



European
Commission



The EU Birds and Habitats Directives

*For nature and
people in Europe*



European Commission
Environment Directorate General

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Contents

4–5 Europe’s biodiversity – a rich natural heritage

6–7 An invaluable resource for society

8–9 Europe’s biodiversity – under threat

10–11 EU nature legislation – a unique partnership

12–13 Scope and objective

14–15 Key requirements

16–17 Species protection

18–19 The Natura 2000 Network – a coordinated ecological network

20–21 Site designation

22–23 Managing Natura 2000 sites

24–25 Natura 2000 – part of a living landscape

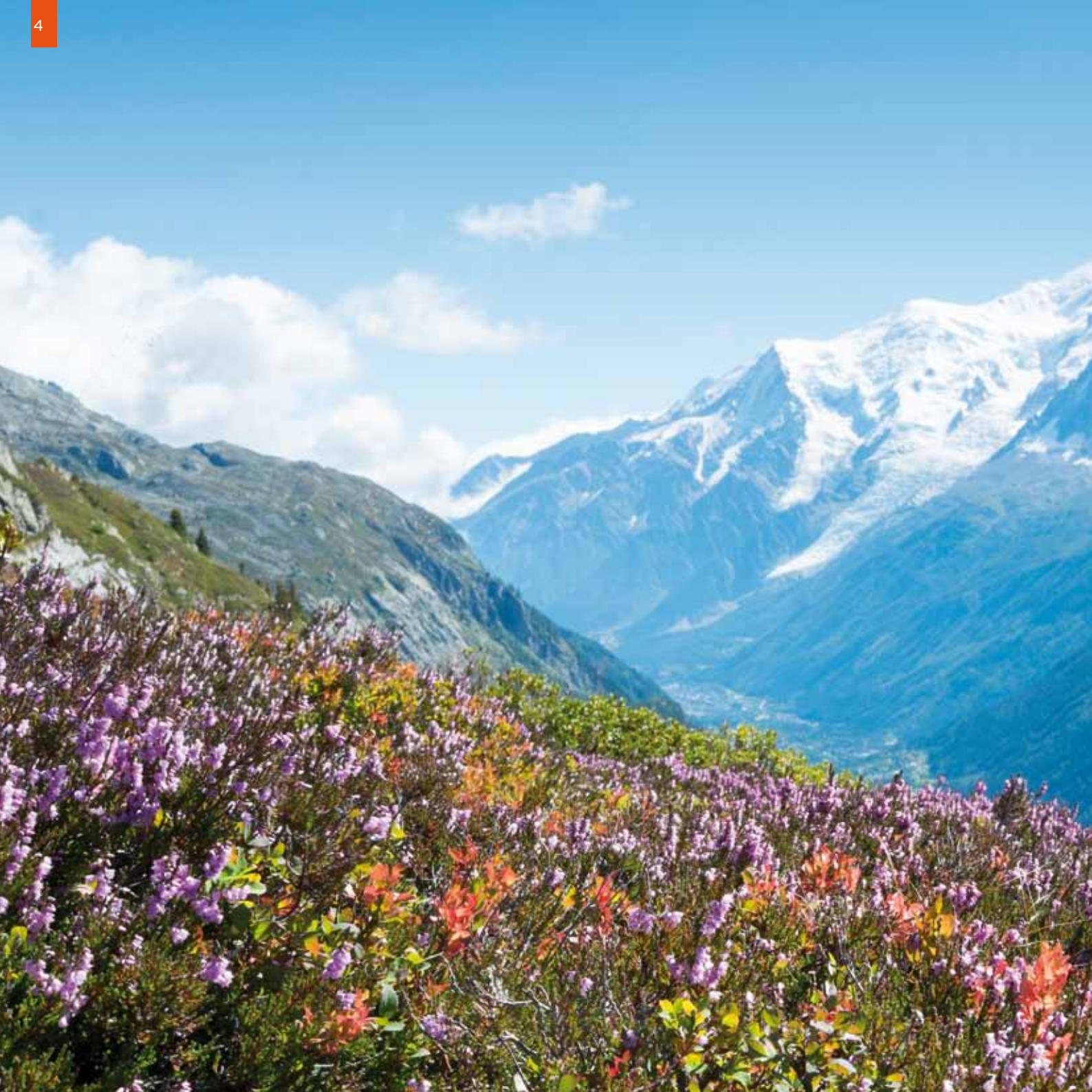
26–27 Promoting sustainable development

28–29 Natura 2000 permits for new plans and projects

30–31 Investing in the future for the benefit of nature and people

32–33 The challenges ahead

35 Further information and photographers’ credits



Europe's biodiversity – a rich natural heritage

Europe covers less than 5% of the planet's land mass. Yet, despite its small size, it has a stunning diversity of wild plants, animals and landscapes, many of which are found nowhere else in the world.

