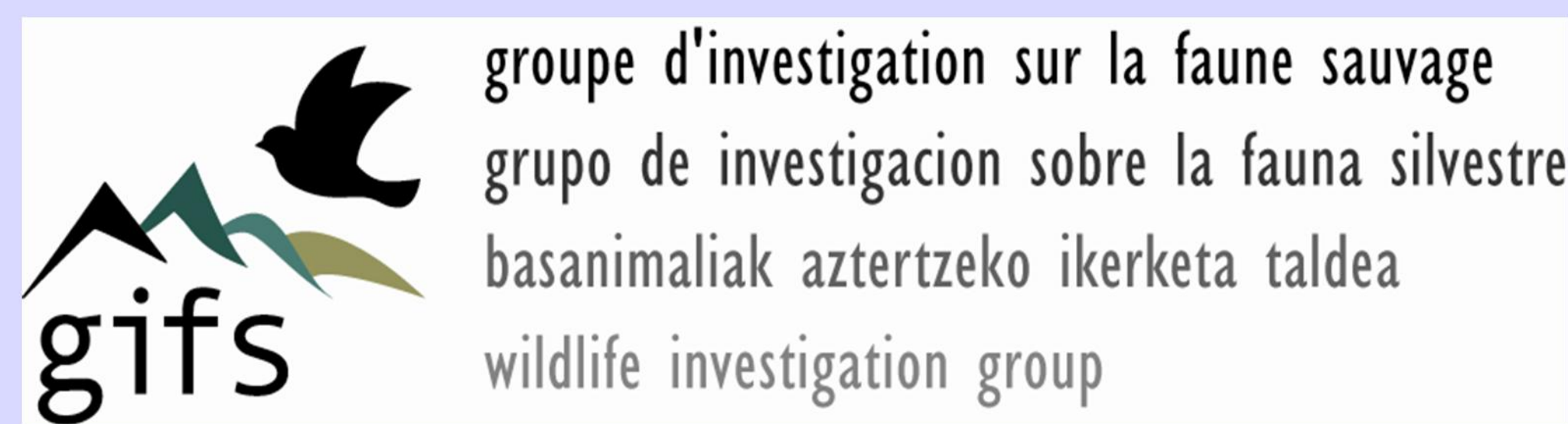


Status and trends of woodpigeon populations in south-western France in autumn and winter, 1988-2006

