

# 25 Years of EU Wild Birds Directive

## *Why do we need to take care of our birds?*

With the help of a Species Action Plan, the population of the Spanish Imperial Eagle has recovered from 50 pairs in 1974 to now total 193 pairs

The EU's rich diversity of over 500 wild bird species has been facing severe threats for a long time. Urban sprawl and transport networks have fragmented and reduced bird habitats, intensive agriculture, forestry and fisheries and the use of pesticides have diminished their food supplies, and there has been a need to regulate hunting to ensure that it does not damage populations. According to the latest scientific studies, 43% of Europe's bird species are threatened or facing serious declines and therefore not in a good conservation status.

Many people derive great pleasure, fulfilment and inspiration from watching birds and listening to them. But birds are also an intricate component of ecosystems, which we need for our own survival. Ecosystems such as forests and the marine environment provide us with food, medicines and important raw materials. They keep the climate stable, oxygenate air and transform pollutants into nutrients. Birds play an important role in the effective functioning of these systems.

As birds are high up in the food chain, they are also good indicators of the general state of our biodiversity. When they start disappearing, it means that something is wrong with our environment and that we need to take action.

Already back in the 1970s, Europe's leaders saw the need for a comprehensive system for bird protection - at the European level in recognition that birds migrate freely across borders and are a valuable part of our shared natural heritage. The result was the Wild Birds Directive<sup>[1]</sup>, which was adopted on 2 April 1979. It was the first major European nature conservation law.

## **What does the Birds Directive do?**

The Birds Directive has created a far-reaching protection scheme for all of Europe's wild birds, identifying 194 species and sub-species (listed in Annex I) among them as particularly threatened and in need of special conservation measures. There are a number of components to this scheme:

- Member States are required to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the 194 threatened species and all migratory bird species. SPAs are scientifically identified areas critical for the survival of the targeted species, such as wetlands. The SPAs form part of Natura 2000, the EU's network of protected nature sites, which was established in 1992. The designation of an area as a SPA gives it a high level of protection from potentially damaging developments.
- A second component bans activities that directly threaten birds, such as the deliberate killing or capture of birds, the destruction of their nests and taking of their eggs, and associated activities such as trading in live or dead birds (with a few exceptions).

- A third component establishes rules that limit the number of bird species that can be hunted (to 82 species and sub-species listed in Annex II) and the periods during which they can be hunted in order to protect them during periods of their greatest vulnerability, such as the return migration to the nesting areas, reproduction and the raising of chicks. There are also rules defining which hunting methods are permitted (e.g. non-selective hunting is banned).
- In addition, since 1993 the Birds Directive has provided the basis for the establishment of EU Species Action Plans aimed at helping the most threatened species recover.

## **What has the Birds Directive achieved?**

### ***SPAs***

By now, EU Member States have classified over 3,600 Special Protection Areas. The SPAs cover more than 7% of EU-15 terrestrial territory as well as substantial coastal and inshore marine areas. The SPA network has contributed in a major way to halting loss of wetlands and other key habitats in the EU, especially in the last decade. As a result, population trends for Annex I bird species have been better than for other bird species in the EU over the past decade.

### ***Species Action Plans***

So far, Species Action Plans for 47 of Europe's most threatened birds have been finalised and are being implemented with the support of EU funds, in particular from the LIFE programme. As a result, the decline of some of the targeted species has already been halted.

### ***LIFE Nature Programme***

In 1992, the EU launched the LIFE Nature Programme, which has played a key role in jumpstarting good SPA management, building up capacities and co-financing Species Action Plans. Up until 2003, the EU contributed €200 million to €350 million spent on more than 300 LIFE Nature projects targeting birds.

### ***Hunting***

For a long time, hunters did not see any need for hunting to be regulated, while bird conservationists believed that the Directive's hunting rules did not go far enough. Today, most hunters are aware that it is in their interest to have healthy viable populations. On 12 October 2004, the two main organisations representing hunters and bird conservationists in Europe, the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU (FACE) and BirdLife International, signed an agreement on sustainable hunting in which they affirmed their commitment to the objectives of the Birds Directive. This was witnessed by Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström and follows years of meetings facilitated by the Commission as well the publication of guidance on sustainable hunting by the Commission.

### ***Awareness***

While many EU citizens may not have heard of the EU Birds Directive, it is well known among bird conservationists, ornithologists, hunters and people who are simply interested in birds. Its implementation and the discussions surrounding it have increased awareness of the need for bird conservation and contributed to positive changes in human attitudes and behaviour towards wild birds and their habitats.

### ***What remains to be done?***

Despite this significant progress, bird conservation in Europe still faces substantial challenges. While the SPA network is impressive, designation varies from Member State to Member State, ranging from disappointing 2% in France, to satisfactory 6%-12.5% in Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands, to inspiring 23-25% in Slovakia and Slovenia. There is no “right percentage” as distribution and abundance of bird species differ across the EU, but most Member States still have some work to do. In addition, the challenge now is to secure effective long-term management of the sites.

Whereas the Birds Directive has helped the bird species it targets, recent scientific studies from BirdLife International confirm that many populations of common birds in Europe, such as sparrows and swallows, are in decline. Common farmland birds monitored in 18 European countries show a decline in numbers by 71% between 1980 and 2002.

In this regard, further efforts to integrate bird conservation needs in other policies, such as agriculture and transport, are needed. The 2003 mid-term review of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy goes in the right direction: it has decoupled subsidies from production levels, and there is greater emphasis on “cross-compliance”, which requires, among other things, that payments are linked to respect of the Birds Directive. There has also been an increase in the amount available under the Rural Development Programme for environmental friendly farming and sustainable use of agricultural and forest sites within Natura 2000.

Furthermore, there is increased recognition of the need for international collaboration to provide for the protection of migratory birds throughout their flyways. For example, the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) is a key framework for such co-operation, bringing together 117 countries to protect 235 migratory waterbird species. In August 2004, the European Commission proposed that the EU ratifies this important agreement.

European Commission, November 2004

[1] Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the Conservation of Wild Birds