STATUS AND TRENDS OF MIGRATORY WATERBIRD POPULATIONS

In the African-Eurasian Flyways 2021
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STATUS AND TRENDS OF MIGRATORY WATERBIRD POPULATIONS

In the African-Eurasian Flyways 2021

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About AEWA: The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) is an intergovernmental treaty dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, Greenland and the Canadian Archipelago.

AEWA brings together countries and the wider international conservation community in an effort to establish coordinated conservation and management of migratory waterbirds throughout their entire migratory range. The AEWA Secretariat is provided by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Cover picture: Flock of Red Knot (Calidris canutus) in flight, with motion blur, Snettisham RSPB reserve, Norfolk, England, UK, © Guy Edwardes / 2020VISION / naturepl.com

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- AEWA is the oldest and the only legally binding multi-species CMS instrument for birds. The implementation of AEWA helps deliver the Sustainable Development Goals and will assist with realisation of the objectives of the proposed Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

- Knowledge of the status of waterbird populations has improved since the establishment of AEWA, but important gaps remain particularly in the eastern part of the Agreement Area where there are fewer Parties. To achieve the target set in the AEWA Strategic Plan 2019–2027, a more systematic and comprehensive approach to waterbird monitoring is needed. Besides the International Waterbird Census, breeding bird monitoring schemes should be developed especially in Africa, Central and Southwest Asia and Russia.

- The number of decreasing populations is 40% higher than the number of increasing populations. There is a pressing need to step up the recruitment of new Contracting Parties along the West Asian / East African flyway, and to intensify implementation assistance for the Agreement through the Plan of Action for Africa, as well as creating a similar mechanism for Central and Southwest Asia.

- The proportion of AEWA ‘priority’ populations with stable or increasing trends has remained unchanged, but less than 70% of the ‘priority’ populations are subject of international Action Plans. Gaps in action planning and implementation of the plans should be filled to recover populations and so achieve the target set in the AEWA Strategic Plan 2019–2027.

**AEWA IN NUMBERS**

- **326 – 430** million waterbirds
- **560** waterbird populations
- **255** waterbird species
- **27** waterbird families
- **119** Range States
- **82** Contracting Parties

Large mixed flock of Red-breasted Geese (*Branta ruficollis*) and Greater White-fronted Geese (*Anser albifrons*) at Lake Durankulak in Bulgaria © Nicky Petkov.
The western population of the Northern Bald Ibis (Geronticus eremita) has been gradually increasing to achieve the target of the AEWA Species Action Plan © Adam Riley.

- The proportion of populations with unfavourable conservation status in 2018 that show a stable or increasing trend has slightly increased, but the target is not achieved yet. Accelerating the production of conservation and management guidance and their national implementation for the 204 populations (over 36% of all AEWA populations), as foreseen in the AEWA Strategic Plan 2019–2027, is urgently needed.

- Three out of the six purpose level indicators of the AEWA Strategic Plan 2019–2027 show negative change compared to the 2018 baseline. This highlights the importance of urgently enhancing site and habitat conservation actions of the AEWA Strategic Plan 2019–2027.

- Although many AEWA populations are important quarry species, information needed for their sustainable use and management is inadequate. Basic information gaps concerning which waterbird species are hunted, and in which countries, should be filled in 2022 as a first step towards ensuring sustainable use.

- Considering the ongoing degradation of wetlands and other habitats, and multiple pressures on waterbirds, the relative stability of their conservation status within the African-Eurasian flyways demonstrates that when actions are internationally coordinated along flyways, their conservation status can be maintained or even improved, as shown for several species where co-ordinated conservation has been undertaken such as the Lesser White-fronted Goose, the Taiga Bean Goose, and the Northern Bald Ibis.

The Central Management Unit of the Taiga Bean Goose (Anser fabalis fabalis) population has increased with the implementation of the AEWA Species Action Plan and has reached the set target © Magnus Elander.
DATA QUALITY

The categorisation of populations on Annex 3 of the Agreement determines the conservation and management regime to be applied to these populations. This classification relies on the size and the trend of the populations.

Reliable estimates of population size and trends are also the prerequisites of the conservation and sustainable use of waterbird populations.

Of the population size estimates, 69% are based on survey data (Census based and Expert opinion on the pie chart) and 71% of the trend estimates are based on monitoring (Good and Reasonable on the pie chart). For 54% of the populations, both the population size and the trend estimate are based on surveys and monitoring. This is still 12 percentage points below the target of 66% in the Strategic Plan 2019–2027.

