Bird conservation in Germany: On the way to the 2020 target?

A critical progress review

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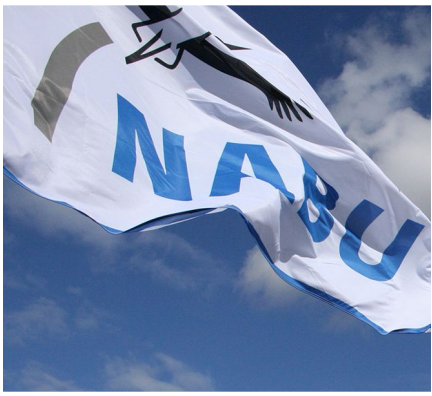

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Target 1 of the European Union's 2020 Biodiversity Strategy is to halt the deterioration of the status of all species and habitats covered by EU nature legislation (birds and habitats directives), and by 2020 to achieve a significant and measurable improvement of their status. By 2015, a concise set of up-to-date population and trend data for all EU bird species has been reported by all member states and summarised and published by the European Commission. This information paper specifically looks at the national bird data reported from Germany in the context of the above EU target and the data reported for the whole EU. It points out where conservation efforts are effective and where improvements are urgently needed.

Overall distance to target

In respect of bird species, target 1 of the EU Biodiversity Strategy states that in 2020 compared to current assessments (from 2004) 50% more species assessments show a secure or improved status. As every member state has to contribute to achieving this target, it has to be assumed that the same target also applies on a member state level. Figure 1 shows the degree of progress made to date towards this target on EU level as well as in Germany.

The EU assessment uses a baseline of the year 2004 ("Birds in the EU") and judges the current state using the new 2015 EU Red List of Birds and the trend information of the national reports according to Art. 12 of the birds directive, that had been submitted by all member states in 2014. In 2004, 52% of all bird species were "secure" in the EU. From this, the target of 78% secure or improving species is derived. In 2015, the share of "secure" species has remained unchanged at 52%. The remaining species are "non-secure". Of these, 8% of the total number of species show improving population trends and therefore contribute to achieving the target. With 60%, the target of 78% remains far away. Furthermore, 20% of all species are judged to be "non-secure" and continue to have a deteriorating population trend, thus more than offsetting the 8% of improvements and making it unlikely the overall target of 78% can be achieved in the near future without additional efforts.

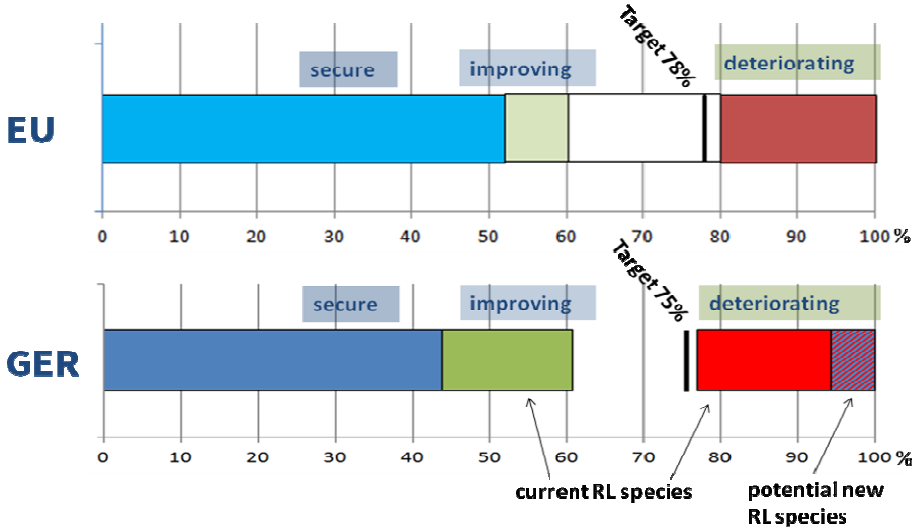

Fig. 1: Progress to the 2020 target for birds in the EU and in Germany: proportion of species that are secure or improving. On the right side, for comparison the proportion of species that are non-secure and deteriorating is shown. The black line shows the respective target for secure or improving species. Sources: BirdLife 2015: Mid-term assessment of EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy (EU data), own analysis NABU/DDA (Germany data).

