



Waterbird counting in Myanmar. Photo by Maung Win

Counting for conservation: Celebrating the 60th International Waterbird Census

A global effort to monitor & protect waterbirds since 1967



INTERNATIONAL
WATERBIRD CENSUS



Wetlands
INTERNATIONAL

60 years of the International Waterbird Census

Since 1967, tens of thousands of people have headed to wetlands every year around the world, taking part in the International Waterbird Census (IWC).

From coastal areas in northern Europe to tropical estuaries in Asia and Africa, volunteers and professionals alike join this global citizen science effort.

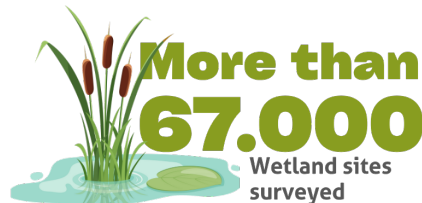
Many waterbird species gather in huge numbers at wetlands in January and February, giving us a great opportunity to monitor the sizes, trends and changes in the distribution of waterbird populations, and to identify their key sites.

In a rapidly changing world, the IWC helps us monitor the health of our wetlands and waterbirds and take actions to manage them sustainably.

Over the last 60 years, the International Waterbird Census has grown into one of the world's largest and longest-running biodiversity monitoring programmes.

International Waterbird Census

In numbers...





Waterbird counting Rufiji. Photo by Szabolcs Nagy.

Why count waterbirds?

Waterbirds are highly visible and occur across a wide variety of wetlands worldwide. They are also charismatic and important in ecosystem functioning. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, it was recognised that these birds could only be conserved and sustainably managed through international collaboration.

At the same time, **waterbirds captivate amateur birdwatchers and are relatively easy to count.** This makes them ideal for long-term monitoring: cost-effective to survey year after year, largely through a volunteer network.

The International Waterbird Census does more than generate numbers. By connecting thousands of volunteers and local communities across continents, it not only tracks population trends at site, national, and population levels, but also links people with each other and with the seasonal rhythms of their wetlands.

The IWC raises awareness of the beauty and importance of waterbirds and wetlands through social media, print and online news outlets, strengthening local awareness and support for waterbird and nature conservation action.



Sarah Heuzeroth

What we've learned: 60 years of trends

In over 60 years, the IWC has shown us how waterbird numbers and distributions are changing.

1. Conservation efforts pay off

Protection and management have helped certain species bounce back. Several goose species in Europe have increased thanks to coordinated conservation and sustainable harvest management.

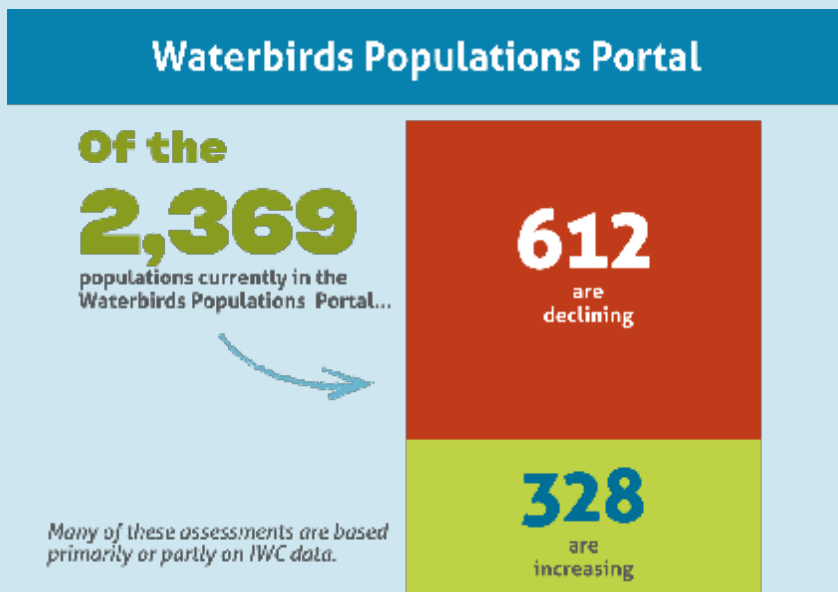
2. But many are in decline

Particularly, waders show worrying downward trends, reflecting the pressures on wetlands, grasslands and tundra habitats along their flyways.

3. Waterbirds are responding to a changing world

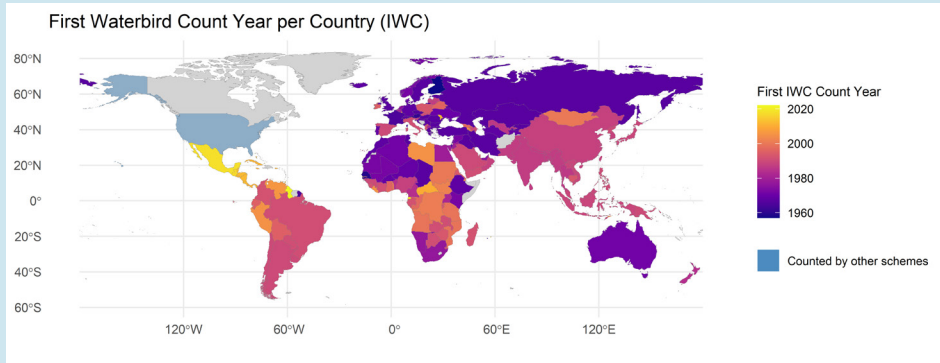
Globally, waterbird distributions shift with temperature in temperate zones and rainfall in the tropics. By 2050, suitable wintering areas in Europe are predicted to extend northeastwards into the Baltic and southern Russia, while ranges in Africa may become increasingly fragmented.

