

UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*)

Current status

The turtle dove is a summer migrant that breeds at the northern edge of its range in the UK. It is confined largely to the south and east of England and is associated with fertile arable farmland in warm, dry situations. The population was at a high at the time of the first breeding atlas (1968-72). However, the Common Bird Census index has indicated a fall of around 60% in the population since this time, and the new breeding atlas (1988-91) shows a marked decrease in range of around 25%. The latest population estimate, taken from the new atlas, is approximately 75,000 territories. The turtle dove is declining in many parts of Europe although it is still common and widespread in the lowlands of central and southern Europe. It generally occurs below 350 m in a variety of fairly dry, sunny, sheltered habitats.

The turtle dove is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule 1 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. It is a traditional quarry species in Mediterranean countries and, as such, is listed on Annex II of the EC Birds Directive.

Current factors causing loss or decline

The decline of the turtle dove has occurred at the same time as decreases in the numbers and/or range of other farmland birds which share its diet of grass and weed seeds. It is therefore likely that its decline may be due, at least in part, to changes in agricultural practice such as the increased use of herbicides and fertilisers, which have reduced the quantity and variety of wildflowers on arable land. Turtle doves nest in large hedges and mature scrub, and also retreat to the safety of this dense vegetation when disturbed. The loss of features such as overgrown hedgerows and hawthorn thickets on farmland is likely to have had an adverse effect on the population.

As a long-distance migrant, the turtle dove faces threats, particularly from hunting, outside the UK. It is heavily shot in France and the Iberian peninsula. Tens of thousands of birds are also shot in their wintering areas, mainly Senegal, and many more are killed on migration through Morocco.

In the UK, turtle doves are associated with light soils in the drier parts of the country and the decrease in range of the species has been most marked in the north and west. It is therefore possible that some climatic factor may be operating.

Little is known of the effects of habitat or climatic changes in the wintering grounds of the species.

Turtle doves spend part of the year, particularly February and March, in acacia scrub in the Sahel region, and recent drought conditions and habitat destruction there have coincided with a steep decline in numbers.

Current action

Until recently the turtle dove was not regarded as a species of conservation concern, so little action for it has been carried out. Rotational set-aside will have benefited the species, although this has been significantly reduced in area in recent years. New prescriptions encouraging the growth of spring-sown cereals and retention of winter stubbles in the South Downs ESA, and the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme, should also benefit the turtle dove.

EN/GCT have undertaken a pilot study into the summer ecology and habitat use of the turtle dove which has made recommendations for a full study that will determine the importance of agricultural factors in the decline of the population.

The EC and French government are under pressure to ensure that the legislation on hunting is enforced. The turtle dove is one of a number of species identified for a Species Management Plan by the EC. The plan is being funded by the EC and coordinated by the Office National de la Chasse. GCT is undertaking an analysis of European ringing recoveries of the turtle dove in an attempt to investigate trends in hunting pressure and survival.

Action plan objectives and targets

In the short term, halt or reverse the decline in numbers of the turtle dove by the year 2003 so that the Breeding Bird Survey index is at least at 1996 levels.

In the long term, see a sustained recovery in numbers so that the BBS index is at least 50% higher than 1996 levels by 2008.

Proposed actions with lead agencies

Policy and legislation

Take account of the need to recover turtle dove and other farmland bird populations when developing agricultural policy and CAP reform; consider how to extend the Arable Stewardship Scheme if the pilot is successful, and how to substitute for the benefits of set-aside, if this is further reduced or abolished. Retention of appropriately managed hedgerow trees and farm woodland should be encouraged.

(ACTION: DANI, FA, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Where appropriate, incorporate new management prescriptions when reviewing agri-environment schemes, especially ESAs, Countryside Stewardship, Tir Cymen and Countryside Premium Scheme, in order to reverse some of the recent changes in farm management outlined in Section 2. (ACTION: CCW, DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Seek uptake of a more cautious and targeted use of pesticides and fertilisers on farmland to reduce the impacts on potential food sources for the turtle dove. This could include encouraging integrated crop management, organic farming and the more widespread adoption of initiatives such as the recently begun Scottish 'TIBRE' project. (ACTION: DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Support the European Commission in its efforts to enforce Article 7 of the Birds Directive on the hunting of the turtle dove. (ACTION: DETR, FCO)

Site safeguard and management

Ensure appropriate management of areas of scrub on protected sites (including nature reserves) within the existing and former range of the turtle dove. (ACTION: CCW, EN)

Species management and protection

None proposed.

Advisory

Promote further advice to land managers on management for turtle dove as one of a suite of farmland birds and update that advice in the light of new policies and research findings. (ACTION: MAFF, WOAD)

Promote effective management of set-aside for breeding birds, including turtle dove. (ACTION: MAFF, WOAD)

Promote the sympathetic management of hedgerows and farmland scrub for the benefit of turtle dove and other farmland birds. (ACTION: DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Future Research and Monitoring

Compare Nest Record Cards from the 1960s with those from recent years in order to look for possible explanations for the population decline. (ACTION: CCW, EN)

Undertake a study into the summer ecology and habitat use of turtle doves, including an assessment of diet and a comparison with a study carried out in the 1960s. (ACTION: CCW, EN)

Ensure appropriate monitoring of turtle dove breeding numbers through continuation of the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. (ACTION: CCW, EN, JNCC)

Communications and Publicity

Use the turtle dove as an example of a bird under pressure from factors operating outside the UK in order to promote increased protection and beneficial habitat management throughout its range. (ACTION: JNCC)