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Wader populations decline faster than ever

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More than half the populations of waders in Europe, West Asia and Africa are declining at an accelerating rate. There is a need for better protection of the key wetlands along their flyways, especially in Africa and the Middle East. This is the conclusion of the Wetlands International's Wader Atlas, the first comprehensive overview of key site networks for waders in Europe, West-Asia and Africa, launched in London today.

Waders are relatively small waterbirds including species like lapwings, plovers, godwits, curlews and sandpipers. Many of them undertake long distance migrations from their Arctic breeding grounds to wintering areas as far away as Southern Africa. Some concentrate in huge numbers at just a few sites, making these critical wetlands for their survival.

Incomplete network of protected areas

The European Union has established a comprehensive network of protected areas for waders in Europe under the Birds Directive. Outside the EU however, the protection and management of key sites is still far from adequate. A string of wetlands concentrated on the western coast of Africa, (Sahel zone along the Senegal and Niger rivers, around Lake Chad), and in East Africa in the Sudd, along the Rift Valley and eastern coast of Africa, is crucial for the survival of many migratory waders.

Therefore, if EU investment in protecting waders is to be effective, these crucial sites must also be included in its conservation strategy. Wader Atlas author Simon Delany said: "Waders such as the Ruff are heavily protected in the EU; farmers receive thousands of Euros for nest protection. These same birds are for sale in the markets of Mopti, Mali for just 25 cents each! If just a part of the finance available in the EU for waterbird protection were to go to the areas where these same birds winter, a huge difference could be made".

Pressure on wetlands

The wetlands of the African west coast are under enormous pressures. The sparse water resources in the Sahelian zone are tapped by dams on the Niger or Senegal rivers, which have turned formerly shallow wetlands into permanently dry lands. Irrigation schemes for growing human population disrupt the water flow in wetlands such as the shrinking Lake Chad. Often wetlands themselves are converted to agricultural use, such as in the Tana River Delta in Kenya, which is threatened by conversion to sugar cane plantations.

A similar story can be told for the Middle East. Many waders migrate from the Arctic and Scandinavia to the coastal zones along the Persian Gulf. These coastal areas are now suffering from rapid development which threatens the habitat of the scarce and declining Broad billed Sandpiper, for example.

Highlighting important wetlands

The Wader Atlas highlights the most important wetlands to be protected for each wader population. It will thus provide decision makers across the Africa-Eurasian region with crucial information so

that they can increase and better focus their efforts for wetland conservation. Better water management preserving the Sahelian wetlands benefits not only waders, but also local people. Indeed, involving local people in protection strategies for waders has been successful in many regions.

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Notes to editors:

1. The Wader Atlas will be launched at a JNCC event on the 20th of May 2009 at the Strand Palace Hotel, London at 5:00 pm (www.jncc.gov.uk/MEA-Event). Contact us if you wish to attend (alex.kaat@wetlands.org).

2. Wetlands International **is a global organisation that works to sustain and restore wetlands and their resources for people and biodiversity.** Wetlands International and the International Wader Study Group (WSG) have drawn on their wide-ranging network of wader experts to help prepare this Atlas, being the final product of ten years of labour.

3. The Wader Atlas (*An Atlas of Wader Populations in Africa and Western Eurasia*) identifies 876 key sites – such as lakes, coastal areas, floodplains - for 59 of the 90 wader species in those countries covered by the UN African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). Amongst these, the book identifies 68 sites at which more than five wader species occur in internationally important numbers (more than 1% of global population). There are 112 sites where more than 40,000 waders have been counted.

4. This book is a result of a huge international effort involving literally thousands of coordinated expert observers in nearly 100 countries. It was funded by the governments of Belgium, the UK and The Netherlands, and a United Nations treaty, the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). Most of the work was undertaken by Wetlands International staff and members of the International Wader Study Group, a Specialist Group of Wetlands International, and these two organizations also contributed to the funding.

5. Examples of the conservation value of the book:

   There is a well-recognised criterion by which the international importance of sites for waterbirds is judged, namely the 1% criterion under which any site which regularly holds 1% or more of a population of a waterbird species qualifies as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on wetlands. The Wader Atlas reveals that the most important site for waders in Africa and western Eurasia on this basis is a site which has hitherto been poorly known and which remains unprotected. This site is Barr al Hikman on the coast in Oman, a vast and remote coastal bay where British and Dutch expeditions since the 1990s have recorded no fewer than 18 species in these internationally important numbers.

   One site under threat from drainage and agricultural intensification is the Tana River Delta on the coast of Kenya, where five species have been recorded in internationally important numbers. One of these, the White-fronted Plover is widespread in Africa and does not migrate much. Of the remaining four internationally important species at this site, all are long-distance migrants breeding far to the north and east in Central Asia (Lesser Sandplover) and in northern Russia (Marsh Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint).

   These migrants occur at the delta in large numbers during the northern winter, and also use it as a feeding site to refuel on flyways which extend further to the south after the breeding season, and as far north as arctic Russia during the breeding season. Damage to this one site, as well as affecting the resident birds, is thus likely to affect the survival of these species over a huge area stretching from Southern Africa, through the Middle East and Central Asia to Siberia.

   Species' chapters and high resolution photos of the book can be downloaded from: www.wetlands.org/waderatlas.