



In April 2012, I was invited by Ceri Levy to join a group of artists participating in the BirdLife SpringWatch camp. This is my creative contribution – an imagined feature article in a 2025 edition of an online newspaper.

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Shooting for the Earth: Malta opti-hunt 2025

Paul Jepson reports from Malta on the phenomena of opti-hunting due to debut on our screens this weekend.

Below us, Clayton Fenech, the new legend of Maltese bird hunting stalks the steep rocky fields of Dahlet Qorrot.

A bird explodes into the air. Clayton reacts. A blurred quail image overlain with scoring grids and circles appears on my iPhone screen. A moment later the scores appear: hit difficulty category '1', hit accuracy '2.2', a combined level 1.6 hit under today's weather conditions.

'Hardly a winning hit but the media feeds are working perfectly' calls top reality gaming producer Orsa Johnson from the Eurosport landcruiser.

I'm in Malta to report on the first live and interactive broadcast of a competitive optical bird hunt. Since the launch of the i-Gun in 2018, opti-hunting has become the world's fastest growing real-game with an estimated 25 million participants in Europe alone.

Sat alongside Orsa is Will Beebe of Digital Asset Management. *"live optical bird hunts are a compelling blend of old-style wildlife programming, on-line gaming, and competitive field sports. Market research suggests major viewer interest, though we expect the real returns to come from the in-game spot betting industry"*.

Clayton, accompanied by his pointer dogs, joins us for a debrief. He looks pleased – three subsequent quail hits were all low level '1s'. It's an opportunity for me to take a look at the prototype Leica i-Gun5 cradled casually in his arms. Clayton is enthusiastic *"The focus-zoom-fire trigger is super fast, the app-phone dock beautifully positioned and the weight and balance is superb. This gun is a work of art"*

Back in the capital Valletta, I meet Alex Salavin, President of FNKN – The Maltese Hunter Federation and organisers of Saturday's first competitive international migratory bird hunt. He talked of the confrontation that historically characterised the migration seasons. *"They were dark times. Every migration northern birdwatchers came with their drones and binoculars, invading our privacy and publicising every minor illegality to pressure Brussels to force our government to ban our traditional sport"*.

In the 1990s, BirdLife International estimated that Mediterranean hunters were killing a staggering 500 million migratory birds a year. In the teen20s FNKN and Birdlife were locked in legal battles. For Alex the invention of the i-Gun was a *'massive relief'*. His hope is that tomorrow's hunt will *"mark a point when hunters and birdwatchers can put the past behind them and unite around the shared goal of restoring Europe's bird populations."*

The origins of opti-hunting are easily traced to the great Eurozone crisis of 2008-2019. The hunter's slogan *'better a hobby than a [drug] habit'* chimed with the EU life quality agenda that arose to curtail the excesses of market capitalism. Inspired by the *'Smart, inclusive, sustainable'* mantra of the teen20's, a collaboration involving Leica Camera, Samsung Electronics, the game developer Electronic Arts, and Oxford University formed to create the i-Gun and the socially networked reality games and competitions it now supports.

At the newly opened Valletta i-huntscape, created in a cavernous warehouse on Quarry Wharf, I run into Charles Bridgeman game designer and consultant to OAiH - opti-hunting's governing board - which decides where and when i-Guns will function, manages the i-hunting interface and leagues and curates the huge amounts of hit data that power a new generation of virtual huntscapes.

"This is the future of gaming" enthuses Charles as we enter a digitally rendered Maltese landscape projected onto a vast dome. *"A fusion of real and virtual life"* he continues as three turtle doves – data visualisations from a past day – fly overhead. The quality of these gaming environments and opti-hunting is expected to mature together. *"Novice hunters can practice and veterans will be able to re-hunt famous past days. In these facilities opti-hunters will be able to go back in time!"*

Next morning, as dawn rises over the scruffy terraced hillside of Mizieb, I find Clayton, his dad George, and hunt referee Gilmore Ellol preparing for their final practice. I invite George to compare hunting of old with today. *"There's no denying it felt more macho, the gun recoil, shot, smell of gun powder, but the beauty of opti-hunting is that a bird can be 'shot' by multiple hunters so there are more shots to be had."*

My last port of call is with Carl Buhagiar, Head of BirdLife Malta and veteran of the campaigns to ban migratory bird hunting on Malta. *"Opti-hunting is definitely a win-win solution. The seamless shot location and data upload is revolutionising our ability to accurately map migration routes and model trends in bird populations."* Carl is referring to Oxford's 'oBioscore' App that adds a 'conservation information value' (CIV) to each hit score. The high CIV scores assigned to lost and little known species is reinventing hunting expeditions of old.

Opti-hunting seems set to become the first truly modern hobby - a compelling blend of the real and virtual, entertainment and exercise, new technology and old practices - that is simultaneously enriching lives and creating political pressure to restore ecosystems. Could it be that with the i-Gun we will find a way to live well with our planet?

The 2025 Malta international opti-bird hunt is live and interactive, SKY 1 Saturday, 29 April, 05.30 - 9.30am, highlights Saturday 22.00.