From the flower-rich meadows of the Alps to the windswept dunes along the Atlantic coast, from the lush beech forests of central Europe and the vast open peatlands of the north to crystal clear waters of the Mediterranean, Europe's nature is truly unique.



Wildflower meadow on the slopes of Mont Blanc, France.





An invaluable resource for society

Differences in climate, topography and geology account for much of this biodiversity. So does our long association with the land. Few places in the world have such a varied, contrasting and localised patchwork of habitats, wildlife and cultural landscapes so tightly interwoven in so small an area.

Protecting our natural heritage ensures that the rich diversity of plants, animals and habitats in Europe is maintained for generations to come. It is also essential for our economy and our well-being.

Healthy ecosystems not only offer a wide range of important socio-economic benefits, such as food, clean water and healthy soil, but also provide a vital source of income for countless people across Europe who harvest its natural resources in a sustainable manner.

Dewerstone Wood, Devon, England, UK. Healthy forests not only help improve air and soil quality, they also absorb large amounts of carbon dioxide, the number one cause of climate change.





Europe's biodiversity – under threat

Significant progress has been made to protect Europe's biodiversity in the last 20 years, but there is still much to do to halt its loss. The rate of species extinction may not be occurring as rapidly as in other continents, but up to 25% of European animal species are still at risk of extinction and even common species are suffering from the continuing loss of suitable habitats.

The latest inventory of land cover in the EU shows that artificial areas resulting from urban sprawl, industrial development and new infrastructures are expanding rapidly across Europe. This often comes at the expense of valuable natural areas, especially wetlands and grasslands which have already suffered heavy losses in the past. The remaining habitats are increasingly isolated from one another, to the extent that nearly a third of the EU territory is now highly to moderately fragmented.

More recently, climate change has become a major concern both for humans and for biodiversity, as has the continued spread of invasive species, which displace our native plants and animals. Other threats to nature include pollution, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, and land abandonment.

The potential consequences are extremely serious. These continuing threats and pressures can seriously affect the health of ecosystems, many of which can no longer deliver the optimal quality and quantity of services that they used to, such as the provision of clean air and water, or the control of floods and erosion.

*The Iberian lynx, *Lynx pardinus*, is one of the most threatened cat species in the world. Major conservation efforts, supported by the EU LIFE funds, are underway to prevent its extinction.*





EU nature legislation – a unique partnership

People all over Europe have expressed serious concern over the loss of their biodiversity. In response to this rising concern, the EU Heads of State and Government have set themselves the ambitious target of halting, and reversing, the loss of biodiversity in Europe by 2020.

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives form the cornerstones of Europe's legislation on nature conservation. These Directives represent the most ambitious and large-scale initiative ever undertaken to conserve Europe's natural heritage.



Striped dolphins, Stenalla coeruleoalba, Azores, Portugal. Highly mobile species such as dolphins require concerted EU-wide action to ensure their conservation.





Scope and objective

Together, the EU Birds and Habitats Directives enable all 28 Member States to work together within the same strong legislative framework in order to protect the EU's most vulnerable species and habitat types across their entire natural range within the EU, irrespective of political or administrative boundaries.

Adopted in 1979, the **Birds Directive** aims to protect all wild birds and their most important habitats across the EU. The **Habitats Directive**, adopted 13 years later in 1992, introduces very similar measures but extends its coverage to around 1000 other rare, threatened or endemic species of wild animals and plants – often collectively referred to as species of European importance. It also, for the first time, protects some 230 rare habitat types in their own right.

The overall objective of the two directives is to ensure that the species and habitat types they protect are maintained, or restored, to a **favourable conservation status** throughout their natural range within the EU. It is therefore more than just halting their further decline or disappearance; the aim is to ensure that the species and habitats recover sufficiently to enable them to flourish over the long-term.

