

IS HUNTING A THREAT TO NATURE IN EUROPE?

Take home messages

1. FACE carefully assessed the reports submitted by Member States to the European Commission on the implementation of the nature directives covering the period 2013-2018.
2. Hunting accounts for an extremely low share of high-ranking pressures reported for habitats and species listed under the Birds and Habitats Directives.
3. Half of the bird species for which hunting was reported as a high-ranking pressure are species with good European Union (EU) status and trends.
4. Habitat loss due to agriculture and urbanization is the main pressure on birds.
5. The most significant pressures reported for large carnivores are the impact of infrastructure and illegal killing.
6. While Europe's nature is under multiple pressures, hunters are key players in the conservation of both birds and large carnivores.



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Introduction

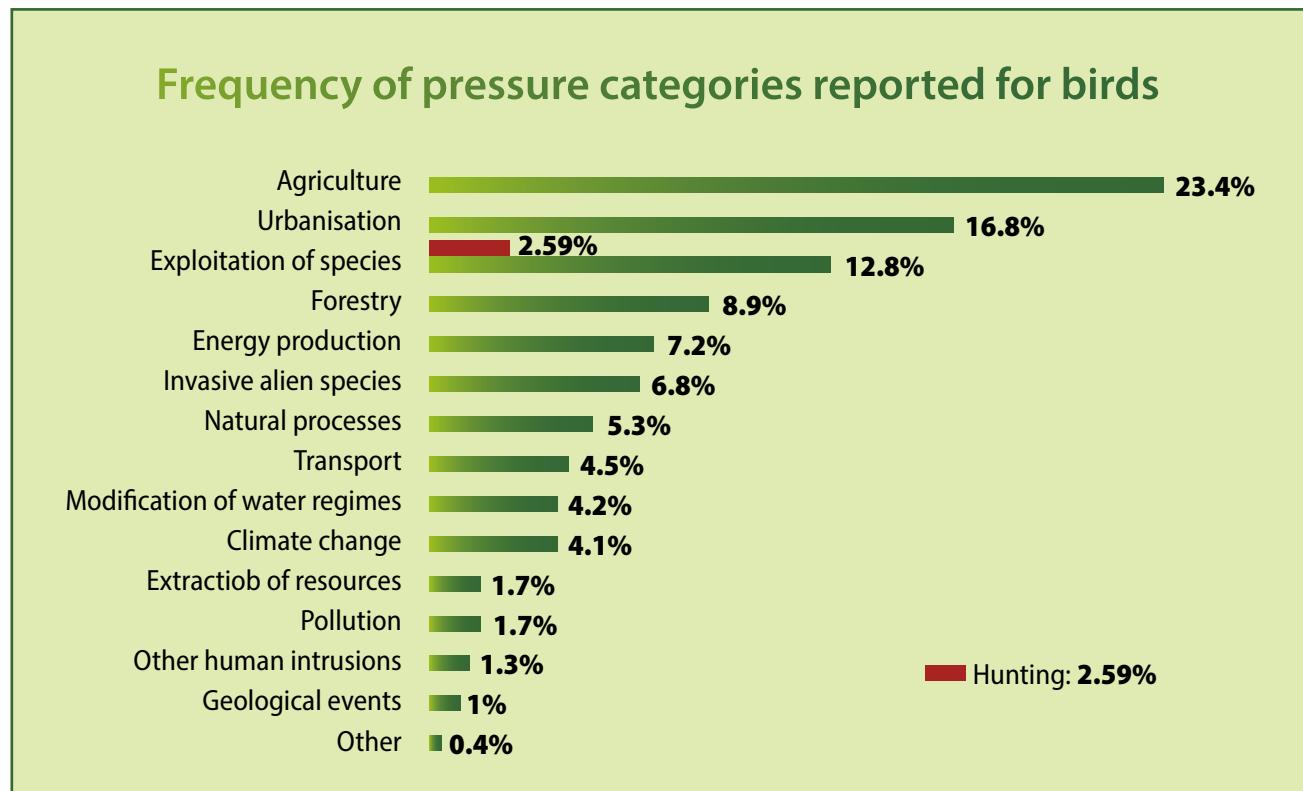
Europe's biodiversity is facing increasing pressures and threats, mostly originating from human activities. In a study on mapping human pressures on biodiversity across the planet, Bowler et al. (2020) found that Europe is one of the regions facing the highest cumulative intensities across multiple pressure drivers. Quantifying biodiversity change and identifying the underlying causes of these changes are basic requirements of conservation (Bowler et al., 2020, Isbell et al., 2017; Tittensor et al., 2014). Therefore, FACE welcomes the reporting process under the nature directives as an important benchmark to assess pressures and threats. Indeed, it provides a good basis to understand which pressures and threats are predominant to help set priorities. This is of crucial importance under the current dialogue on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. A mid-term analysis of the progress on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) "Aichi Targets" revealed that, although showing improvements in several targets (e.g., all four indicators of sustainable management increased significantly), additional efforts were needed to reduce pressures, particularly for factors such as habitat loss (Tittensor et al., 2014). The same study concluded that despite increasing recognition and growing efforts towards the biodiversity crisis, an improvement of biodiversity was unlikely to appear. However, positive results of these efforts on biodiversity could be expected over time as it may take years for actions to translate into measurable changes (Bullock et al., 2011).

