



Conserving the East Asian-Australasian Flyway

A look at the project supported by this year's British Birdwatching Fair

As **Global Sponsor** of BirdLife International's Flyways Programme, the British Birdwatching Fair is this year raising funds to support conservation in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Additional support is being provided by the Rio Tinto-BirdLife Programme and the project will be implemented in collaboration with Wetlands

International and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP; see Box 1).

This project will be implemented by the BirdLife Asia Partnership and aims to take conservation action at intertidal wetlands that are critical for migrating waders, to improve the availability of data on the bird populations that

use the flyway, and to raise awareness throughout the region of the threats to migratory birds and the value of coastal wetlands to people.

Connecting north, south and plenty in-between

The East Asian-Australasian Flyway extends from Arctic Russia and Alaska to Australia and New Zealand, and it encompasses large parts of East Asia and all of South-East Asia. Over 50 million migratory waterbirds, including eight million waders, use the flyway annually. Many of the waders travel all the way from their high arctic breeding grounds to spend the northern winter in the temperate latitudes of the southern hemisphere. Twenty two migratory species, including the Endangered Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* and Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* and the Critically Endangered

Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* and Chinese Crested Tern *Sterna bernsteini*, have virtually their entire global population within the flyway.

Waders and other waterbirds moving along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway use a number of traditional stopover (or staging) sites during their migration, to rest and refuel. Recent satellite-tracking studies have shown that Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica* complete the journey from their wintering sites in New Zealand to their staging areas around the Yellow Sea in a single flight taking eight to ten days, before flying non-stop to their Arctic breeding grounds in Russia and Alaska. Others species, such as Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*, make shorter hops and need to stop over at more sites.

For all of these long-distance migrants, the rich feeding grounds provided by



BOX 1. The Partnership for the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAFP) is an informal and voluntary initiative of government and non-government partners, aimed at protecting migratory waterbirds, their habitats and the livelihoods of people who depend on them. The EAAFP spans 22 countries and

includes critical sites and habitats for over 50 million migratory waterbirds, including shorebirds, ducks and geese, cranes, and seabirds from over 250 different populations. There are currently 27 partners, comprising 14 countries, three intergovernmental agencies, nine international non-government organisations and one transnational corporation. The EAAFP provides a framework for international cooperation, including development of a Flyway Site Network for sites of international importance to migratory waterbirds.

Asia's coastal wetlands are vital for migratory birds but facing major threats (Dongying Birdwatching Society)



intertidal sand- and mud-flats are vital to sustain their spectacular migrations. But these habitats are being lost at an alarming rate and many waterbirds are declining rapidly in numbers. At least 33 Globally Threatened or Near Threatened waterbird species occur in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, including 24 which are heavily dependent on the intertidal zone, more than twice as many as in any of the world's other major migratory flyways.

The development pressures on coastal wetlands

The countries in the Flyway support more than one-third of the global human population, and most are going through a period of dynamic economic growth. This is causing intense pressure for the conversion of coastal wetlands for urbanisation, and industrial, agricultural and aquaculture

purposes. A recent study by IUCN (Box 4) found that losses of up to 51% of coastal wetlands (including marshes) have occurred in China over the past 50 years, whilst in Japan 40% and in South Korea 60% of coastal wetlands are reported lost. This rapid rate of wetland loss is likely to continue, at least in the near future, as many more coastal development projects are on-going or planned. Other threats include pollution and unsustainable hunting and exploitation of fish and shellfish.

Intertidal habitats are amongst the most productive ecosystems on earth, and their loss is impacting on the livelihoods of millions of people. They provide spawning areas and nurseries for the numerous species of fish and crustaceans on which coastal fisheries depend, protect coastlines from natural disasters and provide recreational opportunities.

Great Knot has been uplisted to Vulnerable due to population declines (Changhua Coast Conservation Action)



Box 2. Loss of intertidal areas within migratory pathways can have extreme consequences for wader populations. For example, until the middle of the last decade, Saemangeum on the west coast of South Korea was one of the most important sites for waders around the Yellow Sea. The site, which encompasses the estuaries of the Mangyeung and Dongjin Rivers, has now been fully enclosed by a 33-km long seawall. The abundant molluscs and other invertebrates fed on by waders quickly died off, and numbers of birds plummeted. Bird numbers have subsequently risen at the adjacent Geum and Gomso estuaries, though by no means mirroring the losses at Saemangeum. Populations of waders which used Saemangeum as a stopover on their way to Australia have declined dramatically. Two species have been particularly hard hit: Far Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis* and Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*, which in 2010 were both 'uplisted' from Least Concern to Vulnerable because of the speed of their decline. Around 90,000 non-breeding Great Knots disappeared from the Saemangeum area. Surveys elsewhere in South Korea confirmed they had not relocated to other sites, and a decline of the same magnitude and timing in Australia suggests that the birds previously using Saemangeum had died.

