

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. Photo: Andy Hay

25 YEARS OF THE BIRDS DIRECTIVE

The approval of the Birds Directive in 1979 marked the first significant commitment of the European Community to nature conservation. This was a response to the recognition that effective bird conservation especially for migratory species, requires international collaboration and common standards across countries. The 25th anniversary of the directive is an occasion not only to celebrate positive achievements but also to highlight remaining gaps in implementation which need to be addressed and to consider the future challenges for bird conservation in an enlarged European Union.

There is much to celebrate. Targeted conservation actions within the framework of the directive, including many projects supported by the EU LIFE Nature programme, have improved significantly the status of many of Europe's most threatened bird species. The protection of vital habitats, in particular wetlands, has been promoted by the creation of an impressive network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The implementation of this directive has also

contributed to the debate on the need for wider measures for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

The picture is however not all positive. A number of Member States have yet to complete implementation, particularly in the designation of SPAs. More widely the latest statistics compiled by BirdLife International on bird trends in Europe show that there are continuing serious declines of formerly common species, especially farmland birds. The clear challenge for the future is to find ways to halt and reverse these worrying trends. Recognising this, the EU Heads of State and Government set themselves the objective at the Göteborg Summit of 2001 of halting the decline of biodiversity by 2010.

Commitment and support is required across European society to achieve this. Europe's citizens recognise birds as a powerful symbol for our natural heritage and expect us to succeed in this task.

Nicholas Hanley

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Mating cranes, and (inset) at the nest, Finland. Photos: Jorma Lutha

Safeguarding Europe's most valuable bird areas

For a quarter of a century, the Birds Directive has set the standard for bird conservation across the Community of then 9, now 25, Member States. It was also the first piece of legislation to create a coherent network of special protection areas for birds in the EU. To mark its 25th anniversary, the European Environment Agency's Topic Centre for Nature and Biodiversity recently completed a detailed review of the SPA network. This provides a valuable insight into the nature of the network and the extent to which it has achieved its objectives.

Obligations under the Birds Directive

Article 4 of the Birds Directive requires Member States to classify the most suitable territories, in number and surface area, for 194 species (listed in Annex I) considered to be threatened within the EU. It imposes similar measures on the habitats of migratory bird species not listed in Annex I, particularly regarding wetlands of international importance.

In the early stages of implementation, the term 'most

suitable areas' raised many questions as no specific criteria were given in the Directive to help identify these.

To facilitate this task, experts from the Member States, European Commission and BirdLife gathered in the early 1980s to work out a set of criteria for identifying sites of great importance for conserving birds in the EU.

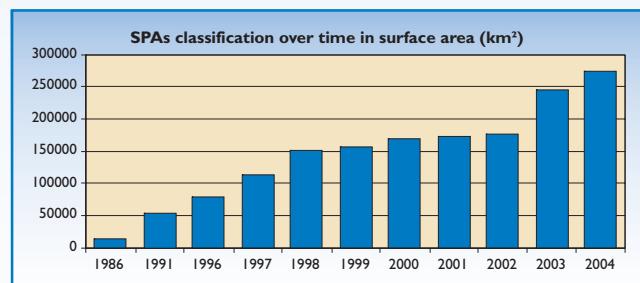
Out of this was born the Important Bird Areas Inventory (most recently updated in 2000) which is used by the Commission, in the absence of any similar national reviews, to assess if Member States have classified all the most suitable territories as SPAs. (an approach which has since been endorsed by four Court of Justice rulings).

Evolution of the network

Progress in classifying sites was initially very slow. By 1986, a mere 309 sites had been designated but, as Member States duties became clearer, so the process began to take on momentum. By 1991, the number of SPAs had doubled to 667. Nevertheless, this was still well below expectations, and it is now evident that significant progress was only really made in the last eight years (actually, the coverage in terms of surface area has increased by 62% just in the last five years).

These late developments are probably due to a combination of factors:

- By 1989 there had been a substantial increase in our knowledge of birds in the EU and an improved reference list of



NB: the graph is based on availability of databases from Member States; actual designation years may be different – databases provided one or two years later.

- Important Bird Areas (IBAs) upon which to base the selection of sites;
- In 1992, the adoption of the Habitats Directive gave renewed political impetus to the designation of key sites to safeguard Europe's most vulnerable wildlife and habitats by introducing a new all encompassing Natura 2000 network, which would integrate all existing and future SPAs;
 - Successive enlargements of the EU meant that the Birds Directive was being implemented over an increasingly large area (in fact the EU has more than doubled in size since the adoption of the Birds Directive). It also brought in a number of biologically rich countries who would be able to make a substantial contribution to bird conservation in Europe;
 - By the mid 1990s, the Commission had begun to take Member States to court for their failure to classify the most suitable areas under the Birds Directive.

Monetary issues also played an important role. For the first time in 1992; significant financial resources were made available, through a fund dedicated to conservation (LIFE-Nature) to carry out practical conservation work within SPAs. Five years later, the Commission started to use the threat of withholding EU regional and rural development funding from Member States who failed to adequately implement EU nature conservation policy.

The nature of the network

Today, the whole SPA network is made up of over 3,600 sites covering an area of land and water greater than 280,000 km² (about the size of the United Kingdom!). The individual sites range from 1 ha to over 500,000 ha, with the majority being around 100–10,000 ha (73%). This variation in size may reflect the types of habitats involved, such as tundra and steppes which are more extensive in nature, or it may result from a more holistic approach, adopted by some countries, to including wider elements of the landscape in the designation of their sites.

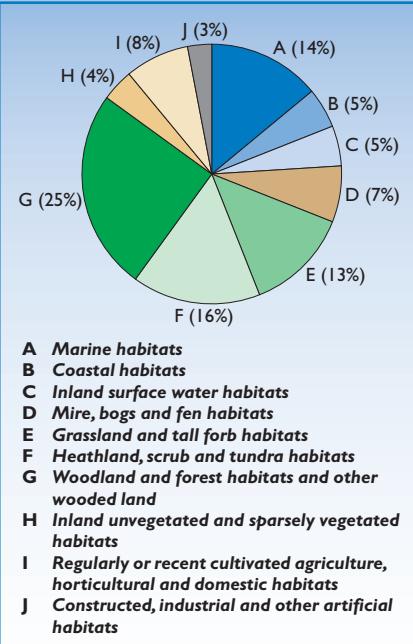
The network does indeed cover a wide range of different habitats. Not surprisingly wetlands feature prominently but others are also well represented such as forests, heaths and extensive grasslands...even marine areas. Regularly cultivated agricultural land, on the other hand, only represents some 8% of the areas within the Network.

This diversity is indicative of the fact that many SPAs are important for a whole range of species and habitats. Over half of them have been designated, in total or in part, as sites under the Habitats Directive as well.

Is the network complete?

The scale of the SPA network is now impressive, but is it complete? This is a difficult question to answer as the Birds Directive does not set quantifiable objectives, nor does it provide any detailed ornithological criteria to enable comparisons to be

Merlin chicks. Photo: Jorma Luhta



made between the requirements of Article 4 and the SPAs designated by the Member States.

Comparison between Member States is further complicated by the very heterogeneous distribution and abundance of bird species across the EU. As a result, some Member States have a heavier burden than others in implementing the Birds Directive. Nevertheless, there are already some clear signs emerging from the present list of sites (see the SPA Barometer pages 10–11)

The first is that, despite recent progress, there is still a deficit for most Member States. Only Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands can be considered to have largely completed their SPA classification. The Network for France, on the other hand, is the most disappointing, covering only 2% of the country, and cannot be justified on biological grounds.

So far, four Member States have been condemned for insufficient designation of SPAs. The Netherlands which was the first to have such a ruling has since put in place a substantial network. However, Italy, Finland and France, who have each received similar rulings, have yet to fully comply.

