

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Oenanthe oenanthe

English name: Northern wheatear	Scientific name: <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Taxonomical group: Class: Aves Order: Passeriformes Family: Muscicapidae	Species authority: Linnaeus, 1758
Subspecies, Variations, Synonyms: –	Generation length: <3.3 years
Past and current threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): Changes in agricultural management (A02), Extra-regional threats (XE)	Future threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): Changes in agricultural management (A02), Extra-regional threats (XE)
IUCN Criteria: A2abc	HELCOM Red List Category: NT Near Threatened
Global / European IUCN Red List Category LC / LC	Annex I EU Birds Directive -no Annex II EU Birds Directive-no
Red List status in HELCOM countries: Denmark: LC, Estonia: LC, Finland: VU, Germany: 1 (Critically endangered), Latvia: –, Lithuania: –, Poland: –, Russia: –, Sweden: LC	

Range description and general trends

The northern wheatear is a widespread breeding bird in most of Europe. Its European population is large (>4.6 Mio bp), and was stable between 1979 and 1990. During the period 1990–2000 the European population suffered declines in many parts of its range, including in some of its key areas (Turkey, Sweden, and Finland).



Oenanthe oenanthe Photo by: Christopher Plummer

Distribution and status in the Baltic Sea region

The very large Swedish and Finnish populations have recently suffered considerable declines. The **Swedish** population is estimated at 180 000–410 000 bp, of which c. 70% live in the mountain area. Ottvall *et al.* (2009) estimate the decline to 10–19% for the recent 10 year period; the long-term trend is also given as declining. However, in the mountain area the population is not declining, at least not much.

In **Finland**, the decline is estimated at 40% during the period 1990–2000 (BirdLife International 2004), but is currently (2000–2010) up to 58%. The species is assessed as *Vulnerable* (VU) in Finland. The overall distribution in Finland has been diminishing by 29% during the last 10 years (no. of Atlas grids). According to line transect data; there has been a steady population decline of 2.0% p.a. since 1975. The

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Oenanthe oenanthe

decline only concerns the inland population, whereas the coastal and the northern mountain populations have not changed much.

The population in the eastern Baltic countries (**Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Baltic Russia**) is large and about stable in the short-term and probably also in the long-term run.

In **Poland**, the northern wheatear is a widespread breeding bird. Locally, especially in the mountains, peripheries of towns and forest clearings, it may reach higher densities. (Tomiałoć & Stawarczyk 2003). According to results of the national bird monitoring, the population seems to be stable (<http://monitoringptakow.gios.gov.pl/app/trendy>).

In the western Baltic (**Denmark, German Federal states Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania**) the northern wheatear is a local, not numerous breeder; it has suffered long-term declines in all parts of this region.

Table 1: Population numbers of the northern wheatear in the Baltic Sea area. For population trends 0=stable, -=decreasing, +=increasing, f=fluctuating, ?=unknown.

Country	Population size		Short-term population trend (10 years)	Long-term population trend (50 years)
	Breeding pairs	Year		
Sweden	180 000–410 000	2010	-	-
Finland	50 000–100 000	2009	-	-
Russia, PET	common	2010	0	0
Russia, KAL	?? (population size rather small)	2010	0	f
Estonia	20 000–30 000	2003–2008	0	0
Latvia	10 000–30 000	1990–2000	0	0
Lithuania	5 000–10 000	1999–2001	?	+
Poland	20 000–50 000	2000–2002	0	?
Germany - SH	50	2005–2009	-	-
Germany - MV	900–1000	1994–1998	-	-
Denmark	1 000–2 000	2000	-	-
Baltic Sea	287 000–633 000			

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Oenanthe oenanthe

Distribution map

Oenanthe oenanthe

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Oenanthe oenanthe

Habitat and ecology

Within its Baltic range, the northern wheatear occupies all kinds of open-ground habitats from coastal islands and arable land to boulder fields in the fell area. It is also common in most man-made habitats in industry, agriculture and forestry. Across the archipelago zonation of the Baltic Sea, the wheatear is more maritime than the Wagtail (Numers 1995), being less numerous in the inner archipelago zone. Compared to Wagtail and Rock Pipit – the other two maritime passerines – the wheatear breeds singularly; it is a strict cavity-nester. Nests are well hidden under stones and boulders or in crevices in cliffs, but also rabbit burrows. The shelter from sun and rain apparently enables nestlings to maintain stable body temperature, this possibly being one reason for the species' wide range of extreme habitats (Verbeek 1988).

Description of major threats

Since the decline refers mainly to the inland, but not to the coastal and mountainous areas, changes in farming and forestry practices are likely to play a role. These environments have faced drastic intensification of land use leading to less stony pasturage, less open logging areas, and less mosaic-like landscape pattern. Wheatears are probably producing less well in suboptimal habitats, although there are no proper population studies done in these environments. The species is a long-distance migrant, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa and possibly suffering from the frequent draughts in that area during the post-1960 era. It is difficult to see how the carry-over effects from Africa would affect only the inland population unless there is a difference also in the reproduction rate among habitats.

Assessment justification

In its main Baltic breeding area, during the last 10 years the northern wheatear has declined by c. 10% (Sweden) and 58% (Finland), respectively. It is also declining in the western Baltic. However, the species is breeding in this region only in low numbers. The eastern Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Baltic Russia) host strong and stable populations.

The overall trend in the Baltic Sea area is, due to the trend in Sweden and Finland, declining, but the decline obviously did not exceed 30% during the last 10 years. The species hence classifies as *Near Threatened* (NT) according to criterion A2abc.

Recommendations for actions to conserve the species

Since the reasons for the decline are not well understood, it is difficult to propose conservation measures. Population studies and habitat analysis are needed in order to identify why the northern wheatear is suffering such strong declines in some areas.

Common names

Denmark: Stenpikker, Estonia: Kivitäks, Finland: Kivitasku, Germany: Steinschmätzer, Latvia: Akmeņčakstīte, Lithuania: Kultupys, Poland: białorzytka, Russia: Каменка, Sweden: Stenskvätta

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Oenanthe oenanthe

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