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### 2017 Red List update for birds

# Seabirds starving, songbirds trapped, but conservation efforts saving pelican and kiwis

Cambridge, UK, 12 December 2017 (BirdLife International) – **overfishing and climate change are pushing seabirds such as Black-legged Kittiwake and Cape Gannet closer to extinction, according to the latest update on the conservation status of the world’s birds by BirdLife International for The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™.**

On land, the Snowy Owl is also struggling to find food in the North American Arctic. The once super-abundant Yellow-breasted Bunting could soon go extinct if illegal trapping (for food) in China is not halted. And the Kea is threatened by predation from introduced mammals, with tourists in New Zealand feeding junk food to these inquisitive parrots being a factor preventing successful conservation.

However, there is also hope, with Dalmatian Pelicans in Europe recovering thanks to artificial nesting rafts and disturbance prevention; and in New Zealand, where two species of kiwi are now less threatened thanks to dedicated control of introduced predators, egg-rearing and community work.

“Birds are well-studied and great indicators of the health of the wider environment. A species at higher risk of extinction is a worrying alarm call that action needs to be taken now. Thankfully success in kiwi and pelican conservation shows that, when well-resourced and supported, conservation efforts really do pay off.” Dr Ian Burfield, Global Science Coordinator, BirdLife International.

### [Kittiwakes struggling to breed: now globally threatened \[N Europe/N America/NE Asia\]](#)

**Overfishing and ocean changes caused by climate change have affected the availability and quality of the Black-legged Kittiwake’s (*Rissa tridactyla*) key prey species** (e.g. sandeels) during the breeding season. Without sufficient food, kittiwake colonies in the North Atlantic and Pacific are struggling to feed their chicks, causing disastrous chick survival in recent years. For the adults, exposure to other threats at sea such as bycatch in fishing gear, pollution, and hunting in the Faroe Islands and Greenland all have contributed to the dramatic declines of this seabird. Nesting kittiwake numbers have plummeted by 87% since 2000 on the Orkney and Shetland Islands, and by 96% on the Hebridean island of St Kilda. Globally, the species is thought to have declined by around 40% since the 1970s, justifying its uplisting from Least Concern to Vulnerable.

Black-legged Kittiwakes cross great swathes of the ocean to find food, including areas of the “high seas” that do not fall under the jurisdiction of any country.

“The alarming decline of the Black-legged Kittiwake and other North Atlantic and Arctic seabirds, such as Atlantic Puffin, provides a painful lesson in what happens when nations take an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ approach to conservation,” – **Marguerite Tarzia, European Marine Conservation Officer, BirdLife International.**

BirdLife has recently identified a “high seas” Important Bird & Biodiversity Area (IBA) [[link](#)] in the Mid-Atlantic that corresponds to key foraging grounds for the Black-legged Kittiwake, Atlantic Puffin and over twenty other

seabird species. This site has been proposed to the [OSPAR](#) Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic for consideration as a high seas Marine Protected Area.

### [Even gannets are starving—overfishing to blame \[southern Africa\]](#)

**Ultimate irony for seabirds famous for their greed: Cape Gannet (*Morus capensis*)**, breeding only in South Africa and Namibia, are now at higher risk of extinction due to population declines of greater than 50% since the 1950s. Overfishing of the gannet’s preferred prey in Namibia, sardine and anchovy, caused the almost complete collapse of fish stocks in the 1960s, and they have yet to recover. In South Africa, the fish stocks have shifted from the west coast to the south and east for reasons that are unclear. The result: Cape Gannets going hungry, and uplisting from Vulnerable to Endangered.

**Christina Hagen, Seabird Scientist, BirdLife South Africa**—“To make up for the lack of food, Cape Gannets have been congregating behind hake fishing vessels to eat low-nutrient discarded offcuts. Not only does this increase the risk of accidental tangling and drowning in fishing gear, but research has shown that chicks fed on this ‘junk food’ grow more slowly and have a lower chance of survival than those fed on a more natural diet.”

In the Southern Ocean, **Antipodean Albatross (*Diomedea antipodensis*) population declines** mean this ocean wanderer is uplisted from Vulnerable to Endangered. Bycatch in longline fisheries is a major threat, one which is increasing as albatrosses have to **fly further to find food**—and with more females being accidentally caught and drowned than males there is now thought to be a strong sex imbalance in the population.