The relatively poor performance of some of these older Member States has not set a good example for the ten newcomers. Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs that the new Member States



THE SPA NETWORK continued

recognise the importance of SPA designation, many have already proposed, or are in advanced stages of proposing, sites for the Network. Slovakia and Slovenia, for instance, designated between a fifth and a quarter of their territory as SPAs within six months of joining the EU.

A species perspective

An alternative approach to assessing the completeness of the network on a country-by-country basis is to look at it from the perspective of the different species in Annex I. Again, the issue is complex as different species vary according to the extent to which they aggregate at sites. This is reflected in the site selection criteria which tend to focus on areas where concentrations of birds can be readily identified, such as in wetlands.

Indeed, for many wetland birds, site protection is the most important mechanism to ensure their conservation. This is reflected in the SPA network. The Bittern, for instance, is largely restricted to reedbeds in the EU and has a relatively high level of site protection – up to 80% of its EU 15 breeding population is included in SPAs.

In this respect, the SPA network is widely recognised to have made a major contribution towards the conservation of wetlands within the

EU. Had the alarming trends of the early 1980s been allowed to continue unabated, it is quite likely that many of the key sites would have been destroyed or damaged by now, were it not for the Birds Directive. This is reflected also in the conservation status of many wetland birds. Again, in the early 1980s, their populations were in serious decline, but now, thanks to the SPA designation process, most appear to have stabilised and some are even showing signs of a slight recovery.

The role of the SPA network in the international arena is also clear. It has been the key tool in the EU's delivery of the Ramsar Convention and has contributed significantly towards international flyway conservation objectives such as those of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

When it comes to species that are endemic or very restricted in the EU distribution, the network can again be considered to be largely complete. This is the case, for instance, for the main breeding areas of the globally threatened species of the Macaronesian region: Fea's Petrel, Zino's Petrel, and the Madeira Laurel Pigeon as well as for species like the Bearded Vulture whose breeding population is restricted to a relatively small number of sites. For the latter, all of the EU breeding population is now within SPAs.

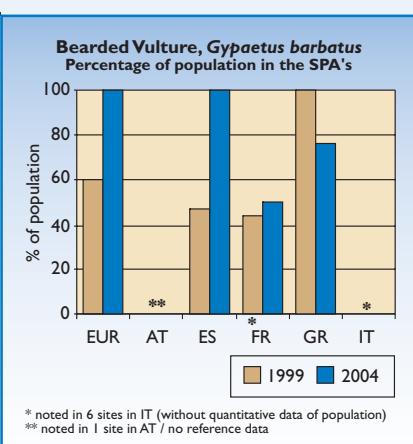
The situation for threatened farmland birds is however not so

clear. The range of farmland birds in Annex I of the Birds Directive is now so restricted that site protection has become an increasingly important mechanism for ensuring their survival, yet, despite this, progress in designating SPAs for these species has been rather piecemeal. The Little Bustard, for instance, has only 30% of the EU population currently included in the SPAs.

There may be a number of reasons for this: the first is no doubt related to the notable lack of designation of agricultural areas (only 8% of SPA network), the second may be a result of difficulties in integrating species conservation needs into current farming practices, despite the potential for using adapted agri-environment schemes for this purpose. These problems are all the more worrying now that the EU has been enlarged. Many of the new Member States have still relatively healthy farmland bird populations yet these too could decline very rapidly if the above issues are not addressed early on.

The implementation of the SPA network in the marine environment is also not very advanced. Whilst 13% of the habitats in the SPA network are marine, this is essentially due to the inclusion of a few very large sites in Denmark and the Netherlands, such as the Wadden sea. SPA designation for seabirds tends to focus on their breeding colonies, (e.g. 100% of the

Photo: EGS-Österreich, N. Roth-Callies



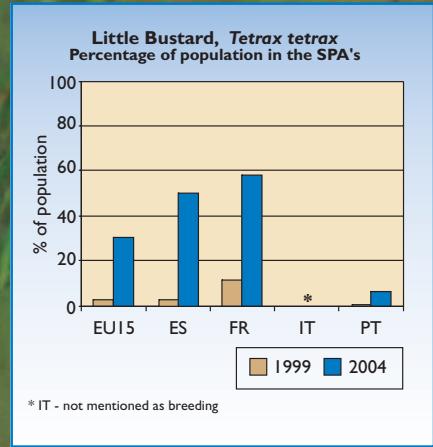


Photo: Louis-Marie Préau/LPO

EU population of the Roseate Tern is within SPAs) but protection is not extended to any significant degree to their marine feeding habitats.

This has prompted the Commission to set up a marine expert working group to look at the application of Natura 2000 (and SPAs) into the marine environment, including offshore areas, and to help develop guidelines on this issue.

Future challenges

In conclusion therefore, the SPA Network, though not fully complete, has already shown its merits in terms of safeguarding species listed in annex I of the Birds Directive and migratory species. This is borne out by BirdLife's recent survey of the state of birds in the EU. According to their results, 26% of species (i.e. 46 species) listed in annex I are now in a favourable conservation state at EU level compared to 18% (32 species) ten years ago. The impact is all the more significant when one considers that the overall situation for wild birds in Europe continues to decline.

So what are the future challenges? Today, we have a relatively good understanding of the species habitat requirements and sites that need protecting (except in the marine areas) but efforts are still required to complete the network. This is true not only for the ten new

Member States who have recently joined the EU but also for some of the older Member States, especially France. Where progress is not made, the Commission may have to resort to further legal action against those countries who fail to designate sufficient SPAs.

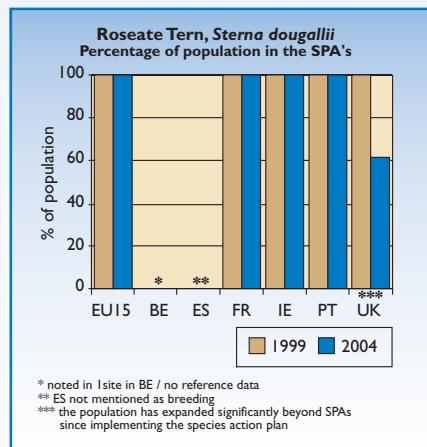
Greater attention will also need to be paid to the subsequent management of the SPAs. This brings into focus the need for effective management planning for SPAs. Having developed over 200 plans for SPAs in consultation with different stakeholder groups, the LIFE-Nature fund can provide a wealth of practical real-life examples of how this can be achieved successfully.

Moreover, with the recent advances in GIS and spatial

information, it should become possible to link SPA conservation needs with other land use information to determine potential threats or damaging activities from development projects and facilitate positive management activities. One of the challenges will be to put this into place, particularly now that the new Rural Development Policy mentions, for the first time, the need for cross compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directives.

So whilst there has been good progress so far, there is still plenty to do to turn the SPA network into a coherent well functioning network which offers a safe haven for vulnerable bird species both within the EU and beyond its frontiers.

Photo: M. Bolton, ImagDOP





Radio-tracking Imperial Eagle over the Carpathian mountains, Hungary.
Photos: Andras Kovacs (eagle) and Ivan Demeter, MME-BirdLife Hungary LIFE project

European action plans for the EU's most threatened birds

In 1993, the European Commission co-financed BirdLife's initiative to develop European Action plans for 23 globally threatened bird species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive. Ten years on, it is time to take stock: have the action plans been implemented? Have they helped improve the conservation status of the species concerned? Is there a need to update them? These are some of the questions analysed in a new Birdlife report commissioned by DG Environment.

As nearly half of the bird species in Europe are now with an unfavourable conservation status, the need for focused conservation actions has never been clearer. It is the best way to ensure that limited resources are used where they are most needed and avoids activities being dissipated or piecemeal.