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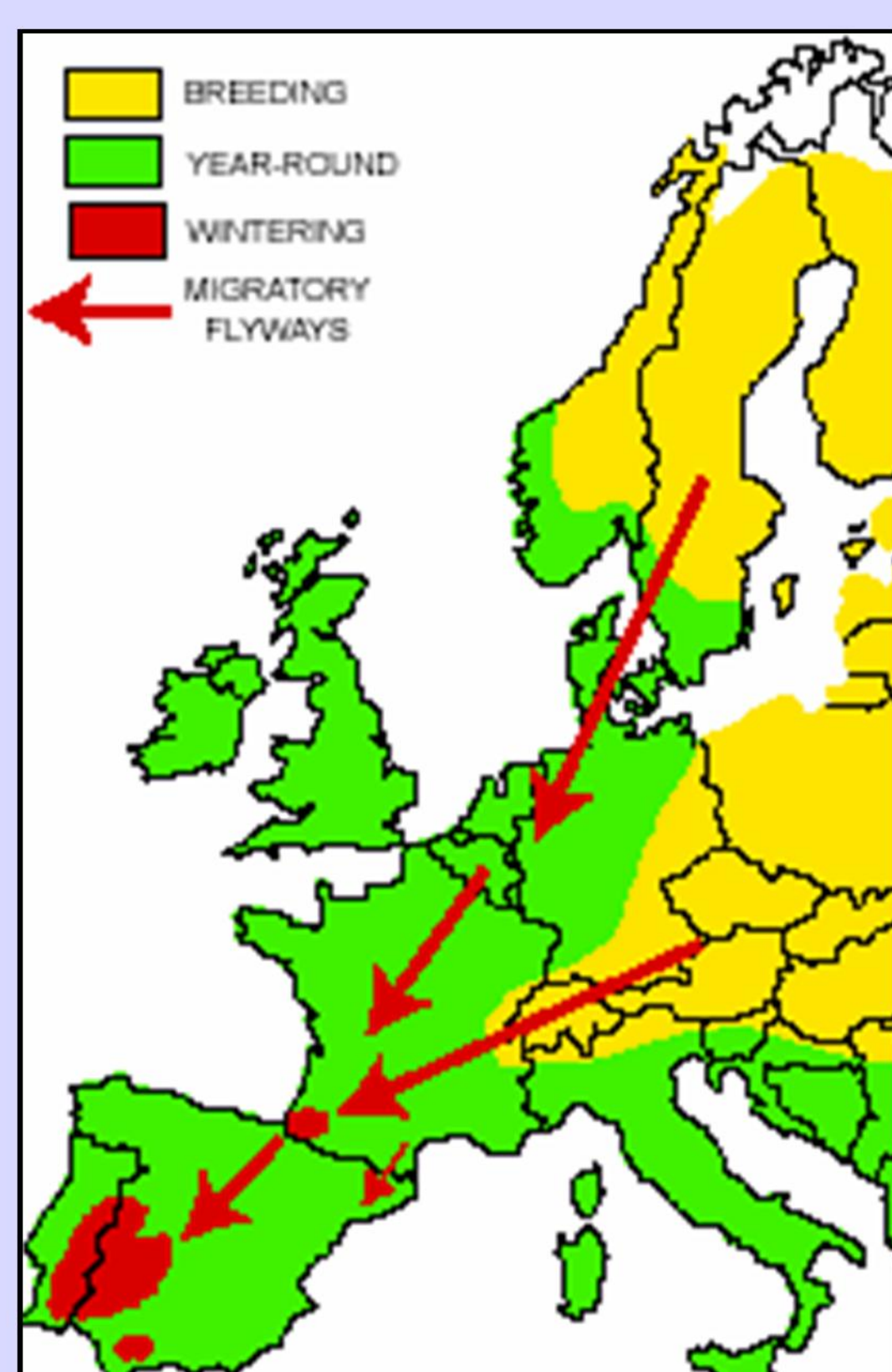
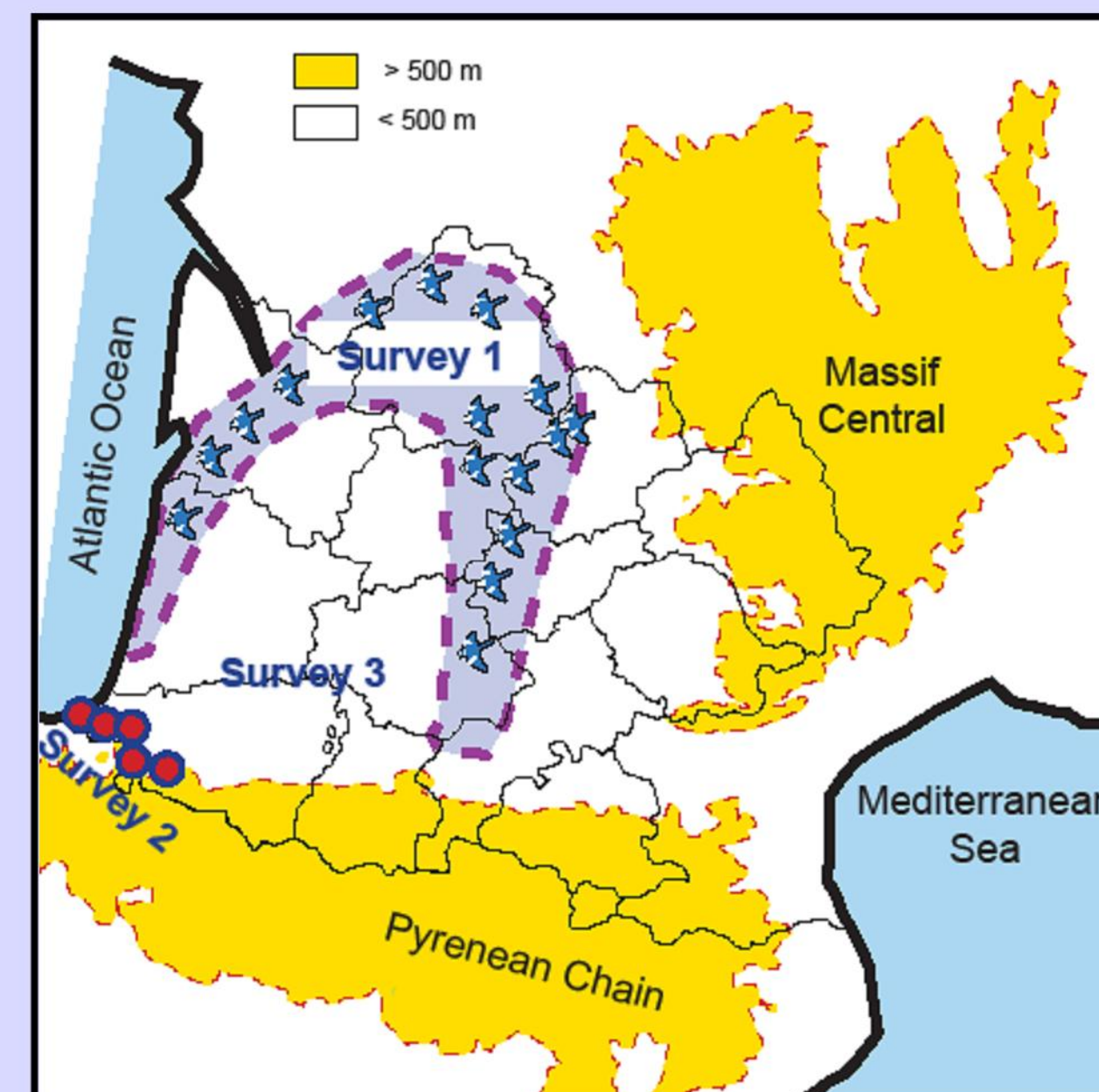