It is in this context that FACE has been carefully assessing the data provided by Member States covering the period 2013-2018 in order to provide clarity on what high-ranking pressures are affecting bird species (particularly those listed under the Annex II (huntable) of the Birds Directive) and large carnivores in Europe.



What pressures are reported by Member States for birds?

Agriculture and urbanisation are the two most reported high-ranking pressures on bird species, accounting for 23.4% and 16.8%, respectively. Exploitation of species comes in third position and accounts for 12.8% of reports. It is important to highlight that the category "Exploitation" gathers 27 pressures, including illegal killing, bycatch, pressures on marine and freshwater by aquaculture and hunting. Altogether, hunting accounts for only **2.59%** of all high-ranking pressures reported for all bird species.

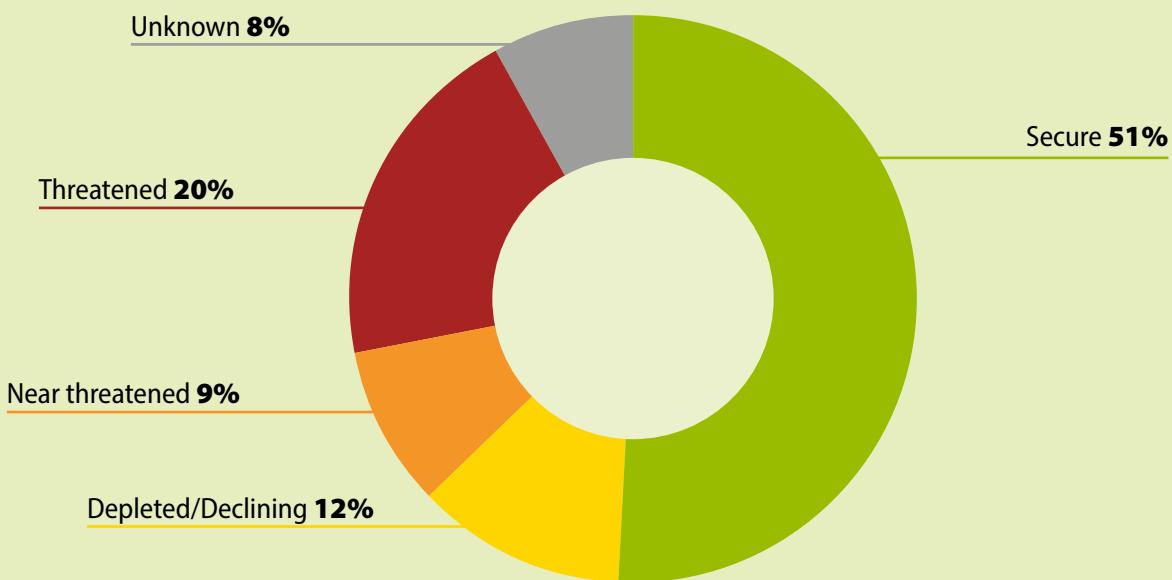


Most Member State reports listing hunting as a high-ranking pressure on birds were reported for bird species, which are not huntable (i.e., birds listed under the Annex I of the Birds Directive or Non-Annex birds). Only 35% of these reports were reported for huntable species.

