

TOP STORIES MEDIA CENTER PROGRAM LEARN GERMAN

GERMANY WORLD BUSINESS SCI-TECH ENVIRONMENT CULTURE SPORTS

TOP STORIES | ENVIRONMENT | GLOBAL IDEAS

GLOBAL IDEAS

Bird migration: Dangerous and astonishing journeys

Humans have long been fascinated with the annual comings and goings of birds. But their journeys can be tough and perilous. On World Migratory Bird Day we take a look at some of the dangers faced by birds on the move.

Date 10.05.2015

Author Jennifer Collins

Related Subjects Biodiversity, Conservation, Climate Change, Environment, Birds, Nature

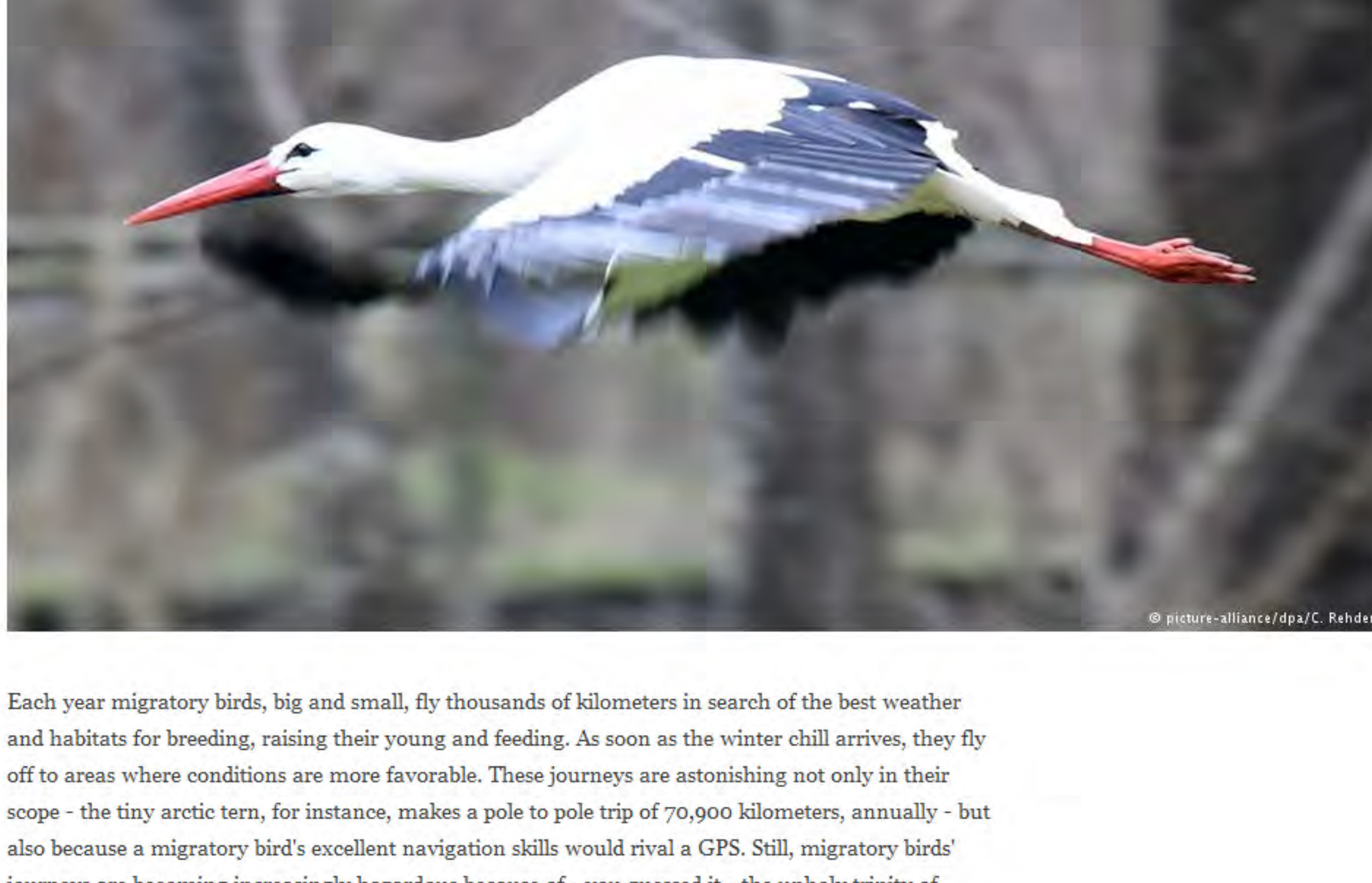
Keywords Global Ideas, birds, migration, migratory birds, nature, environment, conservation, biodiversity, climate change, dangers

Share [Send](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google+](#) [More](#)

[Send us your feedback](#)

[Print](#) [Print this page](#)

Permalink <http://dw.com/p/1lkWf>



© picture-alliance/dpa/C. Rehder

Each year migratory birds, big and small, fly thousands of kilometers in search of the best weather and habitats for breeding, raising their young and feeding. As soon as the winter chill arrives, they fly off to areas where conditions are more favorable. These journeys are astonishing not only in their scope - the tiny arctic tern, for instance, makes a pole to pole trip of 70,900 kilometers, annually - but also because a migratory bird's excellent navigation skills would rival a GPS. Still, migratory birds' journeys are becoming increasingly hazardous because of - you guessed it - the unholy trinity of climate change, habitat destruction and poaching.

