

Nearly half of world's migratory wildlife protected under UN treaty facing population decline, says new report

The interim report re-assessed status of migratory species which were covered under the landmark State of World's Migratory Species report

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A new UN report reveals that 49% of protected migratory species are now in decline—a 5% jump in just two years. With 24% facing extinction, the "State of World's Migratory Species" update is a loud wake-up call ahead of the COP15 summit in Brazil. (Representational Image/ Express Archives)

A new global report on the health of migratory wildlife has warned that 49 per cent of the migratory species population protected by the UN's Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) are declining, and 24 per cent of species are now facing extinction.

The threat of population decline has risen 5 per cent in just two years, while the percentage of species facing extinction has risen by 2 per cent over the same period, as per the interim report updating the landmark State of World's Migratory Species, which was first released in 2024.

This means that out of 1,189 total species listed under the global treaty, 582 migratory species face population decline challenges. The migratory species facing population declines and extinction risks range from many bird species, with bird flu recognised as a threat, including mass mortality; ungulates or hooved animals such as Wildebeest and Llama; freshwater fish; and marine species such as sharks, rays, and turtles.

“Between 2002 and 2021, mobility declined significantly for the Mongolian Gazelle, a nomadic species that makes some of the longest distance movements ever recorded,” the report said.

The interim report tracked changes in conservation status of migratory species and highlighted emerging trends based on data from the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of threatened species, and population trends and changes in extinction risk documented in scientific literature.

The interim report highlighted that 26 species listed under the treaty have moved to a higher extinction risk category under IUCN's list, and among these, 18 are migratory shorebirds. Pronounced long-term declines in the population of many migratory shorebirds have occurred in coastal sites in India, the report noted, and the population of sharks and rays in northern Indian Ocean are facing extinction risk. Meanwhile, vulture populations are improving slowly in South Asia.

There was also improvement in the status of seven CMS-listed species, such as Saiga Antelope, Scimitar-Horned Oryx, and Mediterranean Monk Seal.

The IUCN Red List assigns species to broad categories of extinction risk, based on a standardised set of rigorous scientific criteria. The IUCN is a global body that comprises 160 member countries and hundreds of civil society groups that work together towards

environment and biodiversity protection. It examines the health of species and their extinction risks.

CMS, a legally binding global treaty

The interim report comes ahead of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP 15), to be held from March 23 in Campo Grande, Brazil. The CMS is a legally binding global treaty, signed in 1979 under the United Nations Environment Programme, which aims to conserve migratory animals and their habitats across national habitats and across borders.

The CMS has two appendices, which list migratory species under categories of endangered migratory species and migratory species conserved through agreements. There are 188 species in Appendix I, including 28 terrestrial mammals, 23 aquatic mammals, 103 birds, eight reptiles and 26 fish. Parties that are range states to the Appendix-I listed species are required to provide strict protection, including prohibition of hunting or capturing, habitat restoration and addressing migration challenges.

Species in India, such as the Great Indian Bustard, the Asian Elephant, the Bengal Florican, the Siberian Crane, the Hawksbill Sea Turtle, the Olive Ridley turtle and the Leatherback Sea Turtle are included in Appendix I of CMS.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza, a concern

The report noted that H5N1, the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), has been detected in an unusually broad host range of birds and mammals, and caused substantial mortality in many populations across multiple continents.

It has caused mass mortality events in a range of bird species accorded protection status under the global treaty. Critically endangered African Penguins, the vulnerable Humboldt Penguins, near-threatened Peruvian Pelicans, and Red-Crowned Cranes were affected. Among aquatic mammals, the flu affected the South American Sea Lion and the South American Fur Seal.

“Although long-term impacts of HPAI are uncertain, these disease outbreaks have added to the pressures already faced by migratory species. The emergence of HPAI is especially concerning for long-lived migratory species that are sensitive to any increase in mortality,” the report stated.

Threats to migratory species flagged

“Overexploitation, and habitat loss and fragmentation, are the two greatest threats to migratory species worldwide,” said Amy Fraenkel, Executive Secretary, CMS. “The first global report was a wake-up call. The interim update shows that the alarm is still sounding. Some species are responding to concerted conservation action, but too many continue to face mounting pressures across their migratory routes,” she said.

Furthermore, the report noted threats to migration of hooved animals or ungulates from railways, roads, fences, and pipelines, especially in Central Asia. “Between 2002 and 2021, mobility declined significantly for the Mongolian Gazelle, a nomadic species that makes some of the longest distance movements ever recorded,” it said.

The 2024 State of World’s Migratory Species was the first comprehensive global assessment of migratory animals covering 1,189 CMS-listed species, and its analysis linked to over 3,000 additional migratory species.



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