The highest rate of reporting hunting as a high-ranking pressure for bird species is found when selecting wintering and passage periods only, thus excluding the breeding season. With this selection, 'exploitation of species' was the main reported pressure category (22.8%), closely followed by 'urbanisation' (21.4%) and 'agriculture' (17.5%). For passage and wintering birds only, the main 'activity' reported as a high-ranking pressure was 'illegal shooting/killing', accounting for 7.8% of all reports, and 'hunting', accounting for 6.7%.

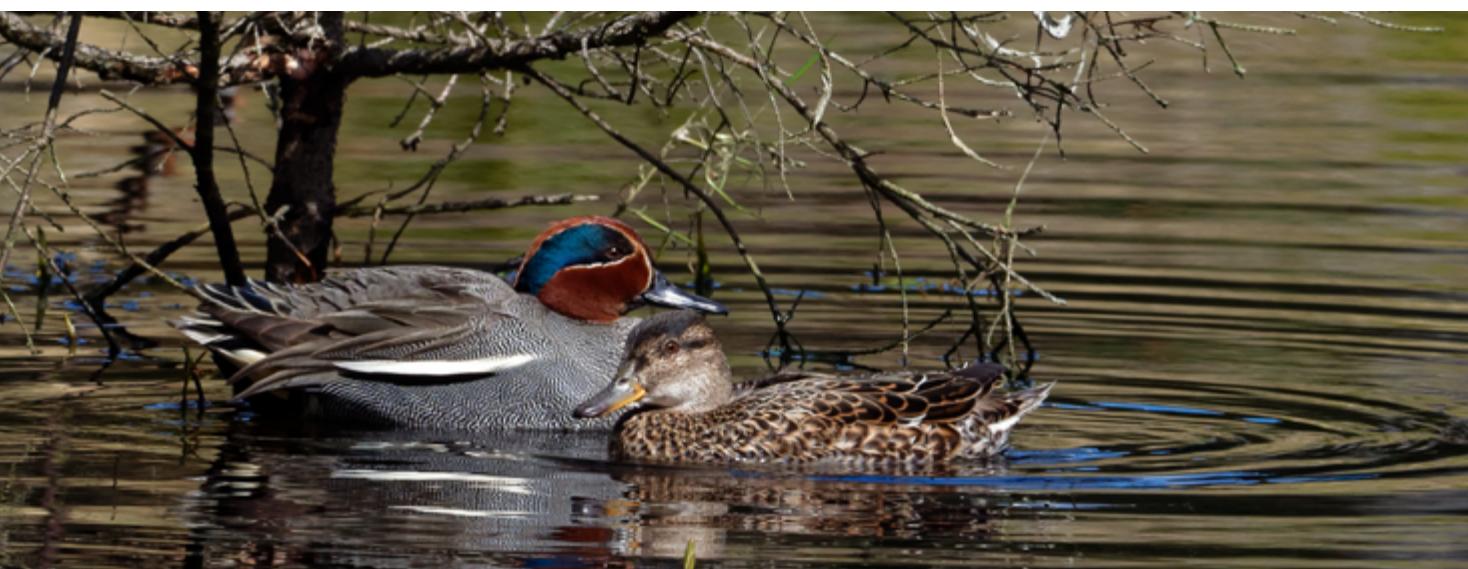
However, of this 6.7%, around half of the species for which hunting was reported as a high-ranking pressure are species showing good EU status and trends. It is important to add that the EU guidance on reporting specifies that high-ranking pressures are unlikely for these species and thus it remains highly questionable whether they should be reported. This is logical guidance as high-ranking pressures are defined as pressures having an important direct or immediate influence on either population size or species distribution at the Member State scale (i.e., causing significant decline). It is therefore bizarre that hunting has been reported as a high-ranking pressure for such increasing populations. This highlights the importance of the need to provide justifications for such reports, which is optional in the reporting formats.

