At least 12 million waterbirds use the East-Atlantic Flyway and migrate yearly between the Arctic, Europe and Africa. The majority of these birds rely for their survival on a limited number of key sites in coastal areas, such as the Wadden Sea in Europe and the Banc d’Arguin and Archipelago dos Bijagós in West Africa. The pressure on these sites – and therefore on the birds – is increasing. Reliable population estimates and trends are needed to guide conservation action, both at the site level and for the flyway as a whole.

As part of a broader initiative to strengthen the conservation of migratory waterbirds, the Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative and the Conservation of Migratory Birds project are improving the monitoring of waterbirds in especially the coastal zone of West Africa.

McAleer (1991) and Zwarts (2010) concluded that population trends are only available for 35% of the 52 key species. Increased monitoring in especially West Africa would greatly improve the situation. A further need is to collect data on reproduction and survival. These drivers of population change and its interactions with pressures will increase our understanding of the most important bottlenecks.

Monitoring reproduction and survival

By studying reproduction and survival for key species, the drivers of population trends can be analyzed. It will help to identify which stages of the life cycle are currently the most problematic. In combination with the registration of pressures and environmental factors, this will help to identify the drivers of population trends and distinguish between natural and human induced causes.

The current initiative aims to bring together all research projects to ensure that the results are widely shared and their implications applied to conservation and management.

Collaboration is needed

The monitoring is initially organized in Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cape Verde. But we hope that other countries along the East-Atlantic Flyway will join as well. The ambition is to stimulate a truly East-Atlantic Flyway-scale cooperation for waterbird monitoring. Anyone interested in more information about this exciting initiative can contact us at the addresses below.

Many key species in decline

The results of long-term monitoring in the Wadden Sea indicate a strong decline in 70% of the populations of migratory waterbirds depending on tidal mudflats. It is not clear to what extent these declines are related to specific conditions in the Wadden Sea or are caused by conditions in other parts of the flyway.

Current monitoring not enough

Monitoring data from the whole flyway is needed for targeted conservation action. Good flyway trends are only available for 35% of the 52 key species. Increased monitoring in especially West Africa would greatly improve the situation. Further need is to collect data on reproduction and survival. These drivers of population change and its interactions with pressures will increase our understanding of the most important bottlenecks.