "Every spring, hunters in Malta are given permission to act in a way not permitted anywhere else in the EU. During a very short season they can shoot migratory birds, an island custom that some people now want to end."

For Malta's hunters, April means just one thing: the spring hunting season. For a few weeks guns can be heard all over the island, firing on migratory birds. But in a few weeks' time, the people of Malta will hold a referendum to decide whether to end this tradition.

For centuries, migratory birds have used Malta as a stopover on their long journey between Africa and the European mainland. But some of them, because of this island, never reach their destination.

Nicholas Barbara (BirdLife Malta): Malta is crucial for bird migration. since this island in the middle of the Mediterranean is on the path of birds migrating between North Africa and Europe. Being an island, especially when the weather is not favourable to the birds, they seek shelter and rest here. At certain periods, depending on the weather, a lot of birds arrive on the islands.

Alasdair: Ghadira Nature Reserve was established in the 1970s to offer a protected reserve for the birds. The organisation BirdLife Malta has surveyed the numbers ever since. The workers have seen a big change, and they blame the hunters.

Nicholas Barbara: Malta, unfortunately, has illegal hunting, which increases during the hunting season. Although the season is only open for quail and turtle doves, other birds are also shot. This has been observed during every hunting season.

Alasdair: In Gozo I met Danny Rosso, who has hunted most of his life. He is proud of being a hunter and of hunting's history. He sees the referendum as an assault on his way of life.

Danny Rosso (Hunter): The referendum is not about shooting protected birds: no-one wants to do that. It's important to understand the argument of those wanting to stop our

spring hunt. Their argument is about the legal position and that's the problem. They accuse us of occupying public land illegally - which isn't true - and of being a danger in the countryside.

Alasdair: Danny feels hunters like him benefit the island and its environment

Danny Rosso: If the hunters are not out there, illegal activity will increase as poachers will find things easier. They don't shoot at protected birds when we're there. A thief normally comes out at night.

Alasdair: Many of those wanting to stop the spring hunt view this referendum as a milestone after years of campaigning, but whatever the outcome, there's some doubt about the effects. Campaigners speak out loudly in favour of protecting the birds. Since some now agree that illegal hunting by poachers is increasing, the campaigners say a complete ban would stop that.

Romina Tolu (SHout campaign): We're not saying that illegal hunting would stop altogether, nor that hunters or their federations are hunting illegally. But illegal hunting takes place in Malta in the Spring and Autumn seasons and even when the season is closed. Without a spring season, illegal hunting is less likely and there is greater control.

Alasdair: St Huberts hunters' association is one of the largest in Malta (GUN PHOTO). The chairman says people should concentrate on illegal hunters instead of those hunting legally.

Mark Mifsud Bonnici (St Huberts Chairman). There are 10,000 hunters, but you get only two or three incidents in a season. By and large, hunters do not act illegally. Everyone knows there are a few poachers whoa are harming the hunters' reputation, themselves and Malta. Everyone, including the hunters, is working to stop these illegal acts.

Alasdair: Whether legal or illegal, the campaigners want a complete stop to the spring hunt. Hobbyist hunters are unhappy about that. At this range, they're shooting clay pigeons. And there is great sympathy for the hunters.

Salvu Portelli (Hunter): As a shooting federation, we back the hunters' federation on this issue, because, if an incident happens here as has happened abroad, and someone commits a heinous crime with a gun, would that mean that target shooting has to stop? We consider ourselves a minority, and we back the hunters' federation not only in their hobby but for other minorities to continue enjoying their hobbies.

Alasdair: Many people in Malta get pleasure from their hobbies. Shooters are no different. Many have turned out to support the competitors. The new generations enjoy following in the footsteps of their predecessors.

Quail being prepared for dinner. But is there a difference between eating birds like this and shooting them for sport?

Unknown person cooking quail: Over the years hunting has caused harm. People used to hunt for food, although they also enjoyed the sport. They used to take all game to market (Suq tal-Belt). Indeed, in the 19th century, Valletta Market in Malta sold a lot of game for consumption. Today people hunt, not for food, but for sport and so there is no longer a need to hunt.

Alasdair: Joe is familiar with the birds that visit at different times of year. He used to hunt, but stopped several year ago. He also want to see the spring hunt banned.

Joe Sultana (Conservationist): I didn't touch the shotgun again once I realised how cruel it was to shoot birds in the name of sport. It didn't make sense. That's what changed me. It's difficult living in a place where hunting is part of culture and your friends and acquaintances perceive you as being against their hobbies. Their arguments are not sound. When you are campaigning, you have to offer people something to persuade them to vote for you. so, what are they saying? 'Vote for us so we can continue killing birds!'

Alasdair: Things haven't been easy for the hunters. Many of them feel they face more and more obstacles.

Salvu Portelli (Hunter); Last year, we were checked by police four times. They looked at our hunting licence, how many shots we fired and if we caught any birds. And down there, on these benches, CABS and BirdLife personnel will be watching us recording all shots fired. To be honest, you have to be really luck to shoot a turtle dove. Is has to be sent by God.

Alasdair: Where does this leave the next generation of hunters and will they have any support?

Salvu Portelli: Maltese schools are forever telling children that hunting is bad. But there is still a generation that continues to hunt. Just a few days ago, there was a programme in Gharghur on how to train dogs. Two children who were interviewed said they were learning to train dogs so they would have hunting dogs when they grow up. That shows that there are children who want to hunt and keep up the tradition.

Alasdair: The debate has been hotting up, on both sides. Next month, the people of Malta have their say.

Mark Mifsud Bonnici (St Hubert's Chairman): If the Yes vote wins, justice will be done and hunters will see their sport safeguarded from unfair attempts to stop it. Things would improve. Police would have more control and be able to impose stiffer penalties. Clearly, as we've see throughout the referendum, those who act illegally would have something to fear. They would have to consider the risks.

Romina Tolu (SHout): If the No vote wines, we may see different species of birds visiting Malta and breeding here. that will take time and we may not see any results if the season doesn't open in April, but it should be possible to see more birds in Malta