

## Turtle Dove to be monitored by the Rare Breeding Bird Panel

For generations, the sound of the Turtle Dove has been an iconic backdrop to summer. Yet the species has been lost across much of its range in the UK, and numbers have declined noticeably. Indeed, it is the most rapidly declining of all breeding bird species in Britain.

Atlas data show that more than half the 10-km squares occupied in 1968–72 had been lost by 2008–11, with the population withdrawing towards East Anglia and Kent (Balmer *et al.* 2013). The BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey data for 1995–2017 (fig. 1) show a statistically significant decline in the numbers of Turtle Doves of -94%, with the most recent 10-year trend (2007–17) being -83%, also statistically significant (Harris *et al.* 2019). These trends, unless halted or reversed, would bring the species close to extinction in the UK within the next two decades. There has been widespread moderate decline across Europe since 1980 (PECBMS 2017) and the species is now classed by IUCN as globally threatened (Vulnerable).

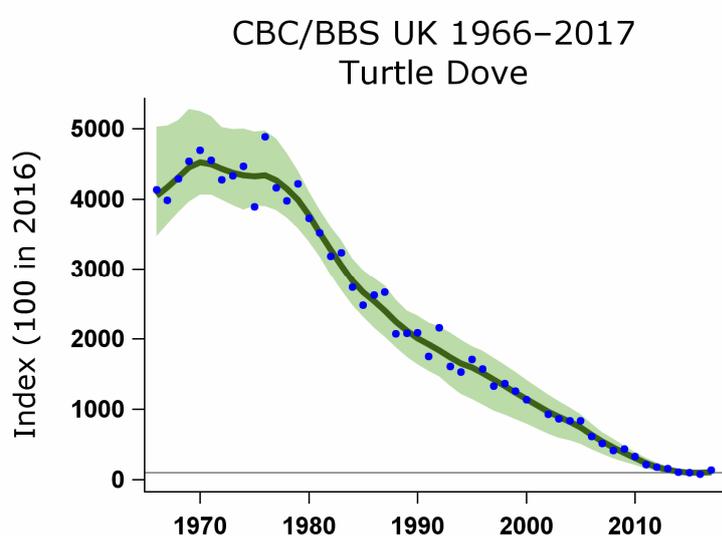


Figure 1. Numbers of breeding Turtle Doves have been in steep decline since the 1980s (source: BTO/JNCC BirdTrends Report (Woodward *et al.* 2018)).

The most recent UK estimate of numbers is of about 3,600 pairs in 2016 – largely restricted to the east and southeast of England. Turtle Doves formerly bred in Wales and south-east Scotland but they are rare in these countries now. A review of the current status of Turtle Dove by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel in 2018 indicated that they now breed in around 25 counties, from Yorkshire in the north to Kent in the south, and west to the Severn estuary, but in the west of England and the Midlands fewer than ten pairs breed in each county. Around 85% of the population now occurs in just six English counties.

Although the 2016 estimate was of c. 3,600 pairs, we know that Turtle Dove numbers have continued to decline in the two summers since then and there are grounds to suppose that in 2019 there could be as few as 2,000 pairs, or even fewer.

In response to the steep decline, Turtle Doves are subject to concerted conservation actions both nationally and internationally. In England, a range of measures are seeking to improve their habitat, whilst the UK is engaging internationally to reduce the numbers shot on migration in southern

Europe. The declines are caused by a reduction in the annual productivity which is largely related to a reduction in the number of nesting attempts. This is thought to be driven by reduced food availability due to increased herbicide use. Mortality on the wintering grounds (due to habitat deterioration) and on migration (particularly through hunting) could be important as well.

With such a severe long-term decline, it is becoming increasingly important to know where Turtle Doves are still breeding. To assist with this, the Rare Breeding Birds Panel – which collates records of the UK’s rarest breeding birds – is now seeking all records of Turtle Dove in order to track the population, and to help target conservation actions to where they will be most effective. Operation Turtle Dove ([www.operationturtledove.org](http://www.operationturtledove.org)), a partnership between the RSPB, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust and Natural England, is working with farmers, landowners and the wider public to save this species from extinction.