Status of passage and wintering bird species for which 'hunting' was reported as a high-ranking pressure



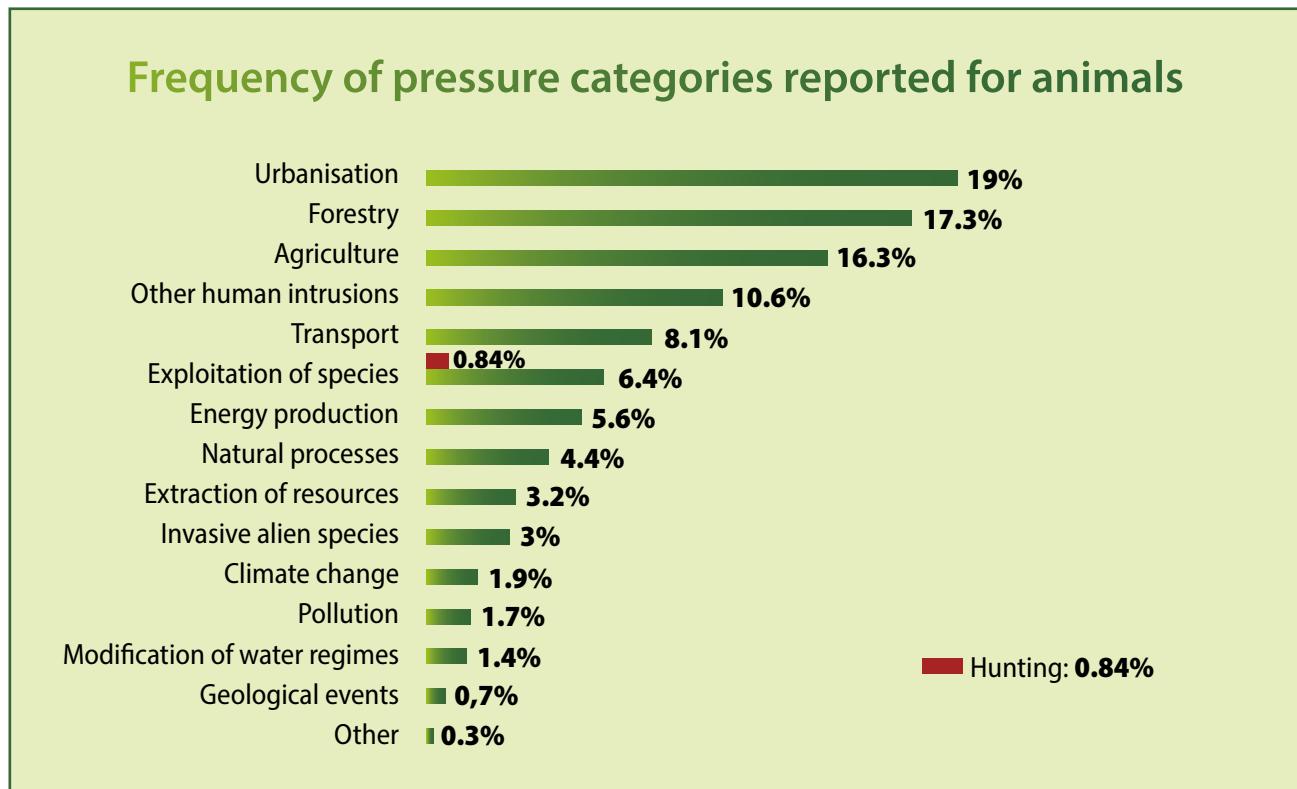
Moreover, the species for which hunting was most frequently reported are those with good EU population status and trends. Surprisingly, the species for which hunting was most reported is the Greylag Goose, which has a secure EU status and increasing EU breeding and wintering trends. In view of its trends and status, it is unlikely that hunting represents a pressure for the species. In fact, an [International Single Species Management Plan \(ISSMP\)](#) was even established by AEWA (African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement) in response to growing Greylag Goose population numbers to mitigate its pressures on agriculture, air safety and ecological networks under the European Goose Management Platform (EGMP). Other species for which hunting was most reported include the Mallard, the Gadwall, and the Great Cormorant. It is also important to highlight that the cormorant is not huntable, but frequently managed by Member States under derogation because to reduce conflicts (e.g., with fisheries).

