

National Code of Good Practice

Animal-aided Hunting & Invasive Alien Species

Common concerns over the significant detrimental impacts of invasive alien species may bring together interest groups to draw attention to those man-mediated actions or interventions that may facilitate the introduction and spread of invasive alien species. In parallel with the drawing up of the National Strategy on Invasive Alien Species, a series of sector-specific codes are being drawn up to raise awareness and promote good practice to curb the risks associated with introducing and using alien species that exhibit an invasive potential. The mandate for such codes is found in Malta's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2012-2020). The present document puts forward a series of recommendations to serve as a code when hunting with the aid of trained animals – hunting dogs, falcons, hawks and ferrets. The recommendations, which adopt the principle of self-regulation, aim to provide practical and concise guidance in establishing common standards of good practice and responsible attitudes and behaviours when hunting, including in falconry and ferreting. The recommendations do not replace established national legislation that regulates activities that use alien species. The recommendations are intended to be complementary to the legally-binding obligations defined in national legislation to entice compliance, and also to support the implementation of the National Strategy on Invasive Alien Species. Wide dissemination of this code to the target stakeholders is of essence in order to create partnerships and encourage voluntary adoption in order to overcome any malpractices that may occur as a result of lack of knowledge or understanding of the risks that alien and invasive species may pose.

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Further Reading:

European Code of Conduct on Hunting and Invasive Alien Species – Monaco, Genovesi & Middleton, 2016, Council of Europe¹

*European Charter on Hunting and Biodiversity, Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, 2007*²

Hunting may be a pathway for the deliberate **introduction of alien animals as quarry** in order to create new hunting opportunities. Accidental introductions through escapes may also occur when using **animal-aided hunting**, such as the escape of hunting dogs (although of limited probability in Malta), **ferreting** (using trained ferrets to chase rabbits out of burrows/warrens) and **falconry** (whereby trained birds of prey, namely falcons of the genus *Falco* and hawks of the genus *Accipiter*, are released to take quarry in their natural state). Hunting is also an **indirect pathway of the introduction of alien plants**, e.g. the past direct planting of *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia* to attract birds.

Past introductions for the purposes of hunting of game have included the following four alien birds [Galliformes: Phasianidae]:

- Chukar partridge - *Alectoris chukar* - A North African/Asian species introduced in Malta in the 1990s and established on Comino.
- Golden pheasant - *Chrysolophus pictus* - An Asian species, introduced throughout Europe, including Malta where it is established on Comino.
- Common pheasant - *Phasianus colchicus* - An Asian species, introduced throughout Europe, including Malta where it is established on Comino.
- Bobwhite quail - *Colinus virginianus* - A New World species introduced in Malta and once established on Comino, where it is now no longer found.

In the past the wild boar had also been introduced to Comino. Such past introductions have not been repeated for the purposes of restocking. The chances of deliberate introductions of alien species for hunting purposes are very remote nowadays, albeit there should still be awareness to prevent any potential misinformed introductions. Bird hunting is also regulated via the "Wild Birds Conservation Regulations, 2006" (S.L. 549.42), which transposes the EC Birds Directive. While the latter Directive defines the common framework for the conservation of naturally occurring species of wild birds and their habitats throughout the European Union, species listed in Annex II may be hunted under Article 7 of the Directive, subject to specific conditions.

In addition, the Protection of Wild Rabbit Regulations, 2014 (S.L.549.90) regulates the hunting and trapping of the wild rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*).

The EU Commission published in 2008 the "**Guidance document on hunting**³ **under Council Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds**⁴. This guidance document includes a section on "Introduction of Non-naturally occurring Bird Species". This section makes reference to Article 11 on the prevention of damage to local flora and fauna by the introduction of bird species, which do not occur naturally in the wild state in the European territory of the Member States. The introduction of

¹ Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/168063075c>

² Available at: <http://www.face.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/charter.en-fr.fin.pdf>

³ Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/hunting/docs/hunting_guide_en.pdf

⁴ Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009L0147&from=en>

the North American ruddy duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) is used as an example to illustrate the point that impact can be through hybridisation as well as competition and displacement. The document further notes that impact is not limited to rare species but also to more widespread species, including those at present subject to hunting.

"**The Biodiversity Manifesto**⁵" adopted by the **Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the European Union (FACE)** includes a statement that FACE and its Members will "contribute to policy formulation for issues such as the control of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) ...". The "**European Charter on Hunting and Biodiversity**", established in collaboration between FACE and the **International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC)**, and, adopted by the Bern Convention in 2007, includes principle number 4 – 'Maintain wild populations of indigenous species with adaptive gene pools', accompanied by a rationale and guidelines addressing IAS.⁶ The rationale acknowledges that the introduction of IAS, or, the human selection for traits, can impact native species and their habitats, as well as human livelihoods derived from them.

