

Researching birds at a continental scale – the role of EURING

Many conservation problems affecting bird populations need to be addressed at a Continental or Flyway scale. *Stephen Baillie* and *Wolfgang Fiedler* describe how EURING co-ordinates the efforts of many thousands of bird ringers working throughout Europe.

Throughout Europe changing agricultural practices and land use continue to have major impacts on our bird populations. Global climate change is already affecting the phenology, distributions and migrations of many bird species, and is set to have much greater effects over the coming decades. The conservation of many migratory bird populations also requires the protection of site networks and other suitable habitat along flyways under international treaties and conventions such as the Ramsar Convention, Bonn Convention and African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). To address these large-scale conservation issues we need knowledge of population dynamics and migration patterns provided by internationally co-ordinated bird ringing. The European Union for Bird Ringing (EURING) aims to provide such information by co-ordinating the activities of European bird ringing schemes.

Exchanging data between ringing schemes

It is always exciting for a ringer to catch a bird with a foreign ring, providing a personal link to the fascination of bird migration, as well as another vital data point for migration research. But once the report is sent in what happens behind the scenes to ensure that the information is exchanged between both of the ringing centres involved. A key role of EURING has been to establish the EURING data exchange code (now in its third edition), which allows Ringing Schemes to exchange information using an agreed protocol. EURING has recently developed a multi-language website that

can be used to report recoveries from across Europe (BTO News 259, p21), and trials of the use of a common European web address on bird rings are in progress.

A databank of European ringing recoveries

Back in the early 1970s, EURING recognised the great advantages of establishing a central databank from which analysts could obtain computerized sets of European ring recovery data. The Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO) has generously hosted the EURING databank (EDB) since its inception. During this period the EDB has supplied data for many research projects, including several run by the BTO. Last year an EDB index was published on the EURING Website. During the next few months the BTO will be taking over the stewardship of the EDB from NIOO, with Chris du Feu undertaking day-to-day management of the EDB on a voluntary basis. EURING is very grateful to NIOO for hosting the EDB over so many years and to the BTO for agreeing to take on this role.

Getting European ringers to work together

Another feature of EURING's activities has been the organization of co-operative ringing projects. The EURING Swallow project is the most recent example of such an initiative. The first part focussed on breeding biology and population dynamics and is now complete. The second component, co-ordinated by Fernando Spina, is a migration study, based on roost catches during late summer and autumn. It has provided much new information on migration and fattening strategies in relation to ecological barriers.

A further project that is currently under development is a European Constant Effort Sites (CES) scheme. This aims to monitor the abundance, productivity and survival of a range of species by standardized mist-netting. There are now some 15 CES schemes operating throughout Europe, nearly all of which follow the design adopted in Britain & Ireland (and also followed by the North American MAPS programme). Guidelines have been produced to promote a common approach while

allowing sufficient flexibility to accommodate conditions in different countries.

Promoting the development and use of state-of-the-art analytical methods

Think about the enormous effort that a single ringing group puts into their work and multiply it up many hundreds of times to get the total effort across Europe. It is essential to match this effort by applying state-of-the-art analytical techniques so as to obtain robust results for conservation and science. During the 1980s Pertti Saurola and the late Chris Mead had the foresight to establish a series of meetings to review the best methods of analysing such data. These EURING technical conferences have promoted much positive collaboration between statisticians and biologists, leading to methods and software that provide better insights into migration patterns and the causes of population changes.

Future plans

EURING's priority over the next year will be to move the EDB to BTO Thetford HQ and to streamline its operation so that European datasets can be made available more quickly and easily. We will also be completing the fieldwork for the EURING Swallow project and look forward to a series of interesting results. We already have the basis of a European CES programme and plan to develop this further over the next three years.

EURING is keen to seek more involvement from individual ringers across Europe and to help them exchange information and expertise. As a starting point we will be establishing a notice board area on the EURING Website where projects needing help can be advertised.

To find out more about EURING please visit our website (www.euring.org), which includes information about projects, tables and maps summarizing the holdings of the EURING databank and links to the websites of all European Ringing Schemes. 

Stephen Baillie is Director of Populations Research at the BTO and has recently been elected as Chairman of EURING. Wolfgang Fiedler is Head of the Vogelwarte Radolfzell Ringing Centre in southern Germany and is General Secretary of EURING.

EURING data curation is supported by money from "Birds in Trust, the BTO's legacy fund". The BTO Ringing Scheme is funded by a partnership of the BTO and JNCC, as well as Duchas, the Heritage Service — National Parks and Wildlife (Ireland) and the ringers themselves.



A recent co-operative project organised by EURING was the Swallow Project. As part of this, ringers have been catching Swallows at roost sites across Europe, providing much information on fattening strategies and migration. Photograph by Kevin Carlson