Figure 1. Quality of population size estimates and short-term trend estimates of AEWA populations.
STRENGTHENING WATERBIRD MONITORING

Improving waterbird monitoring is particularly needed in Africa, Central and Southwest Asia and in Eastern Europe. In order to improve the population size and trend estimates, countries should take a systematic approach to the development of waterbird monitoring paying attention not only to the International Waterbird Census but also developing adequate monitoring schemes in the breeding season for those species that can be best monitored then. The AEWA Conservation Guidelines No. 9 provides advice how to develop national monitoring schemes.

Figure 2. Quality of trend estimates by flyway group: Upper row, from left to right: Western Palearctic flyways: Atlantic, Black Sea and Mediterranean, Central and Southwest Asian. Middle row from left to right: Intercontinental flyways: East Atlantic, Sahelian, West Asia – East African. Bottom row, from left to right: Afrotropical flyways: Western and Central African, Sub-Saharan, Eastern and Southern African.

Key
- No idea
- Poor
- Reasonable
- Good

African-Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership (AEWMP)

The African-Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership is a coalition of organisations that actively supports waterbird monitoring, conservation and management. It includes representatives of the members of Wetlands International, the relevant IUCN Species Survival Commission Specialist Groups, BirdLife International, the British Trust for Ornithology, the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU, organisations that coordinate complementary monitoring schemes or capacity building programmes and over 80 organisations that coordinate the International Waterbird Census (IWC) nationally. The IWC covers over 12,000 sites annually in the Agreement Area and mobilises many tens of thousands of participants.
Population trends describe how a population is changing over time. Trends are based on repeated counts of the same areas. In the context of AEWA, short-term trends are calculated for the last 10 years and long-term trends for the last three generations of the species. In the short-term, 41% of all AEWA populations are decreasing, 29% are stable and 30% are increasing. Long-term trends are similar: 43%, 23% and 34% respectively.

Figure 3. Short-term and long-term trends of AEWA populations.
REGIONAL AND TAXONOMIC DIFFERENCES

The proportion of decreasing populations is particularly high in the Central and Southwest Asian, Eastern and Southern African and Sub-Saharan African flyways. In contrast, the proportion of increasing populations is particularly high in Western and Central Africa, the Atlantic part of the Palearctic and in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, Sahelian and East Atlantic flyways.

Amongst the waterbird families with more than 10 AEWA populations, more than half of the populations of Rails, Gallinules and Coots, Cranes, Sandpipers, Snipes and Phalaropes are decreasing.

Figure 4. Long-term population trends by flyways. Upper row, from left to right: Western Palearctic flyways: Atlantic, Black Sea and Mediterranean, Central and Southwest Asian. Middle row from left to right: Intercontinental flyways: East Atlantic, Sahelian, West Asia – East African. Bottom row, from left to right: Afrotropical flyways: Western and Central African, Sub-Saharan, Eastern and Southern African.

Key
■ Decreasing
■ Stable/Fluctuating
■ Increasing

The Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) is a representative of those wader species that decline primarily because of the intensive agriculture affecting their reproductive success at their European breeding grounds © Hans Overduin.
A ‘Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework’ is being formulated under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at the time of compiling this publication. Although the exact wording is still to be decided at CBD’s 15th Conference of the Parties, it is likely that reducing the number of threatened species will feature amongst the targets of this Framework.

The various categories of threatened species (Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered) represent an increasing risk of extinction as described by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

AEWA is uniquely positioned to contribute to achieving this target for migratory waterbirds in the Agreement Area:

- Globally Threatened and Near Threatened species of the IUCN Red List are specifically recognised in the categorisation of waterbird populations in Annex 3 of the Agreement;
- It has effective mechanisms to develop and coordinate implementation of international single and multi-Species Action Plans by Range States and other stakeholders.

Based on the 2020 IUCN Red List, 33 (13%) of the AEWA species are globally threatened. Four are Critically Endangered, nine are Endangered and 20 are Vulnerable globally. Another 19 species are Near Threatened. The number of globally threatened species has increased by two in the last three years by listing the Black-legged Kittiwake and the Audouin’s Gull as Vulnerable. One Critically Endangered species, the Northern Bald Ibis, a species with an AEWA Single Species Action Plan and an International Working Group, was downgraded from Critically Endangered to Endangered as a result of long-term sustained conservation efforts in Morocco. Two Near Threatened species, the African Oystercatcher and the White-eyed Gull, were downgraded to Least Concern.

Figure 5. Global Red List status of species listed on Annex 2 of AEWA.
COORDINATED CONSERVATION RESPONSE FOR RED-LISTED SPECIES

All Critically Endangered species and eight out of nine Endangered species listed on AEWA have Species Action Plans. 60% of the Vulnerable and Near Threatened species are also subject to Action Plans. The AEWA Technical Committee has already prioritised the remaining 17 species for action planning.