Introduction & Objectives

Common woodpigeons (*Columba palumbus*) are among the most widely distributed and abundant birds in Europe with a population estimated at more than 18 million birds. In France, this species is the most widely hunted and harvested game bird. During fall, innumerable birds cross our country. Some of them winter in South-western France. The status and trends of these subpopulations are largely unknown. In particular, no standardized protocol currently exists for monitoring migrant pigeons. So the primary objective of our research group was to develop an effective survey method for monitoring such populations.

Sampling sites and Methods

Determining the population status of the woodpigeon during fall and winter has been difficult. Data presented in this poster come from a variety of sources. Migrating population estimates are derived from 2 surveys conducted annually from October 1 to November 20 in the north and south of our region, whereas information on wintering populations comes mainly from surveys limited to the most important roosting colonies.



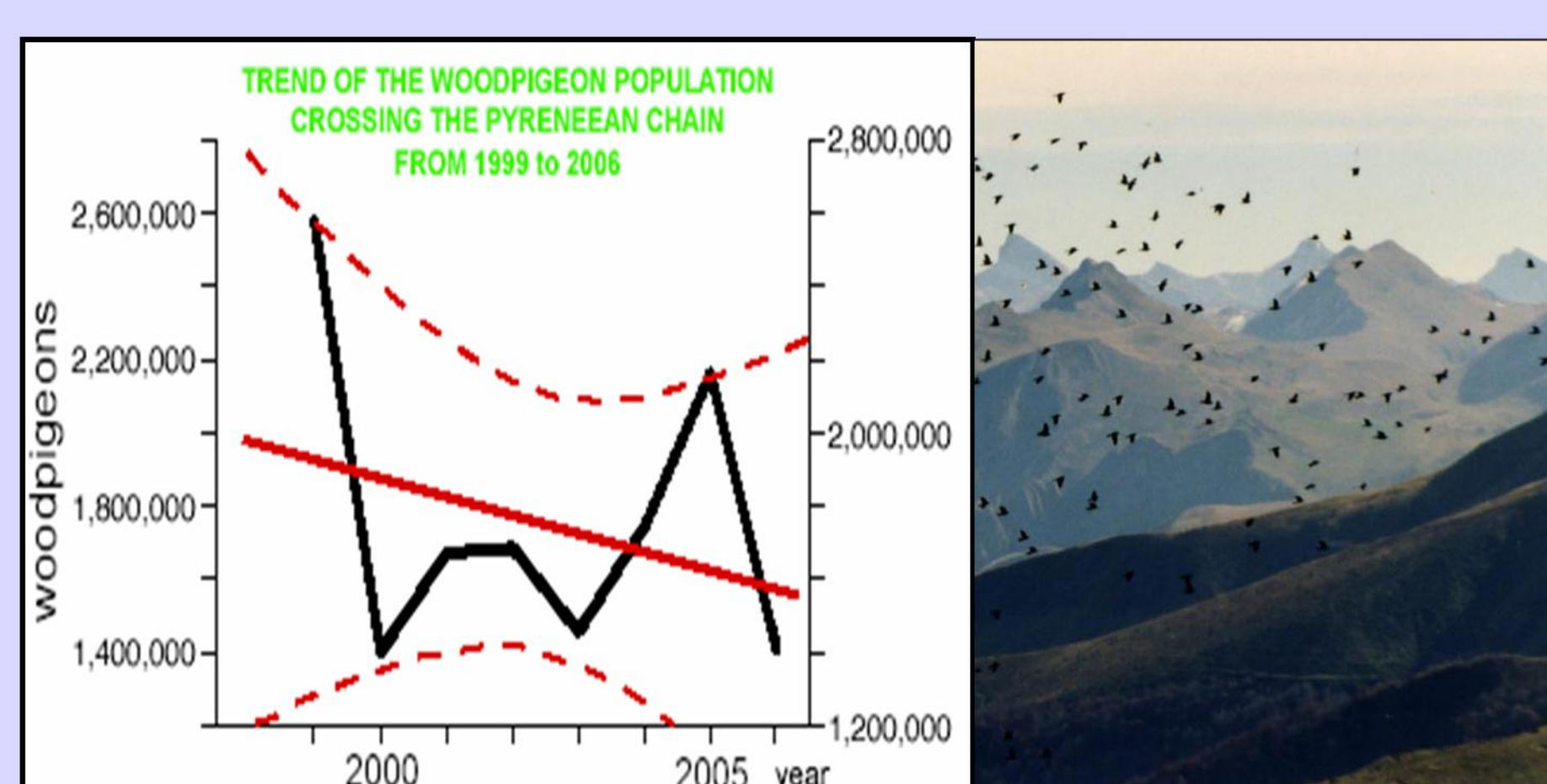
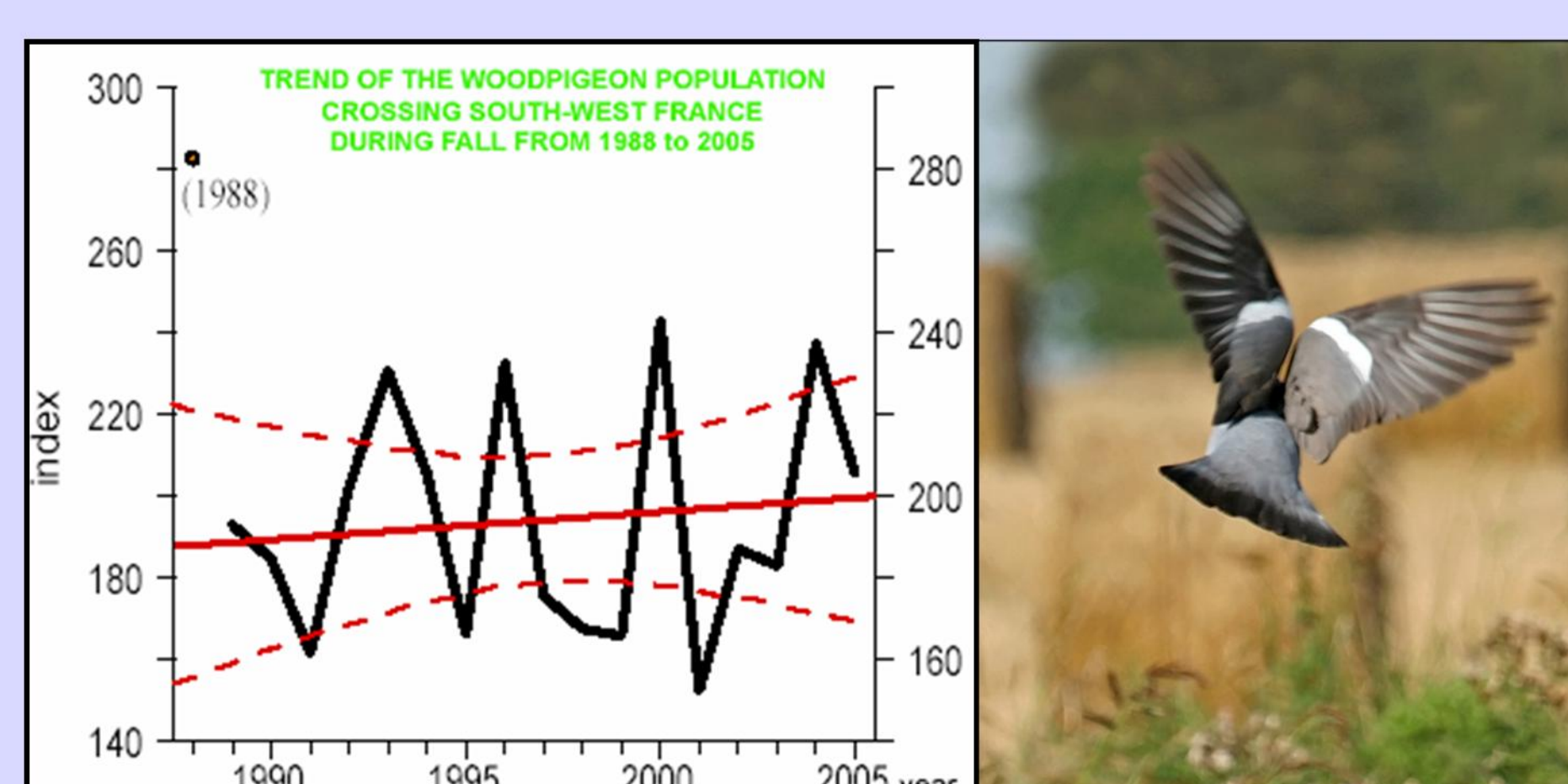
Survey 1 – Flock numbers of woodpigeons arriving in our region were counting in the following manner: A flock was designated as “very small” if it contained 1-10 individuals, “small” 11-50 individuals, “medium” 51-100 individuals, “large” 101-300 individuals and “very large” if it contained more than 300 birds. More than 150 volunteers distributed in a minimum of 60 stations participate each year. This kind of survey provides an annual index to population size as well as data for determining long-term trends in migrating woodpigeon populations.