Purple heron, Ardea purpurea, La Dombes Lake, France. Over 1000 sites in 19 countries have been designated under the Natura 2000 Network for its conservation within the EU.





Key requirements

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives require the Member States to implement two main sets of provisions:

- ▶ The first set of measures requires Member States to **establish a strict protection regime** for all wild European bird species and other endangered species listed in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive, both inside and outside Natura 2000 sites.
- ▶ The second set requires the **designation of core sites** for the protection of species and habitat types listed in Annex I and II of the Habitats Directive and Annex I of the Birds Directive, as well as for migratory birds. Together, these designated sites form part of a coherent ecological network of nature areas, known as the European Natura 2000 Network.

Other than the selection of sites for the Natura 2000 Network, which is done on purely scientific grounds, measures under the two directives must take account of the economic, social and cultural requirements and regional and local characteristics of the area concerned.

In order to check whether the measures are achieving their objective, Member States monitor progress and report back to the European Commission every six years on the status of the species and habitats of European importance that are present in their country. The European Commission then aggregates the information in order to determine the overall trend for each species and habitat across the EU and whether they have reached, or are on the way to reaching, a favourable conservation status.

The edible frog, Rana esculentus. Under the Habitats Directive the species should be surveyed to ensure that its exploitation is compatible with it being maintained at a favourable conservation status.





Species protection

The first set of provisions of the Birds and Habitats Directives concerns the protection of certain species across their entire range throughout the EU, that is both within and outside Natura 2000 sites. The species protection provisions target all naturally occurring wild bird species in the EU as well as other species listed in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive.

In essence, they require Member States to prohibit:

- ▶ all forms of deliberate capture or killing in the wild;
- ▶ deliberate disturbance, e.g. during breeding, rearing, hibernation and migration;
- ▶ deterioration or destruction of breeding sites or resting places;
- ▶ deliberate destruction of nests or eggs, or the picking, collecting, cutting, uprooting or destruction of protected plants in the wild;
- ▶ the use of all indiscriminate means of capture or killing capable of causing local disappearance and serious disturbance to populations of such species; and
- ▶ the keeping, transport and sale of specimens taken from the wild.

Derogations are allowed in some circumstances (e.g. to prevent serious damage to crops, livestock, forests, fisheries and water) provided that there is no other satisfactory solution and the consequences of these derogations are not incompatible with the overall aims of the Directives.

As an exception, some birds species listed in Annex II of the Birds Directive may be hunted, but such hunting must comply with certain rules. Further, the taking in the wild or exploitation of species listed in Annex V of the Habitats Directive may be subject to management measures.

Member States must designate Special Areas of Conservation for Atlantic grey seal, Halichoerus grypus, which may also be subject to management measures outside the sites to ensure its favourable conservation status.





The Natura 2000 Network – a coordinated ecological network

At the heart of both Nature Directives lies the creation of a Europe-wide ecological network of nature conservation areas – called the Natura 2000 Network. All 28 Member States have designated Natura 2000 sites to help conserve the rare habitats and species present in their territory.

Over 27,000 sites are included in the network so far. In total, they cover a substantial area: almost a fifth of Europe's land area and an important part of the surrounding seas. This makes it the largest coordinated network of conservation areas anywhere in the world.



Species-rich Mediterranean scrub on the islands of Kornati, Croatia.





Site designation

Sites for the Natura 2000 Network are selected on scientific grounds so as to ensure that the best areas in the EU are protected for the species and habitats of EU importance.

Under the Habitats Directive each Member State first identifies and proposes for protection important locations for those species and habitats present on their territory. The European Commission then selects, with the help of the Member States, the European Environment Agency and scientific experts, sites deemed of Community Importance (SCIs). If the national list is determined to be insufficient, Member States are requested to propose further sites in order to complete the network.

Once selected, the **Sites of Community Importance** become part of the Natura 2000 Network. Member States then have up to six years to designate them as **Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)** and to introduce the necessary management measures to maintain or restore the species and habitats present to a good condition.

Site selection under the Birds Directive is slightly different: sites are classified by the Member States and, after evaluation, included directly into the Natura 2000 Network.



The choice of SCIs is done at the level of nine biogeographical regions: each having its own characteristic blend of vegetation, climate, topography and geology, which makes it easier to ensure the ecological coherence of the network as a whole.