European Action Plans provide an ideal framework in which to develop such a coordinated strategy. They help establish international priorities for conservation action over much of a species natural range and, crucially, build a consensus on objectives and targets amongst those organisations, experts and

authorities who are in a position to influence the outcome.

The process also facilitates an exchange of experience between countries, encourages the development of best practices and draws public attention to the conservation needs of individual species.

Background

With this in mind, Birdlife set out, in 1993, to develop European Species Action plans for 23 of the most threatened birds listed in the Birds Directive. Having received co-financing from the EU's LIFE-Nature instrument, up-to-date information was collected on the species from an extensive network of experts (over 370) across Europe and written up as draft action plans. These were then widely circulated for comments and subsequently discussed at a series of workshops involving, amongst others, public authorities from different Member States who would be largely responsible for their implementation.

By 1996, all 23 final action plans had been approved by the Ornis Committee (set up under the Birds Directive and representing all Member State authorities).

A review of progress ten years on

It is now a decade since starting the action planning process. To mark the occasion, DG Environment commissioned BirdLife to review their state of implementation in the 25 countries of the EU. The aim is to determine how successfully these plans have been delivered in different Member States, especially as regards priority actions, and to identify any major gaps, including those relating to the completion of the SPA network.

For this purpose, BirdLife developed a simple scoring system to measure the level of progress in implementing the plans for each of the species in question. Scores were allocated from 0–4:

- 0: action was not needed
- 1: little or no work done (0–10%)
- 2: some work started but not significant yet (11–50%)
- 3: significant progress but target not reached (51–75%)
- 4: action fully implemented.

This made it possible to assess the 'distance to target' in terms of overall progress on implementing the recommended actions and their

effectiveness in meeting the short, medium or long term biological targets set.

Have the action plans been implemented?

On the whole, the results are very encouraging. BirdLife's report concludes that significant progress has been made in implementing 18 of the 23 Action plans (with Scores of 2 but less than 3).

For a further three species, the implementation has been substantial (scores of over 3). These include two of the most threatened species in Europe, the Zino's Petrel and the Slender-billed Curlew, as well as the Dalmatian Pelican. It is interesting to note that these species all had the advantage of having different organisations 'champion'

their cause which helped to provide a focus for taking the action plans forward.

Progress has been limited in only two cases: the White-headed Duck and the Lesser Kestrel. In the case of the former, the main breeding and wintering countries have made good progress on the implementation of the actions (leading to a tenfold increase in population in Spain!), but the eradication of the introduced Ruddy Duck has not been given enough attention in the EU to date, except in the UK where a successful trial was undertaken. In the case of the Lesser Kestrel, the short-term objective of maintaining all known colonies at 1994 levels was achieved but the population has yet to expand in range.



Zino's Petrel chick discovered on the island of Madeira. Photo: Filipe Viveiros

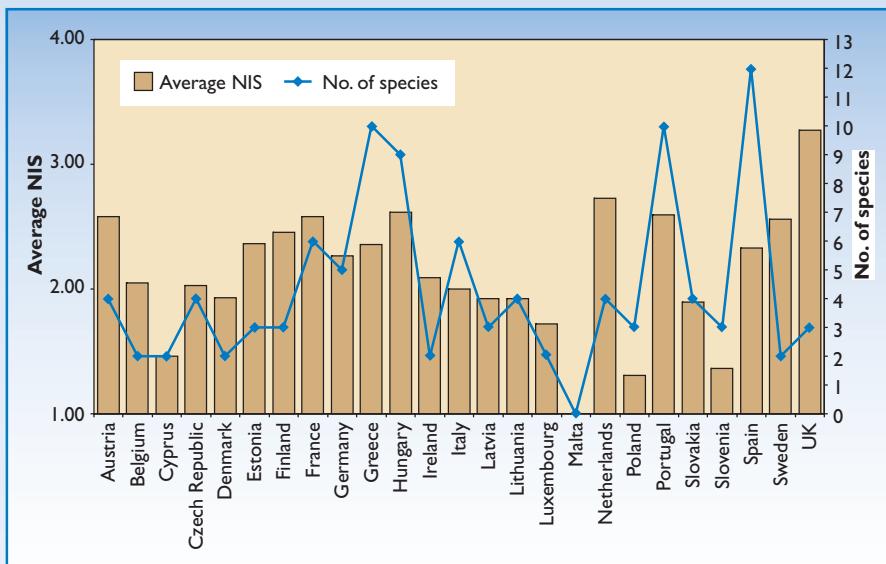
| | | Score | Targets met | Population status | Status change |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------|-------------|---|---------------|
| Zino's Petrel | <i>Pterodroma madeira</i> | 3.31 | Long | Population has doubled – new colony found | ↑ |
| Dalmatian Pelican | <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> | 3.05 | Long | EU population has increased by 20% | ↑ |
| Imperial Eagle | <i>Aquila heliaca</i> | 2.39 | Long | Increased in strongholds – Hungary and Slovakia – but now extinct in Cyprus and Greece | ↑ |
| Pygmy Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i> | 2.44 | Long | Stable population, expanding in range | ↑ |
| Cinereous Vulture | <i>Aegypius monachus</i> | 2.80 | Long | Stable and increasing | ↑ |
| Audouin's Gull | <i>Larus audouinii</i> | 2.01 | Long | Increasing and expanding | ↑ |
| White-headed Duck | <i>Oxyura leucocephala</i> | 1.87 | Med | Massive population increase in Spain Eradication of ruddy duck still a problem across EU although a successful trial was done in the UK | ↑ |
| Spanish Imperial Eagle | <i>Aquila adalberti</i> | 2.19 | Med | Population has increased and expanded to Portugal | ↑ |
| Madeira Laurel Pigeon | <i>Columba trocaz</i> | 2.94 | Med | Population slightly increased | ↑ |
| Corncrake | <i>Crex crex</i> | 2.14 | Med | Variable trends, generally upwards but small populations continue to decline | ↑ |
| Dark-tailed Laurel Pigeon | <i>Columba bollii</i> | 2.38 | Short | Slight increase assumed, but poor data quality | ↑ |
| Lesser Kestrel | <i>Falco naumanni</i> | 1.84 | Short | Overall stable, slight increase in some countries | ↑ |
| Red-breasted Goose | <i>Branta ruficollis</i> | 2.47 | Med | EU contribution to species conservation limited as occurs only marginally in EU | → |
| Fea's Petrel | <i>Pterodroma feae</i> | 2.27 | Short | Population maintained | → |
| Blue Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla teydea</i> | 2.51 | Short | Stable | → |
| Great Bustard | <i>Otis tarda</i> | 2.55 | None | Population size is generally stable but range is shrinking | ↓ |
| Slender-billed Curlew | <i>Numenius tenuirostris</i> | 3.21 | None | Declined – breeds outside EU | ↓ |
| Azores Bullfinch | <i>Pyrrhula murina</i> | 2.00 | None | Decreasing | ↓ |
| Lesser White-fronted Goose | <i>Anser erythropus</i> | 2.82 | None | Continued decline, probably affected by problems outside EU – main staging wintering quarters are in Russia and Kazakhstan | ↓ |
| Marbled Teal | <i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i> | 2.75 | None | Overall negative trend | ↓ |
| Aquatic Warbler | <i>Acrocephalus paludicola</i> | 2.39 | None | General decline except in Hungary little progress Poland has 77% of pop but so far in implementing the plan nationally | ↓ |
| White-tailed Laurel Pigeon | <i>Columba junoniae</i> | 2.38 | Not known | | ? |
| Houbara Bustard | <i>Chlamydotis undulata</i> | 2.04 | Not known | | ? |

SPECIES ACTION PLANS continued



Juvenile and adult Cinereous Vultures on nest in Mallorca, LIFE project.