AEWA International Species Working and Expert Groups

The establishment of inter-governmental AEWA International Species Working Groups (ISWG) is foreseen for prioritised AEWA Species Action and Management Plans. International Species Working Groups are convened by the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat involving government representatives, national experts appointed by the governments as well as observer organisations. Currently, nine ISWGs cover 23 AEWA species. AEWA International Species Expert Groups (ISEG) are set up for other species with AEWA Species Action Plans. Currently, two ISEGs are active focusing on the NW European population of the Bewick’s Swan and on the Eurasian Spoonbill.

ISWG for the Lesser White-fronted Goose

The Lesser White-fronted Goose ISWG covers the entire range of the two populations listed under the Agreement. The ISWG has been coordinated by the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat with financial support from Norway. Range States have worked together from the breeding areas in Norway through the staging sites in the Baltic and Hungary to the wintering areas in Greece as well as from Russia through staging areas in Central Asia to the wintering areas of the Western main population in Iran and Iraq. They have collaborated on implementing the provisions of the Species Action Plan concerning habitat improvement, control of Red Fox, protection from disturbance and accidental shooting, monitoring and awareness raising with support from the EU LIFE+ Nature funding and the government of Norway. As a result of this sustained flyway-scale coordinated effort, the breeding population in Norway has increased from less than 40 individuals in 2008 (when the Species Action Plan implementation commenced) to over 100 individuals in 2019.

International Multi-species Action Plan for the Benguela Current Upwelling System Coastal Seabirds

This is the first Multi-species Action Plan produced under AEWA, covering the globally Endangered African Penguin, Bank and Cape Cormorants, the Vulnerable Cape Gannet and the Near Threatened Crowned Cormorant, Damara Tern and African Oystercatcher. Since the drafting of the Plan, the latter species has been downgraded to Least Concern. The Plan also includes two globally Least Concern species with AEWA Table 1 Category 1 populations: the Caspian and the Greater Crested Terns. The Plan addresses threats that affect most of these species, in particular the management of fish stocks, marine pollution, displacement and predation at colonies.
THREATS TO WATERBIRD POPULATIONS

Threats are actual or potential drivers of negative population change. Direct threats are the proximate human activities or processes that impact the population trend, and impair one or more attributes of the population – typically its survival and/or reproductive success.

In total, some threat information is available for 192 of the 255 AEWA-listed species, with comprehensive threat assessments of 50 species listed as Globally Threatened or Near Threatened. The latter group was comprehensively assessed in 2016, all 78 seabird species were assessed in 2018 and 82 other AEWA species were assessed in 2008.

A total of 38 different threats were reported for AEWA species based on the IUCN threat classification system. Hunting and trapping, habitat shifting and alteration, invasive alien species, and dams and water management were recorded for most species, although the threats considered to be having the greatest impacts on Globally Threatened or Near Threatened species were annual and perennial non-timber crops, hunting and trapping, and fishing and harvesting aquatic resources.

Figure 6. Major threats to AEWA species (Threat impact assessment is available only for the AEWA species categorised as Globally or Near Threatened).
Most hunting and trapping is intentional use with the species being targeted.

American Mink and Botulism are the predominant invasive aliens and diseases recorded.

Both dams and water abstraction (surface and ground water) are known and recognised threats.

Agro-industrial farming is the predominant threat within the annual and perennial non-timber crop category.
AEWA STRATEGIC PLAN 2019–2027: HOW FAR ARE WE IN ACHIEVING ITS OBJECTIVES?

The AEWA Strategic Plan for 2019–2027 has six purpose level indicators designed to measure the achievements of its objectives:

• P1. At least 75% of AEWA populations with known trends show a stable or increasing trend;

• P2. At least 55% of ‘priority’ populations (as established in 2018) show a stable or increasing trend;

• P3. At least 60% of populations with unfavourable conservation status in 2018 show a stable or increasing trend;

• P4. Percentage of harvested AEWA populations with known trends that show a stable or increasing trend;

• P5. At least 70% of AEWA populations highly dependent on site networks with known trends show a stable or increasing trend;

• P6. At least 70% of dispersed AEWA populations with known trends show a stable or increasing trend.