Disappearing resting stops



© 24 free use US fish and wildlife service

A bar-tailed godwit in its breeding plumage

Imagine you had travelled hundreds of kilometers by foot along a route you had used many times before. You're thirsty, hungry and your feet are aching. Now imagine the hotel in the middle of nowhere - your usual place of rest on this journey - had disappeared. The next hotel is a long way off and you've run out of food and water. What would you do? This is what's happening to birds. Cities, farms and industry are swallowing up rest areas critical for the frequent flyers. For instance, 65 percent of the Yellow Sea mudflats in China, North and South Korea, have been lost since the 1950s. The mudflats are of great importance to birds migrating along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and their disappearance is contributing to rapid declines in species such as the bar-tailed godwit.

And expanding deserts



© Europaid

Birds are finding it difficult to fly across the increasing expanse of the Sahara

In other places, such as northern Africa, desertification is causing problems. Overgrazing in the Sahel - a grassland region on the southern edges of the Sahara and a favorite dining spot of millions of birds crossing the immense desert - has caused plants to disappear. As a result, the Sahara is spreading, making it more difficult for some birds, such as sand martins, to cross. [Fewer sand martins](#) are gracing European skies compared to 50 years ago.

Unsustainable hunting



© Huang Qusheng

Every year, nets capture millions of migratory birds

Across the globe each year, migratory birds are hunted in their millions for a variety of reasons, including subsistence use, recreational activities and traditional practices. Nets are one of the main methods used to capture them. For instance, along the north coast of Africa, nets kill millions of birds every year. The Mediterranean is also one of the worst regions for migrating birds. Two million were killed in Cyprus in autumn 2015, according to [conservation group Birdlife](#). Species such as blackcaps, are caught using nets, guns or sticks covered in adhesive lime, and served as a local delicacy.

Dying for a delicacy



© Huang Qusheng

The yellow-breasted bunting has fallen victim to food fads

Further afield in China, another songbird has become an increasingly fashionable dish that's also thought to be medically beneficial. The small yellow-breasted bunting was a frequent sight in the skies over northern Europe, where it migrates, and over its winter quarters in southern China and India. However, since the 1980s their [population has plummeted 90 percent](#) as demand for the "delicacy" has risen in wealthier Chinese circles.

Obstacle courses



© MARTIN BUREAU/AFP/Getty Images

Oil rig flares can be dangerous for migratory birds

Migrating has become a high-stakes obstacle course for birds thanks to man's contributions to the landscape in the form of tall structures, according to the RSPB, a British bird protection group. Wind turbines, lighthouses and power lines pose a threat to migrating birds through collision or electrocution, as do flares on floating oil and gas platforms at sea. Birds fly toward the light and are killed in the flames. Then there are skyscrapers, television aerials and radio masts. "Migration routes took thousands of years to develop; evolution hasn't prepared birds to cope with these modern hazards," says the RSPB.

Climate change and migration patterns



© picture-alliance/dpa

Because of changing weather patterns, baby storks like these don't have enough to eat

In some cases, unseasonable weather causes migratory birds to change routes, shorten or cancel their journeys. For instance, small bird species that usually leave the colder climes of northern Europe in winter for Spain or Portugal might stay put. If the weather changes, they are also not able to cope with low temperatures and won't survive. The premature onset of spring weather is not means birds are arriving and breeding earlier. While warmer temperatures mean flowers bloom and insects hatch earlier too, the peak times are longer aligned, meaning birds sometimes do not find enough food for their newborns.

DW RECOMMENDS

» [Final act for a songbird?](#)
Unfortunately for the yellow-breasted bunting, the small songbird with the bright yellow belly is considered a delicacy in China. High demand has caused an alarming decline in the population. (10.06.2015)

» [Nine surprising migratory bird facts](#)
Most are familiar with flocks of migratory birds soaring through the skies in autumn and spring. But what do we know about them apart from the fact they migrate? We've dug up some astonishing facts for you. (07.05.2015) [2 Comments](#)

» [Cypriot MP in songbird supper scandal](#)
If it weren't tragic it would make for perfect comedy. A member of a governmental environment committee in Cyprus has posted a picture of himself serving controversial songbirds for dinner. (15.12.2015)

WWW LINKS

- [Habitat loss seen as rising threat to world's migratory birds](#)
- [WWF: Yellow Sea](#)
- [RSPB: Dangers of migration](#)

Date 10.05.2016

Author Jennifer Collins

Related Subjects Biodiversity, Conservation, Climate Change, Environment, Birds, Nature

Keywords Global Ideas, birds, migration, migratory birds, nature, environment, conservation, biodiversity, climate change, dangers

Share [Send](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google+](#) [More](#)

[Send us your feedback](#)

[Print](#) [Print this page](#)

Permalink <http://dw.com/p/1lkWf>