Photo: Joan Mayol



Birdlife report: Average National Implementation Score by Member States.

Behind the average implementation scores, however, lies a rather more uneven state of progress within the different Member States. The UK, although concerned with relatively few of these species, has achieved the highest level of implementation indicating the benefits of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan process. It is followed by a number of other countries where the species are the subject of targeted actions, such as the Netherlands, Hungary, Portugal, Austria, France and Sweden.

Spain has the highest number of action plans (12) but, according to the BirdLife report, the level of implementation is very varied. Some regions have carried out significant conservation work, whilst others have been less

effective, bringing down the overall national score. Lower implementation scores are also noticeable in some new Member States such as Poland and Slovenia. Improvements will be needed in these countries too in the future.

Are targets being met?

In addition to the prioritised set of actions, every European action plan also set short, medium and long term goals for the conservation of the species. These were devised as realistic and measurable targets which could be achieved within a specified time frame (1–3 yrs, 4–5 yrs and 6–10 yrs). The review analysed whether these targets have been met and, if so, whether they have had an impact on the species overall conservation state.

Here, too, the results are generally positive. According to Birdlife's findings, long and medium term targets have been achieved for 11 of the species and short term goals have been met for a further four. In all cases the populations of the species in question has, either increased, for instance for Audouin's Gull or Cinereous Vulture, or at least remained stable over most of its range.

The reasons behind these trends are explored fully in the review of each action plan but already a number of general concerns are emerging. The first relates to the extent to which the key breeding, staging and wintering sites are protected as SPAs. It is interesting to note that 75% of the European breeding populations for the 12 species with improved conservation status are within protected SPAs.

The other limiting factors all appear to be strongly linked to the degree of management within the protected sites and the level of success in integrating the species requirements into other policies such as agriculture, forestry and water management. For farmland species, such as the Great Bustard and Corncrake, such policy integration is vital, yet it remains one of the weakest areas within the action plans in terms of implementation.

Finally, the review also concludes that the conservation status of six species has unfortunately continued to decline over the last ten years. The reasons for this vary according to the species in question. In the case of the Slender-billed Curlew, for instance, the European action plan has been fully implemented but this has not been enough to prevent the demise of the population migrating through the EU. This is most probably due to the fact that its conservation is highly dependent on what happens to the species outside the EU. The same goes for the Lesser White-fronted Goose whose main staging and wintering quarters are in Russia and Kazakhstan.

In the case of the Aquatic Warbler, the situation is somewhat different. The low level of

implementation of the action plan is essentially due to the fact that little has been achieved so far in Poland, yet this country hosts 77% of the total European population. With its recent accession to the EU it is expected that many of the important sites will now be protected as SPAs and renewed efforts will be made to address the species' complex management issues, which are again dependent upon other land uses such as agriculture and water management.

The EU's role: sustained support through LIFE

The report also concludes that the decision to accord priority to the funding of projects focusing on the actions recommended in the European Action plans has played a very significant role in the implementation of these plans and the subsequent recovery of the species. All 23 species have been targeted to a greater or lesser extent by almost half of the LIFE-Nature projects (ca 300) funded since 1992. LIFE contributions have also gone up from 10 million a year in the early 1990s to over 40 million a year at present.

LIFE-Nature has, in particular, been the main driving force in the conservation of island endemics in Spain and Portugal and has played a strategic role in the conservation of many other species such as the Spanish Imperial Eagle, Cinereous Vulture, Audouin's Gull and Dalmatian Pelican (see article 15–17).

Not only have these projects considerably advanced the understanding of the conservation needs of the species and helped to develop best practices, but they have also provided an all important source of funding for initial heavy investment costs aimed to secure a key site, pump prime longer-term management actions and stimulate local support for the conservation of the species.

Conclusions

The overall verdict of this new review is clearly a positive one. Significant efforts have been made to implement the European Action Plans for the majority of the species in the ten years since they were first adopted, aided considerably by targeted funding through the LIFE instrument. This has resulted in a marked improvement of the conservation status of at least 12 species, which is all the more noticeable when one considers that the overall trend for Europe's bird species remains alarmingly negative.

It also clearly demonstrates the advantages of having a coordinated strategy for individual threatened species and a focused funding mechanism to help put these in place. Recognising this, the Commission has since funded the elaboration of a further 24 European Species Action plans for threatened species under the Birds Directive. These too receive priority attention for LIFE funding.

This does not however mean the process is over. There is still a

considerable amount of work to be done if these initial successes are to be maintained and built upon. The first step will be to update the action plans and, where necessary, to set new conservation goals and targets for the species. The second will be to adapt the prioritised list of recommended actions in function of the review results (e.g. greater SPA designation) and new threats (climate change).

Certain Member States will also need to step up their activities in implementing the Action plans on their territory. The development of more detailed national action plans seems to be a particularly effective way of taking this process forward and should be explored further.

Finally, greater efforts will need to be made to integrate the species conservation requirements into other land use activities. In this respect, particular attention should be paid to finding ways of developing funding mechanisms through the new Rural Development Programmes in order to secure the long-term management of certain species' key habitats. There are a handful of good examples of how agri-environmental measures have been used in the past but, according to BirdLife's findings, these have, on the whole been poorly targeted and pursued only generic objectives. Now with the new funding mechanisms in place, further opportunities are emerging, the challenge will be to find ways of accessing these for the benefit of Europe's most threatened birds.

Great Bustard, Villafafila. Photo: Junta de Castilla y León



SPA BAROMETER (as of 15/10/04)

| Member State | Number of sites | Total area (km ²) | Terrestrial area (%) | Number of marine sites | Marine area (km ²) | Progress | Member State |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| BELGIË/BELGIQUE | 229 | 2,964 | 9.7 | 0 | 0 | | BELGIË/BELGIQUE |
| ČESKÁ REPUBLIKA | 0 | 0 | 0 | — | — | TBE | ČESKÁ REPUBLIKA |
| DANMARK | 112 | 12,246 | 5.9 | 58 | 9,710 | | DANMARK |
| DEUTSCHLAND | 497 | 32,080 | 6.4 | 17 | 9,171 | | DEUTSCHLAND |
| EESTI | 66 | 12,368 | 12.3 | 26 | 6,811 | TBE | EESTI |
| ELLAS | 151 | 13,703 | 10.1 | 4 | 405 | | ELLAS |
| ESPAÑA | 442 | 81,719 | 16.1 | 20 | 574 | | ESPAÑA |
| FRANCE | 153 | 12,415 | 1.9 | 50 | 2,110 | | FRANCE |
| IRELAND | 131 | 2,815 | 2.9 | 66 | 810 | | IRELAND |
| ITALIA | 503 | 24,865 | 8.1 | 13 | 396 | | ITALIA |
| KYPROS | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | TBE | KYPROS |
| LATVIJA | 97 | 6,751 | 9.7 | 4 | 520 | TBE | LATVIJA |
| LIETUVA | 39 | 3,570 | 5.5 | 4 | ? | TBE | LIETUVA |
| LUXEMBOURG | 12 | 139 | 5.4 | — | — | | LUXEMBOURG |
| MAGYARORSZÁG | 0 | 0 | 0 | — | — | TBE | MAGYARORSZÁG |
| MALTA | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | TBE | MALTA |
| NEDERLAND | 77 | 10,109 | 12.5 | 7 | 4,913 | | NEDERLAND |
| ÖSTERREICH | 94 | 9,275 | 11.1 | — | — | | ÖSTERREICH |
| POLSKA | 72 | 33,156 | 7.3 | 6 | 10,201 | TBE | POLSKA |
| PORTUGAL | 50 | 9,956 | 10.1 | 10 | 622 | | PORTUGAL |
| SLOVENIJA | 26 | 4,618 | 22.8 | 1 | 2.6 | TBE | SLOVENIJA |
| SLOVENSKO | 38 | 12,365 | 25.2 | — | — | TBE | SLOVENSKO |
| SUOMI | 452 | 28,373 | 6.8 | 65 | 5,511 | | SUOMI |
| SVERIGE | 509 | 28,648 | 6.2 | 107 | 3,017 | | SVERIGE |
| UNITED KINGDOM | 252 | 14,511 | 5.8 | 2 | 377 | | UNITED KINGDOM |
| EU | 4,002 | 356,646 | | 460 | 55,151 | | EU |