For Germany, the national red list of birds of 2007 containing 260 species of breeding birds has been used as a baseline. In this list 50% of all bird species have been classified as "secure" (i.e. not threatened or near-threatened), resulting in a target of 75% secure or improving species. Information about the current conservation state has been derived of the German national report under the birds directive submitted in 2014. Because an up-to-date red list for Germany has not yet been prepared, the current status of species has been assumed to be the same as in the 2007 red list, unless the reported 25-year trend of formerly "secure" species is declining by more than 20%. In these cases it is likely that the species will be classified as threatened or near-threatened ("non-secure") in the upcoming red list and have been treated as "non-secure" (potential new red list species) for this assessment.

Today, 44% of species are still "secure", additionally 17% of species are "non-secure" but have improved. Some of these species therefore may be judged "secure" in the next red list. Together, 61% of species are "secure" or improving, still short of the target of 75%. At the same time, 17% of all species are "non-secure" and continue to have a deteriorating population trend, and 6% of secure species are likely to be classified as non-secure in the future due to their decreasing trends. The deteriorations of together 23% therefore exceed the improvements of 17%. Although the achievements are marginally better than for the EU as a whole, Germany is equally unlikely to achieve its overall target of 75% in the near future without considerable additional efforts.

The birds directive is making a difference

The EU birds directive protects all species of wild birds. But two groups of birds are singled out: those listed in Annex 1 of the directive and migratory bird species. For these species special protection measures have to be implemented and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have to be identified and protected. As these species "trigger" the identification of SPAs, they are collectively called "trigger species". By way of convention, they include all Annex 1 species and all migratory species that are included as

threatened in the red list. For Germany there are 101 trigger species (about 40% of all species).

Figure 2 shows the shares of species with increasing, stable and decreasing population trend over the last 12 years (1998-2009, "short-term trend") for all species in Germany and for trigger species only. While only 27% of species overall have a positive short-term trend, 40% of the trigger species have increased. Similar results can also be shown for the 25-year trend ("long-term trend") and for the whole of the EU, proving that species targeted especially by the birds directive are doing better than other bird species and better than the same species outside the EU.

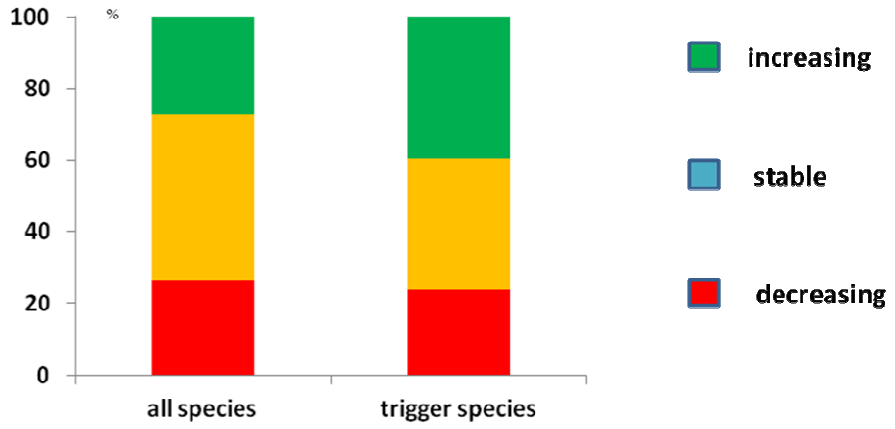

Fig. 2: 12-year (1998-2009) population trends of German breeding bird species, on the left for all species and on the right for 101 trigger species (Annex 1 and threatened migratory species) only. The share of increasing species is significantly larger amongst the trigger species. Source: Sudfeldt C. et al, 2014: Vögel in Deutschland 2013

These results are clear evidence that the targeted provisions for species and site protection of the birds directive lead to improved conservation results even if the overall target for 2020 has not yet been approached.

Saving the rare, losing the common?

The flipside of the coin, however, is shown by Figure 3:

When analysing the share of increasing, stable or decreasing species separately for rare and common species it becomes obvious that the rare species are faring better, while the common species are showing a very bleak picture: While 52% of the rarest species are increasing, this is true for only 5% of the most common species. While only 17% of the rare species are declining, this figure is 27% for the common species.

The rare species are likely to be included in Annex 1 of the birds directive and to be trigger species, while the common species are unlikely to be covered by these special provisions. This result, which also holds for the level of the whole EU, shows that the birds directive is effective where rare species can be specially targeted by species and site protection measures, but so far the directive fails to have a positive effect on widespread birds of the wider landscape ("normal landscape"), presumably because other

policies, like the Common Agricultural Policy, have a prevailing impact outside specially protected areas.