Black-tailed godwit, Limosa limosa, The Netherlands. Once a common species, it has declined significantly in the last 20 years due to changing agricultural practices.





Managing Natura 2000 sites

In all Natura 2000 sites:

- ▶ **damaging activities must be avoided** that could significantly disturb the species or deteriorate the habitats for which the site is designated; in addition:
- ▶ **positive conservation measures must be taken**, where necessary, to maintain and restore the habitats and species present, taking account of the economic, social and cultural requirements and regional and local characteristics of the area concerned.

For each Natura 2000 site, conservation objectives and measures need to be set within the context of the ecological requirements of the species and habitats of EU importance present. This will determine the type of management that is required to maintain and restore the site to a good state of conservation.

Although not obligatory, the Habitats Directive strongly recommends the use of Natura 2000 **management plans** as a means of setting objectives and measures in an open and transparent manner. They are useful tools for helping to build a consensus view on the long-term management solutions for the site amongst all stakeholders and interest groups, and for creating a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the final outcome.

Voluntary wardens talking to local farmers, Somerset, UK. Stakeholder dialogue and involvement is fundamental to the success of Natura 2000.





Natura 2000 – part of a living landscape

Although the network includes strictly protected nature reserves, Natura 2000 embraces a much wider approach to conservation and sustainable use of protected areas, largely centred on people working with nature, rather than against it. Since every site is unique, the emphasis is very much on finding local solutions to local management issues in close cooperation with landowners, stakeholders, and any other interested parties.

The Habitats and Birds Directives introduce a modern, flexible and inclusive approach to site conservation that recognises humans are an integral part of nature and that the two work best in partnership with one another. In this way everyone has a role to play in making Natura 2000 a success – be they public authorities, private landowners and users, developers, conservation NGOs, scientific experts, local communities or individual members of the public.

Forging partnerships and bringing people together also makes practical sense. After all, the majority of sites in Natura 2000 are already under some form of active land use and constitute an integral part of the wider countryside. Many are valuable for nature precisely because of the way they have been managed up to now, and it will be important to ensure that such activities are maintained well into the future.

Fishermen, Lac de Grandlieu, France. Everyone has a role to play in conserving Natura 2000 sites.





Promoting sustainable development

The Birds and Habitats Directives support the principle of sustainable development and integrated management.

Their aim is not to exclude socio-economic activities from Natura 2000 sites, but rather to find ways for these to operate in a way that also safeguards and supports the valuable species and habitats present, and maintains the overall health of natural ecosystems for the benefit of society as a whole.



Farmland with sheep, grass fields and hedgerows at Melplash, Dorset, England, UK.





Natura 2000 permits for new plans and projects

Regarding new developments in and around Natura 2000 sites, Article 6 of the Habitats Directive establishes a permitting procedure for any plans or projects that are likely to have a significant effect on one or more sites, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects.

Having this common EU-wide system provides a level playing pitch to developers and ensures that individual Member States cannot gain a competitive advantage over others having higher environmental standards. It also prevents one country's efforts to safeguard biodiversity being negated by unchecked development elsewhere.

Potentially damaging projects must undergo an appropriate assessment to determine the precise nature and extent of the potential impacts on the species and habitats of EU importance present. It is then up to the competent national authorities to decide whether or not to approve the plan or project. This can only be done after they have ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of that site. The onus is on proving the absence of effects rather than their presence.

Exceptions may, however, be possible for certain plans or projects if they are considered necessary for imperative reasons of overriding public interest, there are no other alternatives, and all the necessary compensatory measures are in place to ensure that the overall coherence of the Natura 2000 Network is protected.

European Roller, Coracias garrulus, Romania. The species can be found nesting in quarries that have been used for extracting aggregates.



Investing in the future for the benefit of nature and people

Having a fully operational Natura 2000 Network will encourage a coherent and resource efficient use of our valuable natural capital as well as foster a more sustainable and inclusive growth economy. It can also lead to a more integrated and cohesive development policy, which brings together complementary economic activities that are based on healthy ecosystems.

However, to achieve this, important financial investments are required – currently estimated at around €5.8 billion/year. While the main responsibility for financing Natura 2000 lies with the Member States, the Habitats Directive recognises the need for EU-level support, and explicitly links the delivery of the necessary conservation measures to the provision of EU cofinancing.

