EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (STREPTOPELIA TURTUR)

POPULATION AND HABITAT
The European Turtle-dove (Streptopelia turtur; from here on referred to as Turtle Dove) is Europe’s only long-distance migratory dove. In Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Austria and Portugal, the Turtle Dove is an important quarry species.

CONSERVATION STATUS
The Turtle Dove is listed on Annex II/2 of the EU Birds Directive as a species for which hunting is permitted in several Member States. It is currently classified as a Species of European Conservation Concern (SPEC 3) with an unfavourable conservation status in Europe (BirdLife International 2004).

The magnitude of long-term trends have been broadly similar across the few countries with data, showing maximum estimated declines of greater than 50% in many cases. Turtle Dove population monitoring in Europe has highlighted declines of 74% between 1980 and 2011 (Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme).

In some countries in the western part if its range, its population is declining precipitously; for instance, the population in the UK has declined by 88% between 1995 and 2012 (Harris et al. 2014). Countries on the northwest edge of the range have exhibited apparently greatest declines.

There are four main factors associated with the decline of turtle doves. These include the loss of suitable habitat in both the breeding and non-breeding range (which may increase mortality and result in birds arriving on breeding grounds later and in poorer condition, with possible knock-on effects to breeding productivity), unsustainable levels of hunting on migration and disease.

Recent studies pointed out a further threat by infections with Trichomonas gallinae, a parasite affecting the gullet and respiratory system and leading to lesions, which might cause starvation (Lennon et al. 2013). Focal studies into this potential threat are underway (J. Dunn pers. comm.).

Evidence from the UK indicates that their decline is primarily due to low productivity associated with loss of suitable breeding and foraging habitat in the breeding range through agricultural intensification: it is considered that loss of foraging sites is currently the greatest limiting factor (Dunn & Morris 2012).

The EU population figures and hunting bag statistics published within the European Commission Management Plan for Turtle Dove (2007–2009) were stark: of an estimated population of 3-6 million pairs breeding in Europe, the annual bag total in EU Member States alone was estimated at 2-3 million birds (European Commission 2007).

PROTECTION MEASURES
If hunting bag figures within the EU Management Plan are accurate and reflect the current situation, hunting may now constitute an increasingly significant contributory factor given recent population declines.

This situation is likely to be exacerbated if populations continue to decline with a concomitant proportional increase in hunting bag. There is an urgent need to collate available quantitative data to assess the legal take of Turtle Doves in the context of existing demographic data and with reference
to our increasing understanding of migratory routes and the potential additive impact of disease. A possible conservation management response could be implemented through self-regulation of hunting until the population recovers sufficiently.

Target 5 of the EU Management Plan was to develop a predictive model to help determine what annual bag would be sustainable in each Member State where hunting is permitted. To date, this has not been undertaken. This would facilitate determination of population level impacts to inform national and EU actions.

Farmland interventions that boost breeding productivity are likely to be an important management tool for conservation of this species, however, without significant scaling-up, they are unlikely to have the required level of impact within the time-scale required.

The Management Plan was published in 2007 and applied for a three-year period. It recommended evaluation after 2009; this is now five years overdue. Many gaps in our knowledge of Turtle Dove demographic parameters, hunting statistics and population estimates and trends remain. An international flyway Action Plan for Turtle Doves is essential to determine the appropriate strategic approach to their conservation.

**FIND OUT MORE**

Species factsheet on the BirdLife International DataZone