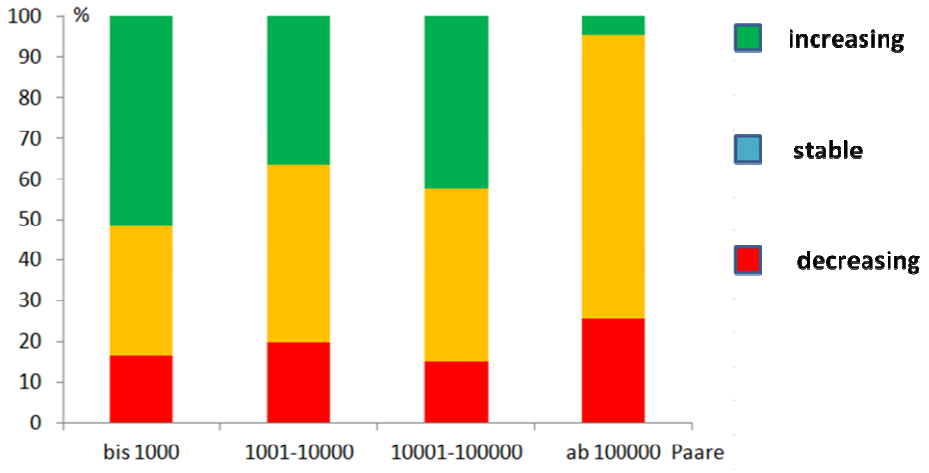

Fig. 3: 25-year (1985-2009) population trends of German breeding bird species split into groups according to the overall number of breeding pairs in Germany. The rarest species with less than 1000 breeding pairs are found in the left column, the most common species with >100,000 pairs in the right column. The share of increasing species is significantly smaller amongst the common species, while the share of decreasing species is bigger. Source: Sudfeldt C. et al, 2014: Vögel in Deutschland 2013

Steering away from the target

Especially worrying are the conclusions from Figure 4, comparing the 25-year population trends (1985-2009, long-term trend) of German breeding bird species with the 12-year trends (1998-2009, short-term trend).

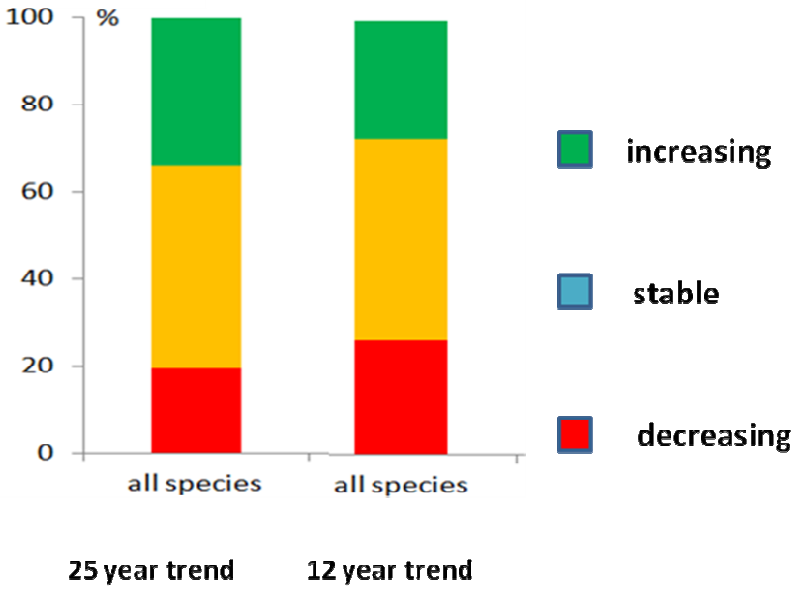

Fig. 4: 25-year (1985-2009, long-term trend) population trends of German breeding bird species compared to the 12-year trends (1998-2009, short-term trend): The trends within the second half of the reported period (short-term trends) show significantly more decreasing and less increasing species. Source: Sudfeldt C. et al, 2014: Vögel in Deutschland 2013

The trends within the second half of the reported period (short-term trends) show significantly more decreasing and less increasing species. This difference is also evident when comparing short- and long-term trends of rare or common species and of trigger species and non-trigger species. In every case, the short-term trends are worse than the long-term trends. These findings are a clear and worrying hint, that instead of speeding up towards achieving the 2020 target, Germany is at present rather steering away from the target.

In Germany, another index is being produced that illustrates the same development, the bird population index that forms part of the set of indices of the German National Sustainability Strategy, shown in Figure 5.