Since 1992, the EU's LIFE fund has contributed over €1.2 billion to demonstration and best practice projects for the management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites across Europe. Other major EU funds for agriculture and rural development, maritime and fisheries and regional development offer important investment opportunities in Natura 2000 which will help ensure that it plays its part in sustaining the socio-economic fabric and regional characteristics of different parts of Europe.

These investments, whilst significant, make sound economic sense. As the backbone of Europe's green infrastructure, Natura 2000 acts as an important reservoir for healthy ecosystems, which delivers multiple ecosystem services to society, the value of which have been estimated at €200 to €300 billion/year.

It is estimated that there are between 1.2 and 2.2 billion visitor days to Natura 2000 sites each year, generating recreational benefits worth €5–9 billion per annum.





The challenges ahead

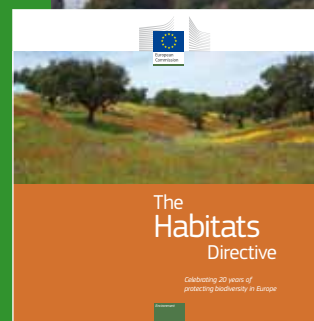
The EU Habitats and Birds Directives have clearly demonstrated their ability to bring enormous added value to society, delivering multiple benefits to both nature and people. They remain, to this day, the core of our EU biodiversity strategy. But despite significant progress to date, there is still a lot of work ahead to meet the ambitious target set by the EU Member States of halting, and reversing, the loss of biodiversity in Europe by 2020.

The key challenges for the future – as outlined in the EU's Biodiversity Strategy – focus in particular on ensuring the full implementation of the EU Birds and Habitats Directives. This means completing the network, especially in the offshore marine environment, ensuring an adequate protection, management and financing of Natura 2000 sites, increasing stakeholder awareness and involvement, ensuring better enforcement, and improving the monitoring of habitats and species of European importance. In addition, it will also be important to further scale-up efforts and integrate species and habitats protection and management requirements into the wider land and water use policies, both within and outside Natura 2000.

But, already now, the EU Birds and Habitats Directives are bearing fruit. Not only has the large-scale destruction of major habitats been abated but several species are also starting to show signs of recovery. Our knowledge of their conservation needs has also increased substantially, leading to better and more targeted conservation actions which are, in turn, receiving greater EU financial support.

Another success of the directives is that they have brought people together in pursuit of a common objective. It is clear that biodiversity needs our help to recover, but, if we get it right, it will pay us back many times over with the multiple benefits that healthy nature provides to society.

Investing in Natura 2000 will not only help the EU to meet its biodiversity target but will also ensure it contributes to the broader sustainable development objectives as laid out in the Europe 2020 Strategy.



Find out more about the achievements of the Habitats Directive in this accompanying brochure.





Further reading on Natura 2000 and EU biodiversity

- *Factsheet on the economic benefits of Natura 2000* (8 pages, 2013)
- *The Habitats Directive – celebrating 20 years of protecting biodiversity in Europe* (52 pages, 2012)
- *EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020* (28 pages, 2011)
- *Investing in Natura 2000 – for nature and people* (24 pages, 2013)
- *Building a Green Infrastructure for Europe* (24 pages, 2013)
- *Invasive Alien Species – a European Union response* (24 pages, 2014)

All are available on the DG Environment's nature and biodiversity home page: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/index_en.htm

Other useful weblinks

- The Natura 2000 award scheme http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/index_en.htm
- The EU LIFE programme <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/index.htm>
- The Natura 2000 viewer <http://natura2000.eea.europa.eu>

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Farmland with sheep, grass fields and hedgerows at Melplash, Dorset, England, UK © Colin Vardell/naturepl.com; Riisitunturi National Park, Finland © Wild Wonders of Europe/Zacek/naturepl.com; Danube sturgeon, *Acipenser gueldenstaedti* © Frei/ARCO/naturepl.com

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Pages 32–33: Footpath stile over dry stone wall, overlooking Lake Windermere, Lake District, Cumbria, England © Adam Burton/naturepl.com

Page 34: Whooper swans, *Cygnus cygnus*, group in flight at dusk, Lancashire, UK © Ben Hall/naturepl.com

Whooper swans, Cygnus cygnus, group in flight at dusk, Lancashire, UK.