In discussions about hunting being a pressure on nature, it is relevant to understand that hunters also invest in conservation actions throughout Europe. More specifically, while pressures originating from hunting are low on bird species, hunters' personal investment in conservation can benefit a wide range of huntable and non-huntable species, bringing positive outcomes. Hunters are continuously active in conservation actions for birds and their habitats, in particular, regarding wetland and farmland habitats, as shown by [FACE's Biodiversity Manifesto report 2021](#). A large variety of other actions benefiting bird species are carried out by hunters which includes Invasive Alien Species (IAS) management to increase reproductive success of waterbirds.



What are the pressures reported by Member States for large carnivores?

Urbanisation and forestry were the two most reported high-ranking pressures on mammal species. In terms of ranking, "Exploitation of species" came in sixth position and accounts for 6.4% of all high-ranking pressures reported by Member States. Hunting is grouped within this category but accounts for only 0.84% of all high-ranking pressures reported for mammal species.



For large carnivores in particular, hunting accounts for a very low part of the high-ranking pressures reported. It was reported only in 9% of cases for the Wolf and 7% for the Lynx. Hunting was not reported for the Brown Bear or the Wolverine as a high-ranking pressure.



When analysing the high-ranking pressures for wolf, 34% are of an illegal nature comprised of illegal killing/shooting (23%) and poisoning (11%). Pressures associated with transport (20%) and agriculture (15%) were also prevalent. For the Brown bear, agriculture (20%), transport (20%) and natural processes such as reduced fecundity or genetic depression (12,5%) were the three most reported high-ranking pressures. Illegal shooting/killing accounts for 10% of all the high-ranking pressures.

From 1971 to 2006, 17 lynx reintroduction and translocation projects have been taken place in Europe. Until today, many of these reintroduced populations are fragmented and suffer from low genetic diversity and increased inbreeding. This is reflected in the reports as transport (28,6%) and natural processes (20,9%) were the two most reported high-ranking pressures. Illegal shooting/killing represents 9.3% of the pressures.

The wolverine is the rarest large carnivore species in Europe and only one high-ranking pressure was reported once: 'illegal shooting/killing'. In 2021, ca. 1,029 – 1,124 individuals have been counted in Sweden and Finland.

For large carnivores, transport is considered by Member States as one of the main pressures on the long-term viability of the species. The development of linear transport infrastructure such as motorways or railway tracks are one of the main reasons for habitat fragmentation, loss of ecological connectivity and wildlife collisions. Also, illegal killing in the form of shooting, poisoning, or trapping is a major pressure on the survival and recovery of large carnivore populations, but especially for wolf populations. The lack of social tolerance and acceptance towards large carnivores has strong effects on successful coexistence. Scientists showed that the limiting factor to large carnivore conservation in Europe is not habitat availability, but factors such as human acceptance and favourable policies.

Hunters have been and always will be key players in the conservation and management of large carnivores in Europe. FACE promotes the importance of hunters in the conservation, management, and monitoring of large carnivore populations across Europe, thereby contributing to the important collection of data on reproduction, distribution, and density of large carnivores at regional and local levels. This facilitates their conservation, enhances coexistence, and guarantees that conservation and management of large carnivores is sustainable. Local communities must be involved in and supportive of management processes and plans. FACE's Biodiversity Manifesto gathers a variety of [projects](#) from the hunting community on the conservation of large carnivores.

Conclusions

Hunting is often incorrectly portrayed as a major pressure on nature without careful assessment of the data. As demonstrated by Member States in their reporting of pressures and threats under the nature directives (covering the period 2013 - 2018), it is clear that hunting is not a significant pressure on Europe's biodiversity. Altogether, it only accounts for 0.66% of all pressures reported.

While offtake is part of the activity of hunting, this is often marginal compared to population sizes, as demonstrated by harvest data, and hunters put in place year-round actions for conservation.

FACE's [Biodiversity Manifesto](#) shows a large variety of actions carried out by hunters, which benefit biodiversity across Europe.



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