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Building bridges for migratory waterbird conservation in the Central Asian Flyway

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The Central Asian Flyway (CAF) covers the large continental area of Eurasia between the Arctic and Indian Oceans. This Flyway comprises several important and overlapping migration routes for the different species of waterbirds, most of which extend from the northern breeding grounds in Siberia to South and Southwest Asia. Geographically the flyway includes an area from the frigid arctic coastline and offshore islands of Siberia to the southernmost non-breeding (wintering) grounds in the Maldives and the British Indian Ocean Territory of Dio Garcia, thus incorporating about 30 countries of Central, East and South Asia and the Trans-Caucasus.

The CAF covers at least 274 migratory waterbird populations of 175 species, including 26 globally threatened and near-threatened species that breed, migrate and spend the non-breeding (winter) period within the region. Species such as the critically threatened Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarious*, vulnerable Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* and Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*, Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*, Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*, and Brownheaded Gull *Larus brunnicephalus* are completely (or largely) restricted to the CAF region.

In addition, the breeding ranges of some species, including the critically threatened Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus*, Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*,

endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus*, vulnerable Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* and Relict Gull *Larus relictus*, and Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*, Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* and Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* are largely restricted to the region although their non-breeding ranges overlap with adjoining flyways.

Other migratory waterbird species pass through this region on their annual migrations within flyways that connect the northern Central Asian countries with South East Asia and Australasia (the East Asian-Australasian Flyway), Africa and Europe (the East African Flyway), and the Indian Ocean to the south.

The CAF comprises large semi-arid habitats with a limited number of wetlands, particularly in the staging areas of Central Asia and different groups of migratory waterbirds appear to overlap considerably in the usage of important sites. While recent work on satellite telemetry and years of ringing of birds has yielded some information, very little is known about the precise migration routes and staging areas of most species.

Rapid human population growth and development across the region has dramatically increased pressure on intertidal and freshwater wetlands, grasslands and other habitats, which has resulted in their degradation, pollution, and loss. The habitat

pressures coupled with legal and illegal hunting of birds have resulted in the decline and local extinction of many waterbird populations.

Management and conservation of waterbird populations requires precise and up-to-date information on their populations and trends. Information on the status and trends of most waterbird populations in the CAF area is limited and outdated. Actions to promote collection of data and their analysis at the flyway and national level are urgently needed to provide the basis for improving the knowledge base.

As the birds cross international borders of several countries and provide a link between the peoples of CAF region, the responsibility for the well-being and conservation of these species and for the sustainable use of their habitats rests with all countries. Management of waterbird habitats requires coordinated multi-sectoral planning and implementation to realise the needs of biodiversity conservation and local people.

Many countries in the CAF have developing economies with inadequate allocation of resources for research and conservation and for involvement of local stakeholders in sustainable management of wetlands, grasslands, and other habitats. In addition, changes in political systems and instabilities in some countries, language and other barriers have not enabled strong cooperation to be developed between

agencies in all the flyway countries to cooperate in information sharing, research and conservation activities.

The first meeting of the governments of the CAF was organized in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in August 2001. The meeting was very successful in recognising the importance of cooperation and the need for an International Action Plan that outlines regional priorities for action to conserve migratory waterbirds and their habitats.

Over the last few years, various efforts have been made to bring the main players together again to culminate this planning work. The breakthrough was the kind invitation of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, India to host a meeting that would be held under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

Between 10 and 13 June 2005, representatives of the 30 CAF countries, international agencies, non-government organisations and technical experts will converge at the prestigious India Habitat Centre in New Delhi for a three-day meeting. The Wildlife Institute of India and Wetlands International are providing logistic support for the event.

One of the main outputs of the Meeting will be to have endorsed a *Central Asian Flyway Action Plan to Conserve Migratory Waterbirds and their Habitats* and to agree on the international framework under which it will be promoted. Wetlands International on behalf of CMS has prepared the Action Plan.

The proposed Action Plan calls for a wide range of actions at the flyway and national levels, including improved legislation for species, regulations on hunting, habitat management, training, education and awareness, and species monitoring. In addition, it calls for the establishment of a network of internationally important sites

to promote conservation of migratory waterbirds in the Central Asian Flyway.

Besides this, it is anticipated that the meeting will result in increased interaction and cooperation between governments, conventions, technical experts and conservationists from countries in the flyway as a basis for promoting concrete actions to ensure the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats.

In addition to this, a side meeting on 12 June of range states is being held to discuss and endorse the *Proposed Western / Central Asian Site Network for Siberian Cranes (and other waterbirds)*, with logistic support from the International Crane Foundation. The meeting is being held under the auspices of the CMS Memorandum of Agreement for the Conservation of the Siberian Crane, which provides a framework for the conservation of this threatened species. It is proposed that the Siberian Crane Site Network will be a forerunner for a larger migratory waterbird network that will be established under the proposed Central Asian Flyway Action Plan.

For those interested in more detailed information on the two meetings, all documentation will be available on the CMS websites: http://www.cms.int/bodies/meetings/regional/caf/caf_meeting.htm and http://www.cms.int/bodies/meetings/regional/site_network/asian_meeting.htm. The real success of these initiatives will be fully realised through the active participation of people in all countries of the CAF. We are hopeful that the New Delhi meetings will be a landmark event in building new international bridges of hope for the conservation of our migratory waterbirds and their habitats.



Errata: Indian Birds (Vol. 1 No. 1).

1. Page 9, column 1, line 8: Change '*leuconogenys*' to *leucogenys*.
2. Page 9, column 1, line 13: Change '*Myiophonus*' to *Myophonus*.
3. Page 9, column 1, line 27: Change '*cryniger*' to *crinigera*.
4. Page 9, column 2, line 27: Change '*Oriulus orilus*' to *Oriolus oriolus*.
5. Page 16, column 1, paragraph 3: Delete.
6. Page 16, column 1, paragraph 4: Treat as caption for sketch on same page.
7. The sketches on pages 4, 14 and 23 are by Sachin Jaltaré.