Survey 2 – For estimating the number of flying birds crossing the Pyrénées during fall, we used the “block method”. This method involves accurate count of a number of individuals (in general 50 birds) of a block in a flock. Using this block as a model allows estimating the whole flock by dividing it into similar blocks and multiplying them. This method requiring a lot of experience, twenty or so wildlife professionals were employed each year from October to November.

Survey 3 – Because of their clumped and patchy distribution in wintering grounds, colonial-roosting woodpigeons cannot be adequately surveyed using randomly placed count points such as those used for singing birds in spring. So, in a first step woodpigeon colonies were located; birds' number in each colony was then estimated by observers. The survey is conducted in the 13 departments of South-western France during a specific time period (1 day in November, December, January and February).

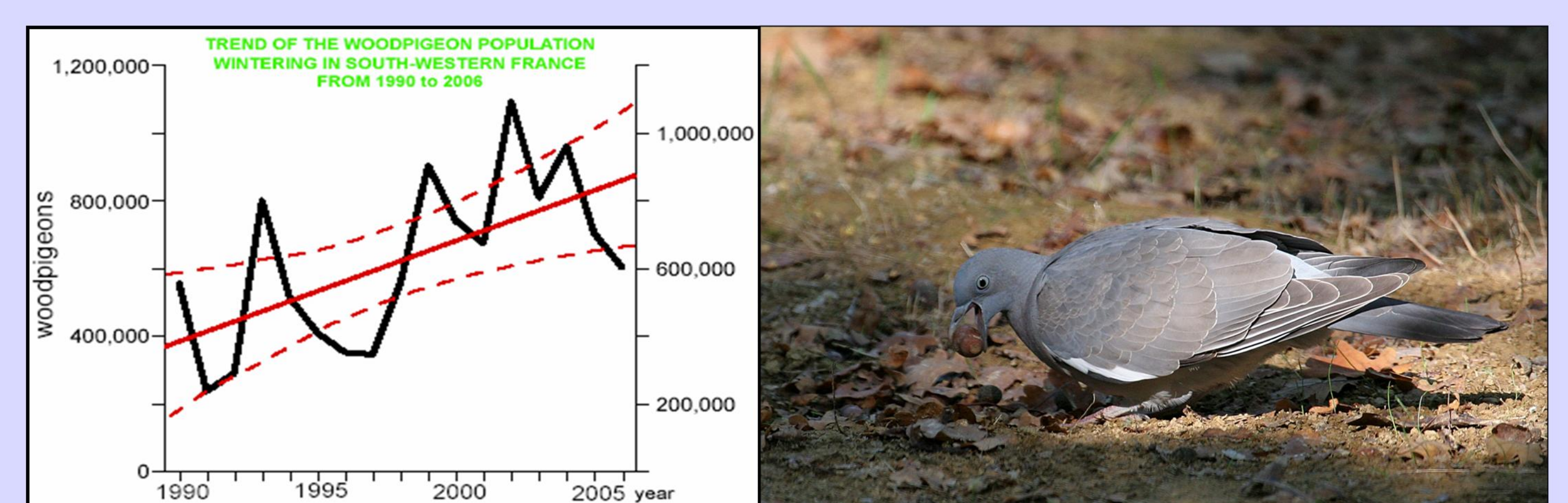
Surveys 1 and 2 - Migrating woodpigeons

Migrating woodpigeon populations are relatively stable since 1988 ($R^2=0.01$; $p>0.67$; $N=17$ years). Contrary to what the organisation Organbidexka Col Libre claimed, the same tendency was observed across the Pyrenean Chain ($R^2=0.1$; $p>0.45$; $N=8$ years). However year-to-year population changes are important. Such changes are, at the present time, difficult to interpret as they may reflect changes in migratory flyways in response to special environmental (e.g. windy) conditions rather than absolute declines in population size.



Survey 3 - Wintering woodpigeons

Early records in the 1950s indicate that wintering woodpigeons were present, although not abundant, in the study area. A survey initiated in 1990 indicates that the wintering populations have increased significantly ($R^2=0.37$; $p<0.01$; $N=17$ years), from around 400,000 individuals in the 1990s to 800,000 in the early 2000s. Winter counts however, underestimate actual population levels, and probably increasingly so as populations have grown.



Summary and Conclusion

Fall populations migrating through our region do not show any significant trend over the time period considered in our study, however wintering populations in the 13 departments have significantly increased over that time period. At the same time, a significant increase in breeding birds is well documented elsewhere in Europe. The rate of increase has been especially rapid in the last decade. We conclude the woodpigeon population status is very good.

Acknowledgements

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