Nota Bene:

- The SPA Barometer is based on the information officially transmitted by Member States.
- The % surface area relates only to the terrestrial area that has been designated; which is the overall SPA area minus the total marine area.
- Some Member States have designated substantial portions of their marine waters (e.g. Deutschland, Nederland).
- The global assessment of national lists may be revised, upwards or downwards, following more complete scientific analysis of the data.
- The ten new Member States had a duty to classify SPAs from the date of their Accession on 1 May 2004. Six countries have transmitted their national lists. An evaluation of their completeness is underway.



notably insufficient



incomplete



largely complete



TBE To be evaluated

25 years, 25 birds, 25 countries



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Photo: Archiv der Abteilung Umweltschutz, Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung



The Birds Directive: working in partnership

The overall objective of the Birds Directive is to conserve all birds at a favourable conservation status across the EU, taking into account human activities. This means we have to ensure that these human activities are carried out in a sustainable and responsible manner that safeguards Europe's varied but increasingly vulnerable bird life.

At the heart of the Directive lies the establishment of a network of protected sites (SPAs) which now forms part of the Natura 2000 Network. The sheer scale of this network, which is set to cover almost a fifth of the EU territory, means that it must remain an integral part of our living landscape in which people are at the heart of the process rather than on its periphery. This implies the active participation of all interest groups.

To achieve this ambitious target, nature conservationists, authorities, land owners and users need to work together to find the right balance in securing the conservation of wild birds whilst taking economic and recreational

requirements into account. This is by no means an easy task and, it has, unfortunately, resulted in some confusion and emotive reactions from all sides during the early stages of implementation of the Birds Directive.

Much of this can be put down to an initial lack of understanding and experience in implementing the provisions of the Directive which has since considerably improved, but there is another underlying cause which has still to be fully addressed. This concerns the lack of effective communication between the different interest groups, be they public, private or NGO, on the aims of the Directive.

Yet, such communication is essential if interest groups are to be fully informed about what the Directives mean in practice for them and actively involved in decisions over the future management of their sites. Once a sufficient level of trust and mutual understanding has been built up between the different groups, it will be much easier to find practical management solutions on the ground.

The El Teide Declaration

It was with this in mind that, in May 2002, all 25 countries of the European Union signed the El Teide Declaration to re-affirm their commitment to promoting a greater awareness and understanding of the two EU Nature Directives and the Natura 2000 network, and to encouraging the active participation of stakeholders in decisions over the long-term management of the sites.

Since then, the Commission has launched the Natura Networking Initiative² which aims to build local partnerships on Natura 2000 sites across the EU.

Inspiration for this initiative can be sought from the LIFE-Nature projects². They have provided a useful test bed for gauging people's reaction to SPA designation and generated a wealth of experience in engaging local stakeholders in the management of the sites.

Their overwhelming conclusion is that attitudes can, and really do, change once a concerted effort is made to explain the nature Directives to local interest groups and actively involve them in the

decision making process. This is not to say the process is without difficulties, or doesn't suffer from the occasional impasse, but the level of success clearly increases in proportion to the time and effort spent in planning these communication activities.

The onus is therefore on all of us – authorities, conservationists, NGOs, land owners and users or individual members of the public – to dedicate the necessary time and resources to make this happen. Once this has been achieved Natura 2000 can become a truly effective

Network that works both for its people and for our rich and diverse natural heritage.

1 <http://www.eurosit-nature.org/>
2 <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/life/infoproducts/index.htm>

VIEW OF THE EUROPEAN LANDOWNERS ASSOCIATION AND THE NATURA 2000 USERS' FORUM

Much has happened since the Birds Directive was hatched 25 years ago. Today the Directive works together with other EU directives in the protection and management of the European environment. The conservation areas designated under the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive are now included under the Natura 2000 network. All water and wetland habitats protected under the Birds Directive and Habitats Directive are now dealt with by the Water Framework Directive –which must have attained 'good ecological status' by 2015.

With the arrival of ten new Member States, the share of rural territories in the total European area has reached 90%. More than ever, the EU requires a sustainable and balanced development of the rural world including its environment, the use and care of land, water habitats and the species in them. The European countryside, shaped by human activities for millennia enjoys a unique biodiversity. Keeping such a natural heritage and halting the loss of biodiversity implies cooperating in order to ensure a proper stewardship of land and a living countryside

Owners, managers and users* of the land and aquatic environment play a key role in the countryside's management and livelihood. In the marine and coastal environment, as well as the freshwater environment of rivers, lakes and ponds, angling organisations play a big and increasing role all over Europe, giving advice to decision makers and taking part in the implementation of restoration programs striving for a self-sustainable aquatic environment with a rich and secured biodiversity therein. A balance must be reached, taking into account the need for socio-economic activities as well as for environmental protection. If each interest is protected, the equation between environmental protection and development of rural activities (agricultural and forestry production, businesses, human use of land and aquatic resources including leisure) can be solved.

The environment and human activities are interdependent. Environmental protection, secured biodiversity and sustainable development do not compete with each other with proper management in place. Environmental protection in practice often means restrictions of use, which requires prior negotiations at a local level and fair compensations when needed. The question of the funding of Natura 2000 is still under analysis. Production of environmental services beneficial to the whole of society should be supported, and if needed also financed through subsidies or the economic market. On the technical aspects, certain specific provisions of the "Bird" Directive would need further interpretation in order to be more workable on land, particularly on the special protection areas, the concepts of "significant disturbance" or "complete protection" ... etc.

Industrial activities, sustainable farming, sustainable forest management, sustainable hunting and fishing (both commercial and recreational) all play an important role in environmental protection and more specifically in the protection conservation of Birds. Examples of these activities include quarries, ports, salt flats and marshes and wetlands. These environmental improvements often go unreported in the media.

Working together and developing common actions are good tools for sustainable management of the countryside and biodiversity conservation.

Thierry de l'Escaille, ELO Secretary General



* The present position was drawn up by the European Landowners' Organization (ELO), the Bureau of Nordic Family Forestry, the Confédération Européenne des Propriétaires Forestiers (CEPF), the European Anglers' Alliance (EAA), the Fédération des Associations de Chasse et Conservation de la Faune sauvage de l'UE (FACE) within the Natura 2000 Users Forum which also includes the Comité des Organisations Professionnelles Agricoles de l'UE – Comité Général de la Coopération Agricole de l'UE (COPA-COGECA), the Fédération Européenne des Communes Forestières (FECOF), the Gîtes d'Europe (EuroGîtes), the Union des Sylviculteurs du Sud de l'Europe (USSE), and as observers, the Council of European Producers of Materials for Construction (CEPMC).

Wetland restoration in Emilia-Romagna, Italy. Photo: R. Tinarelli



Engaging stakeholders.
Photo: UK limestone pavements LIFE project



WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP continued

Involving volunteers.

Photo: UK limestone pavements LIFE project



VIEWS OF BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

The Birds Directive has been a valuable tool for bird protection and conservation in its 25 years of implementation across the European Union. Although still a lot remains to be done the Directive has been instrumental in raising awareness on bird protection across the EU. Even though the Directive's provisions for site protection are still insufficiently implemented and the provisions for site management almost not implemented at all, the Directive can be said to have made an impact on species protection. In particular, it has been successful in regulating hunting practices across the EU (especially in the southern Member States) and by almost eliminating the trade with European wild birds.