### [Illegal trapping for food in China means formerly super-abundant songbird now Critically Endangered \[Asia\]](#)

**Is the Yellow-breasted Bunting (*Emberiza aureola*), now at severe risk of extinction, the next Passenger Pigeon?** Once super-abundant, Yellow-breasted Bunting has suffered frightening declines due to large-scale unchecked hunting (mainly for food). Sights of huge migrating flocks of this attractive songbird over cultivated land could soon be a thing of the past in Asia, paralleling scenes from North America in the 1800s of billion-strong flocks of Passenger Pigeon before they were hunted to extinction. Known as the “rice bird”, the Yellow-breasted Bunting is now thought to have declined by more than 80% since 2002, when it was still listed as Least Concern, and this year is uplisted from Endangered to the highest threat category, Critically Endangered. Improvements in communication and transportation have exacerbated the hunting problem, a practice made illegal in China in 1997, but which continues on the black market today.

The Hong Kong Bird Watching Society calls for immediate action to save the species and has designated 2018 as “International Yellow-breasted Bunting Awareness Year” as part of a new public campaign. Dr Ko Wing-man, former Secretary for Food and Health of Hong Kong, urges people to “Support local agriculture and stop eating Yellow-breasted Bunting”.

### [“Junk food Kea” parrot now Endangered \[Pacific\]](#)

**Whilst [two species of kiwi are recovering and have been downlisted from Vulnerable to Endangered](#)**, New Zealand’s [Bird of the Year 2017](#), the Kea (*Nestor notabilis*), does the opposite, as new information reveals it is declining rapidly enough to be uplisted to Endangered. Tourists feeding these curious alpine parrots junk food (like bread and chips) are unwittingly hampering conservation efforts to save the species from extinction.

Every year, 60% of Kea nests are devastated by introduced mammalian predators such as stoats, a figure that can rise to 99% during an episodic stoat “plague”. Using poison baits to control introduced mammals (which has proven very successful for Kiwi and other native bird species) significantly improves Kea nesting success. However, this technique cannot currently be fully implemented in Kea habitat, owing to the risk of some Kea eating the poison.

“Despite advice to the contrary, many tourists, and some locals, still feed Kea, which encourages them to try novel food. These ‘junk food Kea’ populations are then particularly susceptible to eating the poison baits that are meant to control introduced rats, stoats, possums and feral cats. One of our greatest conservation challenges is therefore to stop tourists and others from feeding Kea.” – Kevin Hackwell, Chief Conservation Advisor, Forest & Bird (BirdLife Partner in New Zealand).

### [Snowy Owl threatened by shortage of prey key threat \[North America\]](#)

**Worrying new information from the North American Arctic shows the iconic Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) population is much smaller than previously thought, and in decline.** Although trends in northern Eurasia are not known (but thought to be declining in Europe), significant populations in USA and Canada have declined by 64% since 1970, and thus globally the owl made famous by Harry Potter’s “Hedwig” jumps from Least Concern to Vulnerable. Climate change is among a number of threats to the species, affecting snowmelt which in turn reduces availability of rodent prey. Collisions with vehicles and infrastructure are also a threat.

“Arctic biodiversity is under pressure from a number of stressors, including climate change, so hopefully the uplisting of the Snowy Owl as a flagship species will also draw attention to wider issues in this region.” – **Dr Ian Burfield, Global Science Coordinator, BirdLife International.**

### [Lifeline for world’s largest freshwater bird \[Europe and Asia\]](#)

**The recovery of the Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) population in southeast Europe** means this species is downlisted from Vulnerable to Near Threatened, thanks to long-term conservation efforts. Numbers have increased four-fold in Europe since the 1990s, thanks to the thorough implementation of a Species Action Plan, and the protection conferred by the European Union’s Birds and Habitats Directives, which helped conserve key breeding sites in Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. This year, the pelicans on Lake Skadar, Montenegro, which nest solely on floating nesting rafts cordoned and monitored to protect the birds from disturbance, had their most successful breeding season ever, raising 60 chicks, and in Greece, populations have increased by almost 200% in under 20 years.

Whilst the large European population is increasing, the current status of the Central Asian population remains unclear, and tiny east Asian population is highly threatened. Even in Europe, this disturbance-sensitive species remains reliant on full-time conservation management for breeding success in some wetlands.