The AEWA Strategic Plan for 2019–2027 was adopted at the 7th Session of the Meeting of the Parties to AEWA © Aydin Bahramilouian/AEWA.
Top right: Grey Crowned-crane (*Balearica regulorum*) © Shawn Olesen.
Center right: Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) © Szabolcs Nagy/Rubicon.
Bottom left: Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) © Szabolcs Nagy/Rubicon.
Bottom right: Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) © Szabolcs Nagy/Rubicon.
In order to reverse the negative changes in the status of waterbirds mentioned in the previous chapter, AEWA needs to strongly enhance the implementation of its Strategic Plan for 2019–2027. The Targets that require particular attention are listed below.

**Objective 1**
To strengthen species conservation and recovery and reduce causes of unnecessary mortality.

1.1. Parties to review existing national legislation against the latest version of the Agreement text and enact appropriate legislative measures to align domestic law with AEWA provisions;
1.2. Develop new Species Action Plans for priority populations, implement existing ones, develop flyway-scale projects to support implementation;
1.3. Develop science-based conservation and management guidance for other prioritised populations in unfavourable conservations status;
1.4. Further improve the quality of waterbird population status assessments focusing particularly on setting up breeding bird monitoring schemes in Africa and Central and Southwest Asia as well as collecting and reporting on drivers of population change.

**Objective 2**
To ensure that any use and management of migratory waterbird populations is sustainable across their flyways.

2.1. Establish and/or maintain adequate systems for making realistic estimates of all forms of waterbird harvest, including illegal taking, at national level and provide waterbird harvest data to the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat;
2.2. Review existing domestic legislation against the provisions of the latest version of the AEWA Action Plan taking into account any amendments adopted by the MOP, put in place process for enacting appropriate legislative measures to align domestic law with AEWA provisions, take measures to reduce and eliminate illegal taking;
2.4. Undertake a rapid assessment of sustainability of harvest of declining quarry populations and identify priority species for applying adaptive harvest management coordinated at flyway-level and develop adaptive harvest management programmes as part of Species Action and Management Plans for an initial set of priority species.

**Objective 3**
To establish and sustain a coherent and comprehensive flyway network of protected areas and other sites, managed to maintain – and where necessary restore – their national and international importance for migratory waterbird populations.
3.1. Update the Critical Site Network Tool with the reviewed site inventory and revised site information communicated by Parties;
3.2. Parties assess and report on the status of their flyway network sites;
3.3. Parties that have not already done so develop and implement national strategies/plans for the protection and management of flyway network sites and/or ensure that such measures are incorporated into existing national strategies/plans;
3.4. Parties that have not already done so take measures to integrate flyway network sites into their water and land-use planning/decisions.

Objective 4
To ensure there is sufficient quantity and quality of habitat in the wider environment for achieving and maintaining favourable conservation status of migratory waterbird populations.
4.1. Conduct Agreement-level assessment of the status of principal waterbird habitats in the wider environment and develop an action plan taking into account regional and subregional differences in key habitat types and threats/drivers;
4.2. Establish and/or strengthen AEWA’s engagement with key policy mechanisms identified in the habitat action plan;
4.3. Parties identify priority measures required to maintain or increase the extent and quality of waterbird habitats in the wider environment;
4.4. Implement at least three new waterbird habitat management restoration projects in the wider environment supported by CEPA activities.

Objective 5
To ensure and strengthen the knowledge, capacity, recognition, awareness and resources required for the Agreement to achieve its conservation objectives.
5.1. Establish partnerships and initiate joint research programmes, with clear timeframes for delivery, to fill priority knowledge gaps by MOP10, where feasible;
5.2. Enhance efforts for recruiting new Contracting Parties in particular along the West Asia / East African flyway;
5.3. Establish national and regional capacity building initiatives to address priority capacity gaps and establish criteria to assess implementation capacity at subregional level.
AEWA Plan of Action for Africa (PoAA) 2019–2027

The AEWA Plan of Action for Africa (PoAA) is the operational guideline for the implementation of the AEWA Strategic Plan in the African region. It places particular emphasis on enhanced national capacity for the implementation of AEWA in Africa. Another focus of the PoAA is on collaboration with partners, including cross-sectoral cooperation at the national level as well as south-south and north-south collaboration at flyway level and seeks to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, the Strategic Plan for Migratory Species and the Ramsar Strategic Plan.
## GLOSSARY

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>AEWA</td>
<td>Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>Convention on Biological Diversity</td>
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<td>CEPA</td>
<td>Communication, Education and Public Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU LIFE+</td>
<td>EU Programme for the Environment and Climate Action</td>
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<td>ISEG</td>
<td>AEWA International Species Expert Groups</td>
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<td>ISWG</td>
<td>AEWA International Species Working Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUCN</td>
<td>International Union for Conservation of Nature</td>
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<td>IWC</td>
<td>International Waterbird Census</td>
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