

# Status and conservation of THE EUROPEAN TURTLE DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*)

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## 1970-1990

Since the nineties the European Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia t. turtur*) has been declining in numbers in its original habitat. In 1994 BirdLife International published the reasons why the European Turtle Dove has been decreasing since the 1970's, namely due to the intensification of agricultural practices on the breeding grounds, especially in Western Europe. Secondly due to the hunting of European Turtle Doves on the wintering grounds and during the spring migration. Thirdly due to the droughts on the wintering grounds in Africa (BirdLife International, 1994).

Apart from the aforementioned specification of the decline of European Turtle Doves BirdLife International's *Birds in Europe: their conservation status* from 1994 also provided solutions, namely to maintain and improve both the breeding and wintering grounds, especially reducing the use of agricultural herbicides. Secondly the hunting in spring should stop completely and the hunting on the wintering grounds should be better regulated.

The reason why little was known about the status of European Turtle Doves in the nineties was that nearly no research had been undertaken. Only in Great Britain and France was research conducted on European Turtle Doves. There was not a lot of specific data from other European countries available on population trends of these birds.





### 1990-2018

In 2007 more knowledge was attained on the population of European Turtle Doves and the entire population was estimated between 5.6 and 7.2 million breeding pairs (BirdLife International, 2004a). The difference is rather large due to the fact that it was hard to estimate the amount of birds present in both Russia and Turkey. Without these last two mentioned countries the population of European Turtle Doves was estimated between 2.2 and 3.8 million breeding pairs. In the 25 countries that were part of the EU between 2004-2006 the breeding pairs were estimated between 1.6 and 2.6 million. That meant that between 36-46% of the European population was found in the European Union (BirdLife International 2004b). The Western population of European Turtle Doves was still declining in 2007. The Central European population was relatively stable and the only two countries where the European Turtle Dove was increasing in size were in France and Romania (BirdLife International, 2004a).

In 2007 a management plan was prepared for the European Turtle Dove with a duration of three years (2007-2009). In this management plan four important threats have been identified for the European Turtle Dove, namely the destruction and change in the breeding habitat, caused by the intensification of agriculture. Secondly the draught and climate changes on the wintering grounds in Africa. Thirdly the hunting of European Turtle Doves during the spring and during the breeding period. Fourthly the competition with the Eurasian Collared Dove was mentioned as a threat for the European Turtle Dove.

Due to the rapid population decline of the European Turtle Dove, the focus of this management plan was not just on its three years, but also on the creation of a 10-year



action plan in order to bring the European Turtle Dove back to a favourable conservation status in the European Union.

The short-term goals of this three-year management plan 2007-2009 were:

- Implementation of improved management (including restoration) of the breeding habitat;
- Collecting scientific data on population trends, ecology and the dynamics of the population of European Turtle Doves, both on the breeding- and wintering grounds;
- Analysis of potential competition with the Eurasian Collared Dove;
- Collection of scientific data to get a better understanding on the influence of hunting on the population of European Turtle Doves.

Currently, we are 20 years further down the road since the decline of the *S. t. turtur* had been described by BirdLife International. The reason for the decline is still virtually the same as 20 years ago. Few improvements have been made on the actions proposed in the previous action plan on a European scale. Luckily this is changing.

Especially in Great Britain lots of work has been undertaken to prevent the decline of the European Turtle Dove. In May 2012 *Operation Turtle Dove* was born through a collaboration between the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Conservation Grade, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust and Natural England.

*Operation Turtle Dove* is conducting research on the breeding grounds of European Turtle Doves, they are creating new foraging and breeding habitat; are providing safer stop over points on their migration routes; and conduct research on migration routes and wintering grounds.





Nest of a European Turtle-dove

The three major threats to the European Turtle Dove are still the same: loss of habitat on both the breeding and the wintering grounds, related to land use and changes in landcover. Secondly the illegal hunting and catching, predominantly during the spring migration and during the breeding season. Thirdly the legal numbers on which European Turtle Doves can be hunted are too high. Other threats identified for the European Turtle Dove are diseases (e.g. *Trichomonas gallinae*); competition with other species; both on purpose and accidental poisoning; and weather and climate changes.

The final goal of the 10-year action plan is to bring the European Turtle Dove back to a favourable conservation status, so that it can safely be removed from the 'globally threatened' category of the IUCN Red List. The main aim is stopping the decline of the European Turtle Dove in its total range. Thereby clearing a road to an increase of the population size in every flight zone during the next action plan (2028-2038).

## 2018-2028

The results of the management plan from 2007-2009 resulted in an 'International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur* (2018-2028)'. This ten-year action plan, produced by the RSPB started in 2018.

Currently the breeding population of European Turtle Doves is estimated between 2.4 and 4.2 million birds in the European Union, about 75% of the total 2.9 to 5.6 million breeding pairs in Europe. The total population of European Turtle Doves is estimated between 13 to 48 million breeding pairs (Fisher et al., 2018).

The European Turtle Dove is part of Annex II/part B of the Birds Directive. That means that it is a species that may be hunted, but where the hunting period is limited and where hunting is illegal when the birds are at their most vulnerable, namely during the spring migration and during the breeding season (European Commission, 2019). Since 2015 the European Turtle Dove is listed on the IUCN Red List of vulnerable species; it is listed as nearly threatened in the EU28; and is listed as a vulnerable species in BirdLife International's Europe region.



European Turtle-dove on its nest





European Turtle Dove at the front, Eurasian Collared Dove at the back

The seven objectives of the action plan 2018-2028 are as follows:

Direct conservation actions: (most critical first)

1. Good quality habitat with the availability and accessibility of water and food; which will be provided and maintained on the breeding grounds.
2. Illegal hunting in the European Union is stopped and decreased outside of the EU.
3. Legal hunting over the entire range of the European Turtle Dove is done in sustainable numbers.
4. Habitat of good quality, with the availability and accessibility of water and food will be provided and maintained on important locations on the migration route as well as on the wintering grounds.

Supporting actions:

5. The international cooperation will be improved by allowing the sharing of information and expertise;
6. The awareness of stakeholders is increased;
7. Knowledge gaps are filled, especially on areas that contribute to a better understanding of what factors are important on the wintering grounds.

As described above, it is very difficult to estimate the population of European Turtle Doves in the European Union and on the European continent. We know that European

Turtle Doves, especially in Western Europe, are declining rapidly. The 10-year action plan specifies very specifically for each objective where there are shortcomings in our knowledge of and about European Turtle Doves, as well as action points that must be taken to achieve these objectives. The 'International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur* (2018-2028)' has just started. The future will tell us if and how it will succeed.

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