However, the Directive has had to compete with conflicting EU policies, in particular the CAP and as a result "common birds", like many farmland birds, have declined dramatically in the years since the adoption of the Directive. Although the Directive applies to all wild birds, it has been especially successful at protecting some of those species that are listed on Annex I by encouraging targeted conservation efforts.

Looking into the future, the full implementation of all provisions of the Directive and the integration of its objectives into other EU policies, continues to be as pertinent as ever in order to meet the target of halting biodiversity decline by 2010, and at the same time it is becoming clear that the EU will have to consider action for its migratory species beyond its the geographical boundaries in places such as Africa, as well as consider how to deal with the effects of climate change.

**Claire Papazoglou,
BirdLife International**



VIEWS FROM FACE – the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU

Representing around 7 million hunters in 33 European countries, FACE fully recognises the contributions of the Birds Directive in conserving Europe's birds and their habitats and has played an important role in raising awareness amongst hunters of their responsibilities towards conservation, management and the wide use of wildlife. The Directive is a good base from which to realise the European Community's target to halt biodiversity decline by 2010.

FACE also supports the establishment of a Natura 2000 network and recognises the importance of having a good protection regime and active habitat management in order to conserve biodiversity, considering that the principle of Natura 2000 site designation is not in principle incompatible with hunting. As the Commission states in its Hunting Guide, responsible hunting within Natura 2000 is possible so long as it is compatible with the conservation objectives of the site.

If certain key principles, such as the concepts of 'full protection', 'confusion' and 'disturbance' have now been clarified in the Hunting Guide, there is a need to apply these on the ground in a reasonable and proportionate manner so as to avoid unnecessary conflicts in the future.

FACE's message that 'hunting is not part of the problem but is, on the contrary, an integral part of the solution when it comes to conserving birds' is more than just a slogan. It can be illustrated by numerous concrete actions and case study on the ground.

Dr. Yves Lecocq, Secretary General, FACE



VIEWS FROM EUROSITE – professionals working for nature

Eurosit, a distinctive network of nature conservation management organisations formally created in 1989, chose this motto as an expression of its philosophy, along with its special logo. The Birds Directive played a key role in the development of the organisation, encouraging members to exchange, enhance and promote expertise on the management of sites for nature throughout Europe, with the objective of ensuring that the wildlife of these sites is conserved in the best possible way.

The Directive helped many site managers to explain to their local stakeholders the European importance of their sites, which require protection and management measures.

The protection of life and beauty knows no frontier, birds and their habitats have a special contribution to offer to Europeans: they are so inspiring. Their survival and well being depend largely on the motivation and daily decisions of land managers all over Europe.

We invite therefore private land owners, local authorities, NGOs, nature conservation organisations, to join us in giving visibility to what you are doing in Special Protection Areas and to discover examples of good practice through the growing Natura Network Initiative, developed in partnership with ELO and Europark on www.natura.org.

Nicole Nowicki-Caupin, Déléguée Générale, Eurosité



FROM CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION: Agreement between BirdLife and FACE

When it comes to birds, the issue of hunting has always been a rather emotive one and, it has to be said, the climate of mistrust between the different protagonists probably worsened during the early years of the Birds Directive, for lack of good information on hunting practices and successive legal cases in front of the European Court of Justice.

Yet, the Birds Directive fully recognises the legitimacy of hunting and endorses the concept of wise use and good management of bird populations. Indeed, the Commission has always considered that hunters and bird conservationists have much in common. They each have a sound knowledge of nature and a vested interest in ensuring the continued survival of the species.

This prompted the Commission to start up a Sustainable Hunting Initiative in 2001 to try to create a constructive dialogue between hunters and bird conservationists. Three years on, the key partners – BirdLife International and FACE – have reached an agreement on ten points which will enable hunting to



Commissioner Margot Wallström with Gilbert de Turckheim, President of FACE and Michael Rands, Director and Chief Executive of BirdLife International at Signing of Agreement on hunting under the Birds Directive. Photo: Micheal O'Briain

continue within a well-regulated framework, whilst fully respecting the provisions of the Directive. This was signed at a high profile event on the 12th October 2004 and marks the beginning of the end of more than a decade of emotive conflict.

Having played the role of facilitator in this process, DG Environment is keen to see similar initiatives being launched with

other key stakeholders, such as farmers, fishermen, foresters, tourism operators.... and to see these agreements put into practice at the level of the sites, for instance, through the Natura Networking initiative (NNi). The Hunting agreement is, after all, living proof that such cooperation can work, even if the partners have very different views at the outset.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE SUSTAINABLE HUNTING INITIATIVE

The Sustainable Hunting Initiative was launched in February 2001 by the European Commission. Our two organisations, invited to be part of this new initiative, BirdLife International and the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU, FACE, could at the time be considered arch enemies and had just finished a major confrontation at the European Parliament over a Written Declaration that was asking the Commission to consider an amendment to the 1979 Birds Directive. FACE was supporting such an amendment and BirdLife was entirely opposed. The first meetings and the first years of this initiative were slow in progress, and there was an overwhelming feeling of distrust between the two organisations, mainly as a result of misunderstandings and strong feelings on both sides. In BirdLife International on a number of occasions it was thought this initiative was not going to go anywhere.

Photo: LIFE-Nature Project Biosphärenreservat Flusslandschaft Mittlere Elbe



So how did it all happen in the end? Well, firstly the European Commission played an important role because its officials didn't give up. They continued to press and insist on bringing the two organisations together. They also insisted strongly on us having bilateral meetings. We think the real breakthrough happened after we started having bilateral meetings without the Commission, as this helped the two organisations build the trust between them and it was only then that the real progress could be made. Trust is indeed essential for achieving respect between the organisations, without which no constructive dialogue can take place. Of course people's personalities matter too.

So to summarise, it's important to have a mediator who doesn't give up, especially in the face of slow process. Old foes can never become new friends overnight but trust helps to build respect that leads to success.

**Clarie Papazoglou, Head of EU Policy, BirdLife International
Dr. Yves Lecocq, Secretary General, FACE**



LIFE project: restoring *Larus audouinii* populations on Islas Columbrete, Spain.

Photo: Consellería de Medio Ambiente. Valencia

Breathing LIFE into bird conservation

Since its inception in 1992, LIFE-Nature has played a key role in the EU's strategy for bird conservation by supporting many targeted conservation actions for Europe's most threatened bird species. Its' very focused project-based approach has proven to be highly efficient in promoting a better practical understanding not only of the conservation needs of many bird species but also of the requirements of the Directive on the ground. It has also made a significant contribution to the Natura 2000 Network by catalyzing the management of around 13% of the SPAs included in this Network, in close collaboration with the stakeholders concerned.

Through this comes a wealth of best practice experiences, for

instance, in winning support and engaging stakeholders, applying practical management techniques and integrating bird conservation needs into other land-use policies which can be of use to others involved in implementing the Birds Directive across Europe.

As a direct result of these actions, LIFE-Nature projects have contributed significantly to improving the conservation status of Europe's most vulnerable bird species. The Spanish imperial eagle population has, for instance, shown a notable increase in its population since the completion of a series of LIFE-Nature projects targeting its entire range. Similar trends are emerging for many other endangered birds, such as the Great Bustard, waterbird communities, endemic species from the Canaries and Azores, to name but a few.

Much of this success is down to the strategy, adopted early on in the programme, of focusing the limited funds available on priority actions and projects for the most endangered bird species in the EU. Also important is the ability of LIFE projects to, either collectively or individually, tackle the conservation of species over a significant proportion of their population or range. This is something no other EU fund has achieved, yet it remains central to the success of the Birds

Directive and the overall coherence of the SPA Network.

