



Long-term Decline in Numbers of Migrant Birds Breeding in Europe

European researchers have recently found a long-term and severe population decline of long-distance migrant birds breeding in Europe. The major drivers of this trend are not known, but the results of the study indicate that more conservation measures outside Europe may be required to conserve migratory species.

There is increasing evidence that the population of long-distance migrant birds breeding in some parts of Europe and wintering in sub-Saharan Africa may be in major decline. Most European countries are committed to addressing such a decline through the Convention on Migratory Species and the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. These aim, respectively, to preserve migratory species and to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010. To meet these targets, it is necessary to identify species or ecosystems that are in decline or endangered in order to prioritise and target the conservation measures required. To date, evidence of lower numbers of migrant birds breeding in Europe comes from studies conducted either in limited geographical areas or on a single species. There was therefore a need to identify continent-wide population trends of migrant birds so the reported decline could be further studied and generalised across the entire continent.

European researchers have recently analysed trends in all migratory bird species in Europe, thus providing the largest spatial and temporal examination of population trends carried out to date in Europe. The scientists also tested the hypothesis that population trends of sub-Saharan migrant birds differ systematically from those of resident or intra-European migrant birds. For this study, data from BirdLife International's Birds in Europe¹ project was used. This data set provides estimates of population trends for all bird species in each country in Europe over two time periods: 1970-1990 and 1990-2000.

The results of the study suggest that migrant birds breeding in Europe have suffered a sustained and often severe population decline over the last 30 years. No such general pattern has been observed in the trends of non-migrant birds in Europe, particularly from 1990-2000. The authors suggest a number of potential causes for the observed decline in African migrants towards Europe, including habitat lost or deterioration on the wintering grounds, loss of staging areas, pressure from hunting in Southern Europe and Northern Africa, and climate change. All these possible causes would affect only long-distance migrant birds. However, it is also possible that long-distance migrant birds are more susceptible than resident and intra-continental migrant birds to environmental changes on their breeding grounds such as changes in food availability or agricultural intensification.

The authors highlight the fact that more research is needed in order to assess whether the reported decline is due to changes on the birds' wintering grounds, breeding grounds or on migration routes, and to identify the measures required to reverse this negative trend. Very little is also known about the diverse potential impacts that climate change may have on long-distance migrant birds.

In short, the current study provides new insights into the decline of long-distance migrant birds in Europe. It indicates that more conservation action may be required outside Europe in order to preserve migratory species.

¹ Website of BirdLife International: http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/birds_in_europe/index.html

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