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#### **Notes to editors**

- [Photos available here](#)
- For other species changes, please see [BirdLife’s Bird Red List Roundup infographic](#).
- More information on the conservation success and downlisting of Northern Brown Kiwi and Okarito Kiwi from Endangered to Vulnerable: [Stars of the Red List](#)
- More information on [Yellow-breasted Bunting and the Passenger Pigeon](#)
- [Video about Yellow-breasted Bunting](#)
- Video about [Dalmatian Pelican conservation at Lake Skadar](#), Montenegro

#### **Contact**

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## **Global figures for the 2017 IUCN Red List for birds**

Worldwide, over one-quarter (26%) of the 238 bird species reassessed for the latest Red List update have been uplisted to higher threat categories, but 28% of these bird species have been downgraded to a lower threat category. [BirdLife's Bird Red List Roundup infographic](#).

Of the total of 11,122 bird species currently recognised by BirdLife International and IUCN:

156 species have gone **Extinct** since the year 1500 – there is no reasonable doubt that the last individual has died.

Five species are **Extinct in the Wild**, surviving only in captivity.

222 species are **Critically Endangered**, of which 21 are Possibly Extinct and one is Possibly Extinct in the Wild. Critically Endangered species are considered to be facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.

461 species are **Endangered**, meaning that they have a very high risk of extinction in the wild.

786 species are **Vulnerable**, having a high risk of extinction in the wild.

Together, species in the three categories of Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable are referred to as globally threatened. **Around 13%, or one in eight, of all extant bird species are currently listed as globally threatened.**

*In addition:*

- 1,017 species are **Near Threatened** – these are close to qualifying for, or likely to qualify for a threatened category in the near future.
- 8,417 species are **Least Concern** – they are not currently thought to be close to qualifying for listing in any of the threatened categories at the global level.
- 58 species are **Data Deficient** – there is not enough information to assess their extinction risk.

### ***About The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™***

*The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (or The IUCN Red List) is an invaluable resource to guide conservation action and policy decisions. It is a health check for our planet – a Barometer of Life. It is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant, animal and fungi species. It is based on an objective system for assessing the risk of extinction of a species should no conservation action be taken.*

*Species are assigned to one of eight categories of threat based on whether they meet criteria linked to population trend, population size and structure and geographic range. Species listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable are collectively described as 'Threatened'.*

*The IUCN Red List is not just a register of names and associated threat categories. It is a rich compendium of information on the threats to the species, their ecological requirements, where they live, and information on conservation actions that can be used to reduce or prevent extinctions. The IUCN Red List is a joint effort between IUCN and its Species Survival Commission, working with its IUCN Red List Partners – Arizona State University, BirdLife International; Botanic Gardens Conservation International; Conservation International; NatureServe; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; Sapienza University of Rome; Texas A&M University; and Zoological Society of London. [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org) and [www.birdlife.org/datazone](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone) for the bird-specific Red List.*

### **Quote on introduced species (kiwis):**

*"Invasive alien species were the major driver of bird extinctions in recent years, and continue to impact hundreds of threatened species, particularly on islands," states Dr Ian Burfield, Global Science Coordinator, BirdLife International.*

*"Fortunately, the Kiwi downlistings show that there is hope. New Zealand is a world leader in tackling invasive species, and has developed techniques that have been adapted and used successfully all over the world. What we need now are more resources to scale up these efforts and deploy them on many other islands, before it is too late."*

### **About BirdLife International**

BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership. Together we are 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide – one per country – and growing, with almost 11 million supporters, 7,000 local conservation groups and 7,400 staff. As the official Red List Authority for birds for the IUCN Red List, BirdLife coordinates the process of evaluating all of the world's bird species against the Red List categories and criteria, in order to assess their extinction risk. Find out more about BirdLife and its Preventing Extinctions Programme at: [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)

### **About IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature)**



Partnership for  
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IUCN is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. Created in 1948, IUCN is now the world's largest and most diverse environmental network, harnessing the knowledge, resources and reach of more than 1,300 Member organisations and some 10,000 experts. It is a leading provider of conservation data, assessments and analysis. Its broad membership enables IUCN to fill the role of incubator and trusted repository of best practices, tools and international standards.

IUCN provides a neutral space in which diverse stakeholders including governments, NGOs, scientists, businesses, local communities, indigenous peoples organisations and others can work together to forge and implement solutions to environmental challenges and achieve sustainable development. Working with many partners and supporters, IUCN implements a large and diverse portfolio of conservation projects worldwide. Combining the latest science with the traditional knowledge of local communities, these projects work to reverse habitat loss, restore ecosystems and improve people's well-being. [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)

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