The problem with **escapes from falconry activities** is that the species used are generally captive-bred raptor hybrids, which may then potentially hybridise (even if of low probability) with wild birds of prey. Captive-bred birds are fitted with seamless metal rings/bands (placed on the feet of chicks, and which cannot be removed when legs are fully-grown); this is a requirement of the EC Wildlife Trade Regulation, as is the licensing of all captive-bred raptors. A consultative meeting on trade in falcons for falconry was held under the CITES framework in Abu Dhabi in 2004.⁷ Points that were raised at the meeting included the need to raise awareness among falconers of the provisions of the Convention, the seriously low levels of *Falco cherrug* populations and the significant impact of illicit trade on wild populations of birds, in order to encourage compliance with CITES. In the case of captive-breeding, delegates at the meeting encouraged falconers using hybrids to use means to assist the tracking and recapture of birds that escaped. Indeed, the Conservation of Wild Birds (Falconry) Regulations (S.L.549.106), which came into force in 2016, includes requirements for the falconry species to be fitted with a transmitter of a real-time tracking device, as well as the need to inform the competent authority on instances where the falconer has failed to retrieve an escaped falcon.

The **International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF)** adopted in 2014 the "**Position Statement and Code of Conduct for Falconry with respect to Invasive Alien Species**".⁸ The intended goal is to minimise the risk of loss of captive-bred raptors when practicing falconry. In this respect, IAF requires that affiliated falconry clubs formally adopt the mentioned code of conduct for falconry when their members fly exotic species or hybrids. This Code requires that:

- *No hybrids or exotics should ever be deliberately released to the wild*
- *Modern functioning telemetry should be used when any hybrid or exotic species is flown*
- *IAF will manage an online reporting scheme so that any incidents of ex-falconry hybrids or exotics can be recorded attempting to establish or breed in the wild.*

The following national recommendations build on the "**European Code of Conduct on Hunting and Invasive Alien Species**", the "European Charter on Hunting and Biodiversity" and the "IAF Code of Conduct for Falconry". The recommendations are aimed at Maltese hunters, hunting organisations/associations, falconers and falconry groups to promote sustainable hunting and sustainable falconry. Another aim is to engage their participation in efforts to prevent and minimise the impacts caused by the introduction and spread of invasive alien species, and hence strengthen their contribution to the conservation of biodiversity in the Maltese Islands.

⁵ Available at: http://www.face.eu/sites/default/files/documents/english/bdm_en_final.pdf

⁶ Available at: http://www.face.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/charter.en-fr.fin_.pdf

⁷ Available at: http://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/common/prog/falcon_sum.pdf

⁸ Available at: <http://www.iaf.org/download/Exotic/IAF%20IAS%20march%202014-1.pdf>

✓ BE AWARE of the List of IAS of Union concern and the national list of species deemed to be invasive alien species and the legal obligations that apply to these species.

✓ BE AWARE OF, IMPLEMENT and COMPLY with the provisions of Council Regulation (EU) No. 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species , CITES requirements, national legislation transposing the EC Habitats and Birds Directives, and the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations, (S.L.549.64).

✓ PREVENT the intentional and unintentional releases of invasive alien species (used for game or in falconry).

✓ PREVENT the intentional and unintentional introduction and spread of invasive alien plants for game food and shelter.

✓ RELEASE of species into the natural environment can only be done when given prior authorisation by the Competent Authority.

✓ PRACTISE animal-aided hunting in a manner that seeks to minimise the risks of escapes (and ensure recovery) and risks of impacting native species.

✓ COLLABORATE in programmes aimed at controlling and monitoring IAS as well as in conservation efforts.

✓ ADOPT all possible measures: (1) to prevent escapes of birds of prey used in falconry (and in falconry displays), in particular of hybrids or non-native birds, and (2) to increase the possibility of recovery of escaped individuals. Instances of escape are immediately reported to the Competent Authority.

These recommendations, if followed by all hunters and falconers would help in the prevention of introduction, and timely detection of new alien species in Maltese waters. Continued dialogue and cooperation between Government and hunters, hunting associations, falconers as well as falconry groups is of essence, especially when recognising the knowledge of such stakeholders and their contribution to the conservation of Malta's biodiversity as part of the concept of "citizen science".