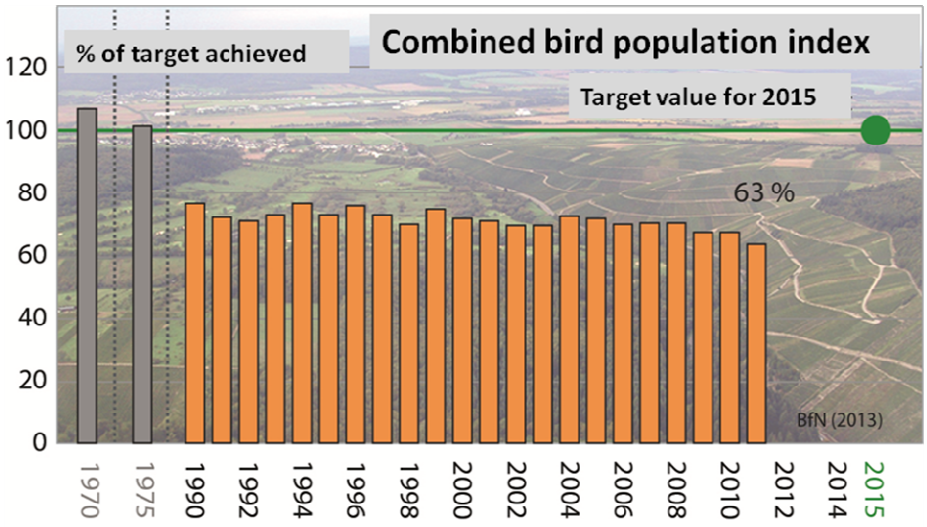

Fig. 5: Combined bird population index of the German national sustainability strategy, composed out of several part-indicators for six main habitat types. In this strategy, a target value approximately corresponding to bird numbers in the year 1975 has been set as target to be achieved by 2015. Apart from the fact, that the most recent available index is far from the target value, it is especially worrying that there is a clear trend away from the target. Source: Sudfeldt C. et al, 2014: Vögel in Deutschland 2013

Not only is the last available index value of 63% far away from the target value to be achieved in 2015, but also there is a significant trend away from the target value. This trend appears especially clear in the years 2008-2011, which hints to the fact that the deteriorations shown in fig. 4 and including only population trends until 2009 have in fact become even more pronounced in the following years.

The main driver: decline of farmland birds

The combined bird population index for Germany, shown in figure 5 is most strongly influenced by the partial indicator for farmland birds, which contributes 52% to the value of the combined index according to the German land surface covered by farmland. The other 42% of the value of the combined index are contributed by the other five partial bird indices for forests, settlements, inland waters, coastal habitats and alpine habitats. None of the latter partial indices is showing a significant increasing or decreasing trend. Therefore, the negative development of the combined index is almost exclusively driven by the farmland bird index, which is rapidly deteriorating. It has decreased from around 75% of the target value in 1994 and again in 2000 to only 56% in 2011.

A similar result is achieved when the population trends of all German breeding birds are analysed separately for every major habitat type. The share of declining bird species is far larger in open farmland habitats than in any other type of habitat.

Three typical examples of declining farmland birds refer to species formerly considered very common and ubiquitous: Skylarks have decline by 34% over the past 25 years. Lapwings have declined by 75% in the same period and grey partridges even by 94%.

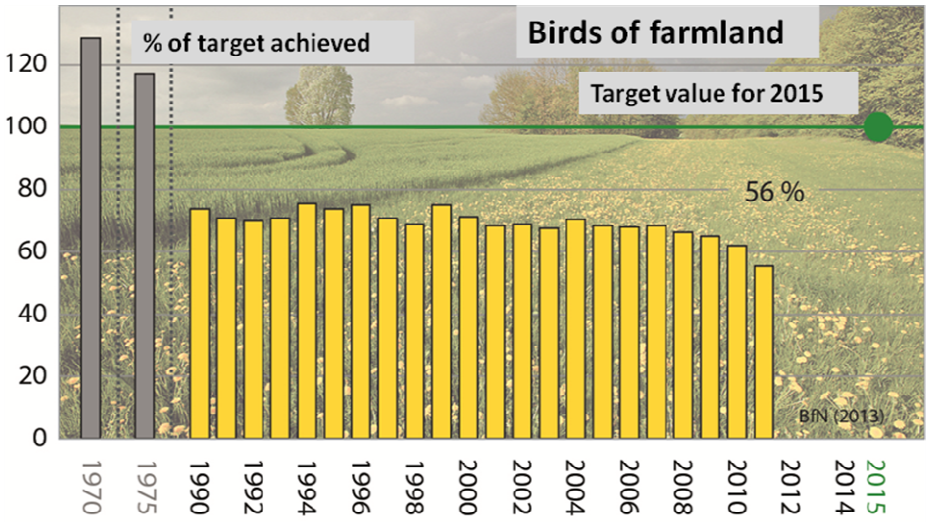

Fig. 6: Bird population index of the German national sustainability strategy, partial indicator for farmland habitats, which is contributing to the combined index shown in fig. 5. The indicators for the six main habitat types are weighted according to their share of the country's land surface. As 52% of Germany is classified as agricultural land, the farmland index is contributing most to the combined index. Source: Sudfeldt C. et al, 2014: Vögel in Deutschland 2013