This article examines the strategy that lies behind the use of LIFE funds for bird conservation and highlights some of the actions and achievements of the projects funded so far. These are explored further in a new publication 'LIFE for the Birds Directive'¹

The strategy behind LIFE

From the outset LIFE-Nature's key objectives included the co-financing of projects that target the conservation of one or more of the SPAs included in the Natura 2000 Network or that aim to address specific problems for endangered species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive.

To be selected for funding, projects also need to be well prepared, able to demonstrate a clear added value and potentially significant conservation impact and be fully aware of the socio-economic circumstances in which they operate. This is to ensure that LIFE's limited funds are put to maximum use.

Support is usually limited to 3–5 years so that the projects have a pump priming and catalytic role and do not pay for 'business as usual' activities. The normal co-financing rate is set at 50% to encourage a real partnership and sense of ownership amongst the project beneficiaries.

Co-financing rates of up to 75% are nevertheless also available to projects that target highly endangered bird species. This was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Commission to further channel the limited resources towards those actions and species considered to be in most urgent need of support. Altogether 49 so called 'priority' bird species, including all globally threatened bird species in the EU, were earmarked for this higher co-financing rate. Species action plans were subsequently developed for each, partly with LIFE-Nature funding, to further guide the choice of conservation actions (see article pages 4–6).

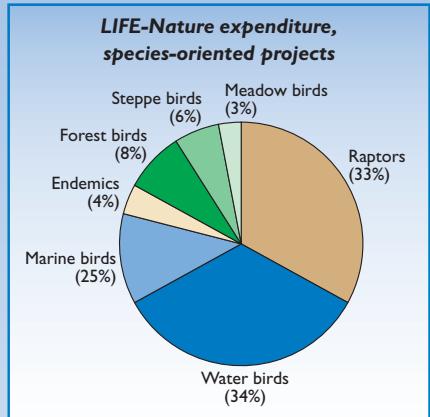
Despite this very narrow and highly focused approach, LIFE-Nature continues to this day to be



LIFE project: surveying seabirds in coastal and marine SPAs in the Azores.

Photo: Universidade dos Açores, ImagDOP

¹ <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/life/infoproducts/index.htm>



heavily over-subscribed, demonstrating the value of such targeted sources of funding to help inform and implement the Birds Directive.

Coverage of LIFE-Nature projects

By 2003, over 300 LIFE-Nature projects had been funded on threatened bird species and their habitats across the EU. Collectively these projects contributed around €350 million to bird conservation, €200 million of which came from LIFE. As a result, the majority of the 194 species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive and all except seven of the priority species have been targeted by at least one or more LIFE projects.

The projects also kick started the conservation management and restoration of over 400 SPAs, representing close to 13% of the SPA network. Amongst the most common habitats to be featured in the LIFE-Nature projects are, unsurprisingly, wetlands. In Spain alone, 21 of the 39 Spanish Ramsar sites have been included in a LIFE-Nature project so far. Other habitats such as forests, steppic areas, coastal and marine communities are nevertheless also well represented.

Type of actions funded under LIFE-Nature projects

The range of activities funded under LIFE-Nature projects is very wide indeed. It has involved, amongst others, scientific research, management planning, habitat restoration, land acquisition, initiation of recurring management, reintroduction of bird species, testing of new techniques, monitoring, stakeholder dialogue and public awareness.

Each project will include any combination of these activities depending on the conservation needs of a particular species, the habitats involved and the socio economic conditions of the area in question. It is, however, the combined effect of these activities and their long-term durability that determines their real impact.

For the majority of projects this impact is felt at the level of individual SPAs but in some cases it has wider reaching effects that go beyond the scope of the project. The following illustrates some examples of how LIFE-Nature projects have played a strategic role in the conservation of threatened bird species and their habitats.

Informing policy

Whilst the LIFE-Instrument focuses first and foremost on practical on-site conservation actions on the ground, a number of projects have involved preparatory actions of strategic value to the implementation of the Birds Directive. The co-financing of the species action plans for 23 of the most threatened bird species in the EU is one example of this.

The inventorying of important marine bird areas in offshore waters is another. Whereas terrestrial breeding colonies for marine birds are generally well protected, this is not the case for the offshore marine sites, principally because of the overall lack of detailed scientific knowledge of their whereabouts and conservation threats. This remains a significant gap in the SPA Network. Two LIFE-Nature projects in Spain and Portugal are currently

attempting to address this by undertaking detailed marine surveys in their own territorial waters. The aim is to identify sites for the SPA network and make recommendations on the management actions required for these sites.

Catalyser effect

Many LIFE-Nature projects have also been recognised for their significant catalytic effect in initiating the long-term conservation management of SPAs. This, they have achieved through a range of different approaches in engaging local stakeholders, demonstrating what the conservation actions mean in practice and identifying additional long-term sources of revenue, for instance, through the Rural Development Programme. Some projects have done this at the level of the individual sites themselves, others have been more strategic in nature.

In the west of Ireland for instance, a LIFE-Nature project has set out to demonstrate how conservation friendly practices for key bird species such as the corncrake can be integrated into the national agri-environment schemes. Contact was made with all farmers in the Termoncarragh SPA to persuade them to test different techniques on their land in exchange for an annual management fee. Eventually, with the help of its partner, Teagasc, the national farm advisory body in Ireland, it managed to sign up 87% of the farmers.

Once this was done, the project set out to demonstrate these adapted farming techniques to a wider audience. It organised regular field visits to Termoncarragh for farmers in

LIFE project: restoring wetlands for Bittern in the UK. Photo: RSPB
INSET Bittern benefiting from a LIFE Nature project in France run by LPO.
Photo: Christophe Egretteau/LPO



LIFE FOR BIRDS continued

neighbouring regions (around 200 so far) and training courses for planners and ecologists from different farming associations and authorities.

This demonstration area is now well known across Ireland. Thanks to its high profile and the success of the demonstration training days, decision-makers are now actively discussing the inclusion of conservation orientated measures in the new Agri-environment schemes as of 2006.

Taking a strategic approach

Another notable feature of LIFE-Nature projects is that they have the unique advantage of being able to support actions that address a particular conservation problem facing certain species across a significant proportion of their population or range.

Many large birds of prey have been targeted in this way. One project in Aragon Spain, for instance, is addressing the problem of electric power lines which run across significant parts of the SPA network and are a major cause of mortality for raptor species, such as the Spanish Imperial Eagle or Bonelli's Eagle. Focusing on 16 of

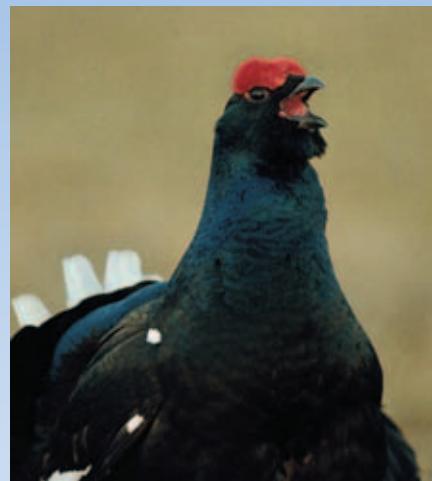
these SPAs the project is working with the electricity companies to adapt the existing power lines over 350 km in order to remove the risk of electrocution and collision.

Similar projects have been funded elsewhere in Spain and now also in Italy and have, collectively, had a significant effect on the survival rate of some of Europe's rarest birds of prey.

This strategic approach can also work at the level of individual sites which have different conservation threats and multifunctional uses, yet harbour the same species. In the UK, two LIFE-Nature projects have targeted the entire national population of bittern. Working in partnership with a range of public authorities, water companies and NGOs, the project aims not only to optimise the breeding potential for bittern in existing SPAs which already harbour the species but also to create the right conditions for the recolonisation of a further 11 sites. The ultimate aim is to establish a more extensive network of strategically located and self sustaining sites across the UK.