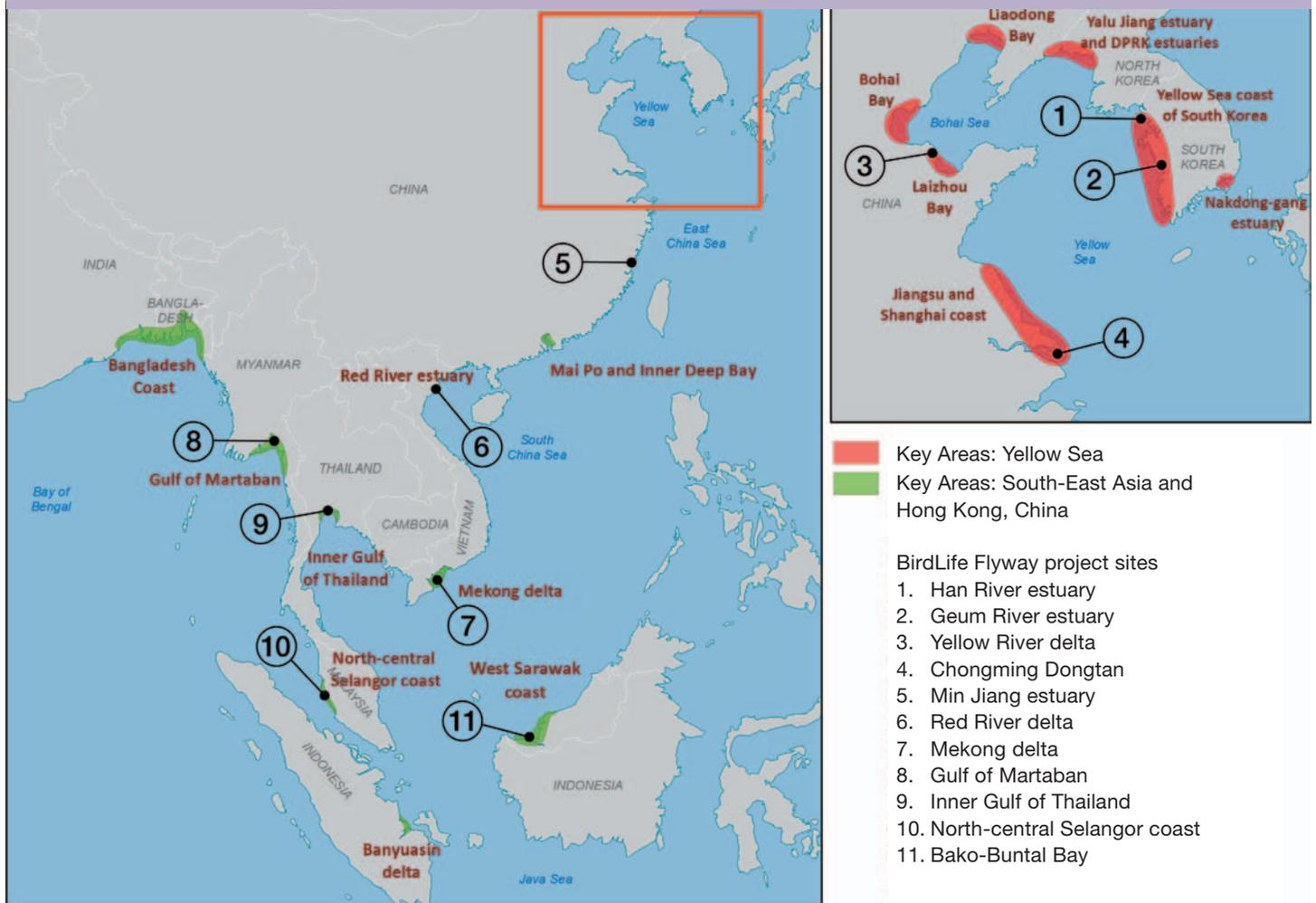
These ecosystem services are valued in billions or even trillions of dollars, and their loss needs to be balanced against the potential benefits of the planned development projects.

Flyway-wide action is needed to address the urgent conservation issues, and the support from the British Birdwatching Fair and Rio

Tinto (see Box 3) will enable the BirdLife Partnership to play its part. In the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, the Partnership currently includes nine Partner organisations, two Affiliate organisations, country programmes covering the three Indochinese countries and mainland China (where the BirdLife China

Box 3. The Rio Tinto – BirdLife International Programme, established in 2001, is supporting the development of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Project. In addition to the activities of the BirdLife Asia Partnership described in this article, the project is complimented by company efforts to safeguard wader habitats at the Dampier Saltworks, a Rio Tinto Minerals operation in Western Australia, and a feasibility study by Wetlands International for a new wetlands centre and nature reserve at Bohai Bay in northeast China. This collaborative project will focus on the 'Dampier 7', a set of northern migrant wader species that have occurred in internationally important numbers at Dampier Saltworks, which are recognised as Important Birds Areas as a result. These species are believed to be in decline because of human impacts on the tidal flats in East Asia that they use whilst on migration, and effective conservation actions at their key stopover sites are critical to maintain their populations.