Lapwing

Grey Partridge

Skylark

Conservation effort is paying off

While bird conservation has apparently failed to date in the wider landscape, the reporting data to the birds directive has shown that targeted protection of certain species can be effective.

A NABU study in 2014 has revealed another promising fact: The more conservation staff is employed to protect certain species in certain areas, the better the conservation results become: The study compared the success of conservation measures in 75 breeding sites of lowland meadow-breeding waders. The amount of conservation staff employed per area was found to be a significant factor contributing to the success of conservation work for lapwings at the sites. If more than 0.1 full-time equivalent conservation staff member was employed for 1 km^2 of protected area, this would guarantee that the conservation results are better than in the German average. A similar, albeit not fully significant, relationship was also found for the conservation of black-tailed godwits and curlews.

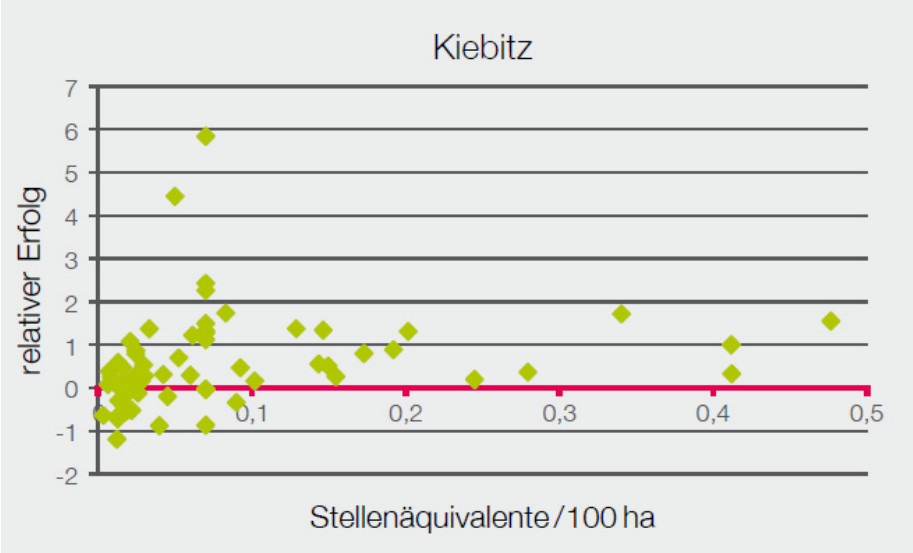

Fig. 7: Relationship between relative success in the conservation of lapwings in 75 lowland meadow-breeding wader sites and the number of conservation staff (in full-time staff equivalents per 100 ha) employed. A significant correlation shows that more staff leads to better conservation success. Source: Hötker H., Leuschner C. (2014): Naturschutz in der Agrarlandschaft am Scheideweg

Conclusions

- The EU as well as Germany are not on the way to achieve target 1 of the EU 2020 biodiversity strategy for birds. As more threatened bird species are declining than improving and because short-term trends are significantly worse than the long-term trends there even is a trend away from the target. The situation in Germany is only marginally better than in the EU average.

- Still, the recent bird population data reported by Germany and all other EU member states show that species especially targeted by the EU birds directive are faring much better than other species. This proves that the birds directive has a significant positive effect.

- While rare birds are doing fairly well, there are pronounced losses amongst widespread and common birds, especially of farmland habitats. Here, the provisions of the birds directive have not been able to be effective as they are overridden by other sectoral policies, like the Common Agricultural Policy.

Action needed

- Full implementation of the EU birds directive, especially of the provisions referring to the protection and management of Special Protection Areas for Birds (SPAs) and in the wider landscape, where the directive also applies.

- A real ecological reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to finally stop the demise of farmland birds. Such reform requires the obligatory introduction of effective ecological priority areas and well-financed, well-targeted and competitive agri-environment schemes.

- A new financing system for nature conservation that guarantees sufficient funds for necessary conservation measures and reduces subsidies for activities that are harmful for birds.