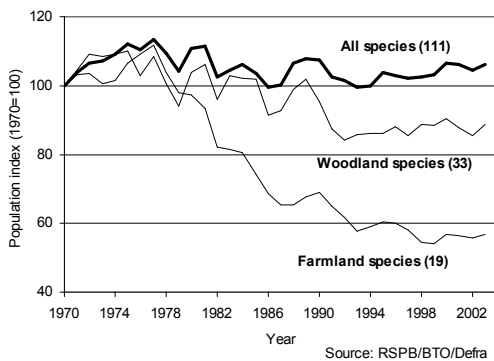


- **Common bird indicators show the average trends in abundance of a selected set of species. They are especially useful in showing change in the overall condition of ecosystems, which is difficult and expensive to measure directly.**
- **Using birds has many advantages: excellent data, based on the volunteer efforts of skilled birdwatchers; a stable taxonomy; a thorough knowledge of ecology and behaviour; meaningful responses to environmental change, and great resonance and symbolic value with the public and decision-makers.**
- **Bird populations integrate a set of environmental changes, because they are mobile and often wide-ranging. Bird numbers also respond more slowly than those of smaller organisms, and at a larger spatial scale.**
- **Common bird indicators can help measure progress towards reducing the rate of biodiversity loss at the national, regional and global levels.**

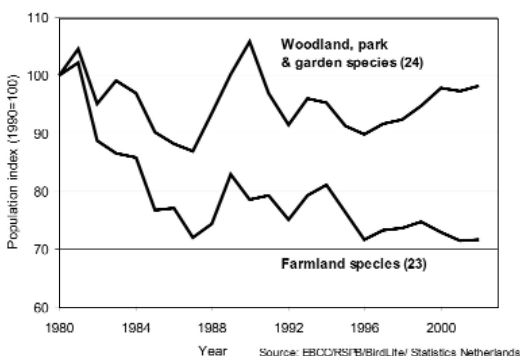
National example: The UK common bird indicator turning science into policy

The UK common bird indicator, which is based on population trends of common breeding birds, has been adopted by the UK Government as one of 15 headline indicators of the sustainability of lifestyles in the UK. It shows that common birds have increased by 10% on average, while woodland and farmland birds have fallen by 15% and 42% respectively, from 1970 to 2002. The UK Government has adopted a formal Agreement to "reverse the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020". UK land-use policy is now coupling agricultural production with the needs of maintaining and restoring biodiversity.



The UK Common bird indicator

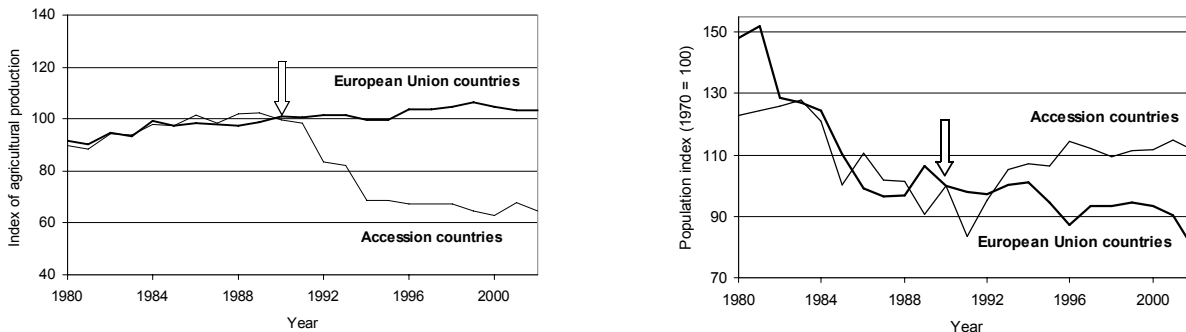
The Pan-European common bird indicator shows average population trends of a suite of common breeding birds across 18 European countries. Data are collected through national annual breeding bird surveys conducted by skilled volunteers. National species' indices are weighted by national species population sizes; regional indicators are calculated by averaging the resulting indices. They show that common farmland birds in Europe have declined steeply over the last two decades, whereas common woodland birds have not. The farmland bird index has been formally adopted by the European Union as a Structural Indicator for Europe. A number of studies show that bird populations are good surrogates for trends in other farmland biodiversity.



The Pan-European common bird indicator

Why have farmland birds declined both in the UK and across Europe?

Compelling evidence shows that recent farmland bird declines in north and west Europe have been driven by changes in agricultural methods and specialisation. The most important changes affecting birds have been hedgerow loss, land drainage, increased mechanisation, increased fertiliser and pesticide use, reduction of spring cultivation, simplification of crop rotations, changes in crop use, and loss of farm diversity. This hypothesis is supported by a contrast in population trends in EU and EU Accession countries. In Accession countries, farmland birds showed signs of recovery from 1990, as the former Eastern Bloc broke up and agricultural intensity was reduced. There has been no similar recovery of farmland birds in the EU, where intensification has continued (Gregory *et al.* 2005 *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. Lond. B.*, in press).



Farmland birds in EU Accession countries have recovered since 1990 as agricultural production has declined

Global: Scaling up common bird indicators

Data from common bird indicators can feed through to, and help improve, global indicators based on species' population trends, such as the Living Planet Index. The scope of common bird indicators could be expanded in three ways:

- Methods used in Europe can readily be applied in other regions with similar data sets, such as North America and Australia. Recent analysis of trend data in the USA, for example, has shown severe declines in grassland birds, but a mixed picture in other habitats.
- Indicators are under development for species groups that have been counted in many countries for many years, such as waterbirds (led by Wetlands International), seabirds and birds of prey.
- Thousands of birdwatchers around the world make bird lists, which can provide an index of species abundance changes. Such lists are now being captured through web-based systems in a number of countries: see www.worldbirds.org
- Common bird indicators complement other biodiversity indicators.
- Strengths include statistical robustness, relative simplicity, efficient use of existing data, sensitivity to environmental change, ease of communication, and ease of update.
- These indicators are very cost-effective. However, the data-collection networks need a long-term commitment of resources for co-ordination and support.

Assessing biodiversity trends: BirdLife's approach using indicators for birds

Are we on track to achieve the target of reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010? Birds can make a major contribution to a global monitoring scheme because of the wealth of information available. A suite of relevant bird indicators is now taking shape:

- Red List Indices measuring global and regional trends in the extinction risk of all species.
- Important Bird Area Indices measuring trends in the condition of sites, pressures on them, and responses in place.
- Common Bird Indicators measuring population trends of representative common species to indicate trends in the condition of habitats.

Further information:

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Global: Stuart Butchart (stuart.butchart@birdlife.org). See www.birdlife.org, www.rspb.org.uk and www.ebcc.info