Box 4. In response to the growing concern about intertidal wetlands in East Asia and the biodiversity they support, IUCN SSC has commissioned a report entitled *IUCN situation analysis on East and Southeast Asian intertidal habitats, with particular reference to the Yellow Sea*. This report seeks to present as clear a picture of the status of the intertidal zone in the flyway as the data allow. It provides extensive background for a motion on East Asian tidal flats that will be presented at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Jeju, South Korea in September (sponsored by BirdLife International, with 17 co-sponsors including several BirdLife Partners).



Programme is working with a network of more than 20 birdwatching and conservation organisations), and BirdLife also works closely with contacts in countries where it is currently not represented.

Many of these organisations are already actively engaged in the conservation of migratory birds and wetlands, which will provide a springboard for the development of the new flyway project. Project planning meetings were held in Thailand and South Korea in February 2012 to consider how to make the most effective use of the new resources available, to build upon the on-going activities both at selected sites

and at the flyway level. During these meetings, 11 sites in South Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar were chosen for inclusion in the project, because they are of critical importance for migratory waterbirds (as confirmed by the IUCN situation analysis; see Box 4) and places where BirdLife organisations have the capacity to implement conservation activities.

Grassroots local engagement in site conservation

One of the key activities at the project sites will be to mobilise local communities for the protection and management of

wetland habitats. This will be done by establishing and building the capacity of Local Conservation Groups (LCGs), site-based groups of local stakeholders, often comprising of volunteers, which will support the efforts of protected area managers and local government agencies. They have already been established

at some project sites in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. For example, the LCG at Bako-Buntal Bay in Malaysia includes restaurant owners and tour operators, village committee representatives and members of the Malaysian Nature Society's Kuching branch, who work together towards better management of

Box 5. The IUCN Situation Analysis identifies 16 key areas in East and South-east Asia for the waterbird species that depend on tidal flats, assessed using three parameters: (a) globally threatened and near threatened waterbird species; (b) overall wader abundance; (c) wader populations of international importance. These 16 key areas correspond closely to the candidate list of sites for BirdLife's new flyway project, giving further justification for concentrating conservation efforts on those sites.

the bay for wildlife and livelihoods. The Flyways project will help guide the activities of the LCGs at the project sites where they have already been established, and will set up new LCGs at the other sites.

The BirdLife organisations and the LCGs will seek to develop partnerships with protected area and local governments at the project sites, to help strengthen the protection and management of waterbird habitats. For example, four LCGs are working closely with local government agencies in the Inner Gulf of Thailand, and at Khok Kham lobbying by the LCGs is playing an important part in its designation as a new Ramsar site. The project will support similar initiatives at the other project sites, for example the Gulf of Martaban in Myanmar, the most important non-breeding site for Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the world.

The project planning meetings in February identified a lack of secure high-tide roost sites for waders as a major problem at the two sites in South Korea, the Han Estuary and the Geum Estuary, because of development and disturbance along the coast. This is also a potential problem at the North-central Selangor Coast, where the current roost site at Kapar Ash Ponds might soon be lost. The project will investigate the potential to restore abandoned roost sites, or create new ones. In Eastern China, introduced cord grass (*Spartina*) is a growing menace, rapidly covering sandflats and reducing waterbird habitat. At Chongming Dongtan, the reserve authorities are currently removing the *Spartina*, and the project will monitor how the tidal flats then recover and determine the best methodology to apply at other sites.

Working together throughout the Flyway

Despite the efforts of international and national programmes and NGOs,

awareness remains low in many countries in the flyway of the value of tidal flats for migratory birds and other biodiversity, as well as the ecosystem services they provide for people. This lack of awareness amongst government and local communities often leads to insufficient attention being given to the environmental value of wetlands in coastal zone planning and management.

The project will organise awareness-raising activities, including an annual flyway-wide festival with the theme “Welcome to the birds”, timed to coincide with southward migrations. This will be modelled on BirdLife’s World Bird Festival, with events organised in as many countries as possible in the flyway during October, to tell people about the spectacular waterbird migrations taking place around them. The project will seek to generate as much media coverage as possible, to show that people through the flyway are concerned about the birds and wetlands.

Conservation action in the flyway is hampered by the availability of information on waterbird populations and the conservation situation at many coastal wetlands. There are well-established waterbird monitoring programmes in some countries including Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and new schemes have recently been initiated in several others, such as the China Coastal Waterbird Census and Korean Shorebirds Census. The Asian Waterbird Census, coordinated by Wetlands International, organises annual counts at many wetlands in the flyway. However, although these have gathered a large amount of valuable data on populations and sites, the overall coverage of the flyway is still very incomplete. The project will support the expansion of the existing monitoring schemes by providing training to build

capacity, and by promoting increased communication between the national programmes, to help harmonise, share and communicate the data collected. It will also use the internet to improve communication and sharing of information about migratory birds in the flyway.

“There are huge challenges to be faced in all the world’s flyways, but most of all in the

East Asian-Australian Flyway”, said Mike Crosby, BirdLife’s Senior Conservation Officer for Asia. “But the conservation community is working together, through initiatives like the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership, and BirdLife’s Flyways project will make an important contribution to this work.”

WB

By Nick Langley



Asian Dowitcher (above) and Mongolian Plover (below) will both benefit from work on the flyway (Changhua Coast Conservation Action)