The Panel urges all birdwatchers to record any Turtle Dove seen this summer, and in the years to come, and to report these to the Panel via the local county bird recorder; the online BirdTrack bird recording system ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)) can be used for this. Any casual record of Turtle Dove is useful, but especially so if recorded as part of a complete list, because that gives a measure of how frequently they are recorded across the wider countryside.

Appendix 1 gives some guidelines on recording Turtle Doves to maximise the value of sightings. Birders can make a real contribution to the conservation of Turtle Doves by submitting their records of Turtle Doves, and by engaging with those individuals who have the ability to make changes on the ground.

## **Appendix 1: Recording Guidelines**

### *Timing:*

Turtle Doves arrive from late April onwards and most will be on territory by mid-May. Early morning, ideally within two hours after sunrise, is the best time to detect the gentle purring song of Turtle Doves.

### *Where to look:*

Open countryside with areas of tall, dense wood vegetation, which could be tall dense scrub (on its own, or at the margins of woodland), tall, wide hedgerows or thicket-stage forestry. Turtle Doves generally occur at low elevations, but in forest edge habitat may occur up to around 250m asl. It is suspected that birds nesting in woodland margins or young forestry may be under-recorded.

### *What to look for and record:*

Listen out for singing (“purring”) Turtle Doves, in suitable breeding habitat; these birds can be recorded in BirdTrack with the breeding evidence category of “Possible Breeding”. Turtle Doves are territorial, so a repeat visit a week or so later will provide valuable information that the bird is still present in the same area; in BirdTrack this can be recorded as “Probable Breeding” as permanent territory is presumed. Getting evidence of confirmed breeding of Turtle Dove can be difficult; recently fledged young may be seen, though as it is often not clear how far the birds may have travelled from their breeding site, care needs to be taken in the use of this evidence code – it should only be used if the observer can be sure the young birds have fledged within 1km of the sighting, which requires regular observation of a site through the breeding season. Birds seen entering, or exiting, areas of dense wood vegetation (rather than just sitting on top and singing) is a very strong

indication of nesting. Incubating birds are highly sensitive and should not be disturbed but the following behaviour is highly indicative of an occupied nest. The male will perch close to nest site, gives a soft purr, the female then comes out and the male goes in. The female often then sits nearby preening for a short while. This changeover typically occurs in the mid-morning with the reverse process in mid to late afternoon.

#### *How to submit your records:*

RBBP collates records from the County Recorder Network (<https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders>), so please submit your records to your local bird recorder. You can do this through the usual channels such as BirdTrack ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)), club website etc. We are also seeking records from 2018.

#### **References**

Balmer, D.E., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B.J., Swann, R.L., Downie, I.S. & Fuller, R.J. (eds). 2013. *Bird Atlas 2007–11: the breeding and wintering birds of Britain and Ireland*. BTO Books, Thetford.

Harris, S.J., Massimino, D., Eaton, M.A., Gillings, S., Noble, D.G., Balmer, D.E., Pearce-Higgins, J.W. & Woodcock, P. 2019. *The Breeding Bird Survey 2018*. BTO Research Report 717. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.

PECBMS. 2017. *Trends of common birds in Europe, 2017 update*. EBCC, Prague.

Woodward, I.D., Massimino, D., Hammond, M.J., Harris, S.J., Leech, D.I., Noble, D.G., Walker, R.H., Barimore, C., Dadam, D., Eglington, S.M., Marchant, J.H., Sullivan, M.J.P., Baillie, S.R. & Robinson, R.A. (2018) *BirdTrends 2018: trends in numbers, breeding success and survival for UK breeding birds*. Research Report 708. BTO, Thetford. [www.bto.org/birdtrends](http://www.bto.org/birdtrends)

#### **Further sources of information**

Operation Turtle Dove: <https://www.operationturtledove.org>

International Action Plan:

<http://www.trackingactionplans.org/SAPTT/downloadDocuments/openDocument?idDocument=59>

Rare Breeding Birds Panel recording guidelines for Turtle Dove:

[http://www.rbbp.org.uk/downloads/sp\\_guidelines\\_Turtle\\_Dove.pdf](http://www.rbbp.org.uk/downloads/sp_guidelines_Turtle_Dove.pdf)