Passing on best practice experiences

Finally, the very practical and 'hands-on' nature of the LIFE projects has generated a wealth of



Black Grouse. Photo: Jorma Luhta

good management practices and techniques which can be very useful for site managers dealing with similar conservation issues elsewhere. To promote greater networking and exchange of project experiences, the Commission introduced in 2002 a new type of project called 'co-op'.

So far 3 Coop projects have been approved for birds. The first aims to produce a handbook for actions to promote Bittern conservation in Europe, the second is examining the issues surrounding grouse conservation and tourism in Natura 2000 sites and the third is evaluating best practices for Little Bustard conservation in Western Europe. All will use the practical experiences of selected LIFE-Nature projects to feed into this process and will disseminate the results to a wider audience.

Conclusions

These projects illustrate some of the achievements of LIFE-Nature projects in supporting the implementation of the Birds Directive and in improving the conservation status of Europe's most vulnerable species. Whether working at the level of an individual site or a whole suite of sites, or at the level of the species across a significant part of its natural range, the actions funded under LIFE remain unique in that they focus on the all-important gap between policy and practice. There is a need to now build on the experience of LIFE as we work to halt the decline of Europe's bird species by 2010.

LIFE project: construction of artificial rabbit warrens for Spanish Imperial Eagle.
Photo: CDB-Habitat **INSET Spanish Imperial Eagle.** Photo: Fernando de Antonio





Schaalsee LIFE project, Germany. Photo: Archiv des AfBRS **INSET Skylark.** Photo: David Kjaer



Birds in a wider biodiversity context

In 2001, European leaders set themselves an ambitious target to halt biodiversity decline by the year 2010. This objective is now enshrined in both the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy and its 6th Environment Action Programme. The Birds Directive is one of the key delivery mechanisms for achieving this target, particularly for vulnerable and threatened species. However, with most of Europe's biodiversity located in the wider countryside, there is also an increasingly urgent need to look beyond site protection in order to find ways of better integrating nature conservation requirements into other EU land-use policies and practices.

What's happening to Europe's birds

The Birds Directive places a general duty on Member States to maintain populations of all naturally occurring birds in the wild within the EU. As the previous articles illustrate, this has proven to be effective in many ways. It has led to the establishment of an already extensive network of Special Protection Areas across the EU to conserve Europe's most vulnerable as well as migratory birds. It has also inspired the development of International Species Action Plans for Europe's most critically endangered species, which have, in turn, benefited from targeted funds such as LIFE.

The results speak for themselves. According to a new report by BirdLife International on the status

of birds in the European Union, the number of threatened bird species, most of which are listed in Annex I of the Directive, has increased by 10% in the last ten years alone.

The Directive has not, however, been effective in conserving birds in the wider countryside. Yet, one of their main threats, today, comes from the continued unsustainable land-use practices and developments across much of rural Europe, a fact borne out by the alarming rate of decline of many of Europe's more familiar birds. Recent surveys by BirdLife have shown that the overall decline outside protected areas is now at record levels, with 46% of the 524 birds in Europe in trouble up from 38% just ten years ago. As birds are valuable indicators of what is happening to biodiversity, the problems and pressures they are facing are symptomatic of what is happening to other forms of wildlife in Europe.

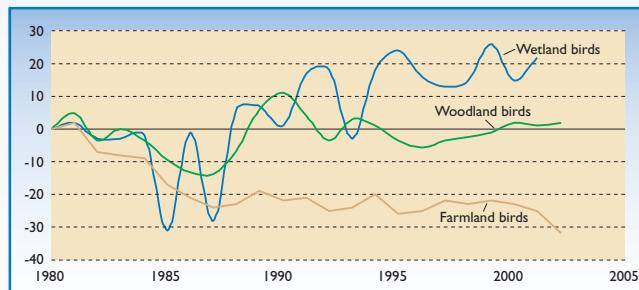
Farmland birds are amongst the worst hit, especially in countries with a higher proportion of intensive agricultural use. There is also the problem of land abandonment in some regions of Europe. Long distance migrants and some waders

have also suffered badly. As a result, many of the species that were once a common sight in our countryside, such as the Lapwing, Swallows, Common Snipe, Tree Sparrow or Skylark, are becoming increasingly scarce.

The need for greater integration

If the target of halting biodiversity decline by 2010 is to be achieved, it is clear that efforts need to be redoubled to ensure that current rural land-use practices in Europe become more environmentally sustainable. This can only be achieved if conservation requirements are taken fully into account during the development and implementation of the different policies and practices that define Europe's rural land uses, be it in the farming, fishing, forestry, water resource management or tourism sectors.

Some efforts have already been made in this direction, for instance with the targeted use of agri-environment schemes. There are now several examples of these schemes which have been demonstrated to deliver significant benefits for birds and biodiversity.



Pan-European wild bird indicator.¹

¹ From DG Environment's 2004 "EU environment related indicators" and based on data from BirdLife International, the European Bird Census Council and Wetlands International.

BIODIVERSITY continued

However, these generally remain the exception rather than the rule.

Nevertheless, with the adoption of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy and recent reforms in Europe's rural development policies, new opportunities are emerging for securing better integration. The recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy has, for instance:

- introduced agricultural support in the form of a Single Farm Payment which is decoupled from production levels.
- placed greater emphasis on cross-compliance by ensuring that the Single Farm Payment is linked to the respect of the Birds and Habitats Directives,
- increased the amount of money available for the Rural Development Programme, by shifting of funds within the CAP, which is expected to add €1.3 billion a year to Rural Development funds. This will now allow for enhanced agri-environmental schemes and a specific support scheme destined to agricultural and forest sites within Natura 2000.
- continued the application of good farming practice, that all recipients of support under rural development measures need to apply

The challenge will be to ensure that these opportunities are fully exploited for the benefit of Europe's biodiversity. This will only be possible if it has the active involvement and support of European farmers, fishermen, foresters, etc. who are after all the



The Camargue, France, a key wetland along a major European migratory flyway.

Photo: Micheal O'Briain

main managers of these natural resources. Recent examples of effective stakeholder dialogue and partnerships, such as the Sustainable Hunting Initiative, or through LIFE-Nature projects, provide invaluable advice and in how to achieve this. We need to build upon these experiences.

The international context

The decline in many long distance migrants brings to attention another important factor of bird conservation. As factors operating outside the EU also determine the conservation status of these species there is a need for international cooperation and coordination to secure their conservation across their entire flyway. The African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), is a good example of such international collaboration. It establishes a framework in which 117 countries can work together to save 235 migratory waterbird species across their entire range. Many Member States have already ratified this important agreement. The Commission has recently proposed that the Community does likewise, giving greater effect to the role and commitment of the EU in international waterbird conservation.

Meeting the 2010 target and beyond

So, in conclusion, much has clearly been achieved for bird conservation in Europe thanks to the Birds Directive. But there is still a lot to do to halt the continuing decline of Europe's birds and biodiversity by 2010. Renewed efforts will be required to complete the SPA network and to secure the long term management of these areas. Species protection provisions will also need to be reinforced and extended to beyond the EU frontiers through international cooperation and collaboration.

Moreover, the implementation of the Birds Directive in the wider countryside also now needs to move centre stage. With the recent enlargement of the European Union and changes in EU rural policies, there are more opportunities than ever to better integrate bird conservation requirements into wider rural land-uses. The onus is now on all of us to seize these opportunities and work in close partnership with the different land users to secure more sustainable land-use practices across Europe. Only then will Europe's biodiversity be recognised as a truly integral part of our rich and diverse living landscape, and the shared responsibility of all. Here's to the next 25 years....!

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