

EUROPEAN TURTLE DOVE

SCIENTIFIC NAME: **Streptopelia turtur**

CONSERVATION STATUS: **Vulnerable (VU)**

FACT FILE

- CLASS: AVES
- ORDER: COLUMBIFORMES
- FAMILY: COLUMBIDAE
- MIGRATORY SPECIES
- HUNTED FOR FOOD
- NOT MUCH BIGGER THAN A BLACKBIRD
- TIMID AND FLIGHTY
- DISTINCTIVE PURRING CALL
- LENGTH: 26-28CM
- WINGSPAN: 47-53CM
- WEIGHT: 130-180G

Each year, around **25 million birds** are illegally killed across the Mediterranean – a region where many, such as the declining European Turtle Dove, are undertaking already perilous migrations. The killing occurs throughout the Mediterranean, but it is not evenly distributed. The black spots besmirch Italy, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, which collectively, illegally slaughter 16 million birds every year. Not far behind, with half a million or more unlawful deaths, are Cyprus, France, Croatia, Greece and Libya.

Meanwhile, the mortality rate – the number of birds killed unlawfully per unit of land area – reaches its terrifying peak in Malta. On this small island of just 316 km², almost 350 birds are killed per square kilometre. Every single year.

That shocking final statistic is why I'll never visit Malta.



Description: Dainty dove with chestnut-fringed wing feathers, grey head, pink breast and white-edged black tail.

Distribution: Breeds in much of Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Winters mainly in the Sahel of Africa.

Ecology: Breeds in a variety of woodland types; feeds on agricultural land, mainly eating seeds on the ground. Migratory, flying up to 700km at a time. Song is a distinctive purring.

Threats: Transformation of agricultural land, which reduces both food supply and availability of nesting habitat, hunting and disease.

WHEN DOVES CRY

More than one million European Turtle Doves are still illegally killed each year.

Along from its wintering grounds in Africa to breeding sites across Europe, Unlawful killing along its migration route constitutes another nail in it's coffin. Around 600,000 birds die annually in the Mediterranean alone. The largest number are killed in Libya, Syria and Greece.

For a bird treasured in art and culture for millennia – from pulling the chariot of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, to multiple cameos in Shakespeare's works, plus one in a reading at Prince Harry's wedding – this is both disconcertingly ironic and deeply sad.

The species' population crash stems from the interplay of hunting, both lawful and not, plus the loss of foraging and nesting sites due to agricultural change and disease.

This fatal combination renders it one of the world's most threatened long-distance migratory birds.

Hunting Turtle-doves during their breeding season is forbidden by EU law. Despite this, the species has declined by 30% throughout Europe in the last 20 years and in some countries by as much as 90% in the same period. Culprit countries talk of zero tolerance to this persecution and quote legislation against this illegal slaughter. The reality is that fines and punishments are not severe enough to deter hunters and in some places, they are even being reduced. Birds are still not safe to fly throughout the Mediterranean. Despite its small size, Malta is a major offender and recently lifted the Spring ban on hunting. This will impact even more on Turtle Doves' breeding populations.



If we continue to ignore the problem this iconic species could be lost forever. Both Birdlife International and the RSPB are leading the fight against the illegal hunting. It is not a simple solution as in some impoverished countries, migrating birds are a welcome food source for poverty stricken families. Everybody has a right to eat but it is the needless slaughter for sport or just the fun of it, that needs addressing through education.



The Turtle Dove's gentle purr is an evocative sound of summer, but has become increasingly rare following rapid and sustained population declines.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS THAT HUMANS WILL EVER LEARN?

5 billion to none if we can't learn from past mistakes.

An example is the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon. In under a hundred years of Europeans settling in North America their estimated population of 5 billion birds were wiped out due to hunting.