By detecting declines in hunted species, tracking the impact of climate change and avian influenza, the data from the IWC is essential for guiding waterbird conservation policy and action.



Back to the beginning

In 1967, the first coordinated International Waterbird Census took place across the Western Palearctic - Europe, North Africa and Central and Western Asia, organised by the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB), one of the predecessors of Wetlands International. This initiative built on pioneering post-war wildfowl counts that began in Europe in 1947 and expanded through a growing network of dedicated volunteers.



Global map illustrating first waterbird count year per country

Every January, counters would visit all kinds of wetlands – lakes, rivers, coasts, estuaries, man-made waterbodies - to record all waterbirds present. These simultaneous counts provided the first reliable 'snapshot' of northern wintering populations, helping identify important sites and track long-term population changes.

The power of the IWC lies in its continuity. By repeating the same coordinated efforts year after year, it builds a long-term record that allows us to see beyond short-term fluctuations and understand real population trends.

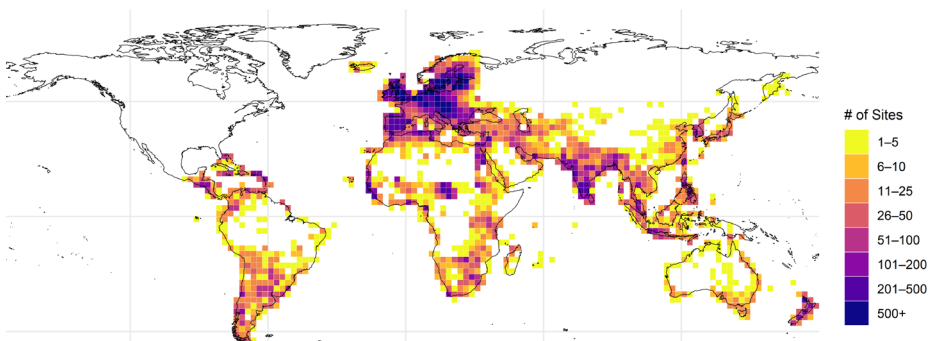
By 1973, **over 40,000 counts had been submitted from 55 countries** and nearly 13,000 wetlands, providing valuable data to drive conservation efforts. Since then, the IWC has been held in 189 countries and territories, with data from more than 67,000 sites. Overall, **more than 1.9 billion waterbirds** have been counted, building one of the largest and longest running biodiversity datasets in the world.

This success has always depended on people. Each year, tens of thousands of counters contribute to the IWC counts. Mostly volunteers, counters also include researchers, conservationists and protected area park staff, which make this **an extremely cost-effective programme, and one of the largest and longest running citizen science initiatives in the world.**

Global expansion

Similar efforts around the world soon followed the initial Western Palearctic counts, with participants in Asia, Australasia, Africa and the Americas joining the effort.

- **1987 – Asian Waterbird Census (AWC):** Now covering more than 6,700 sites in 27 countries, it has been essential in identifying critical habitats for species such as the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and supports the identification and monitoring of Network Sites under the East Asian - Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP).
- **1990 – Neotropical Waterbird Census (NWC):** This census expanded rapidly, supported the designation of many Ramsar Sites across South America and supports the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN).
- **1991 – African Waterbird Census (AfWC):** Built coverage across more than 30 countries, doubling participation within its first decade. Now, as part of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Census, it supports the implementation of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA).
- **2009 – Caribbean Waterbird Census (CWC):** Coordinated by Birds Caribbean, this census monitors waterbirds across islands and coastal wetlands in the Caribbean basin, filling an important geographic gap in global coverage.
- **2011 - Central American Waterbird Census (CAWC):** Coordinated by Manomet Conservation Sciences, the CAWC expanded to over 200 sites surveyed annually across eight countries in its first decade. It identified eight wetlands of international importance, qualifying as Network Sites in the WHSRN.



IWC site density visualised by grid cells. This shows where wetlands are around the world but also the capacity of volunteer counters to undertake the counts.

The importance of the IWC for...



The African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA)

The International Waterbird Census is essential for implementing the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), providing critical data that support the assessment of the status of waterbird populations and guide their conservation across the flyways. The IWC monitors population trends and serves as the primary data source for AEWA's flagship Conservation Status Report (CSR). Its data underpin the amendments to the waterbird populations legal status amendments under AEWA and key processes, including adaptive harvest management under the European Goose Management Platform (EGMP) and the development of Species Action and Management Plans. The IWC also supports the identification of internationally important sites that form a flyway network. By delivering robust, long-term data, the IWC establishes the scientific foundation for AEWA's work and empowers Parties to make evidence-based policy and management decisions for the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats across Africa and Eurasia.



The Caribbean Waterbird Census (CWC)

BirdsCaribbean launched the Caribbean Waterbird Census in 2009 as a region-wide survey to monitor waterbirds and wetlands. From the start, CWC emphasised inclusion - building skills through training workshops, raising awareness, and engaging NGOs, government agencies, communities, and volunteers in monitoring and protecting wetlands. This approach helps achieve the central goal of the CWC: conserving the Caribbean's wetlands and waterbirds through local action, one site at a time.

By connecting people with birds and wetlands across the Caribbean, the CWC strengthens the International Waterbird Census and demonstrates the power of local action in a global movement.

To name a few examples: Bonaire's Cargill Salt Ponds became a WHSRN Site after WILDCONSCIENCE surveys found its importance for migratory waterbirds; Antigua's first birding club, the Wadadli Warblers, setup after CWC training and work with local communities; and Grupo Acción Ecológica surveys at Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic exposed major threats, inspiring collaborations to protect habitats and secure international recognition for these critical sites.

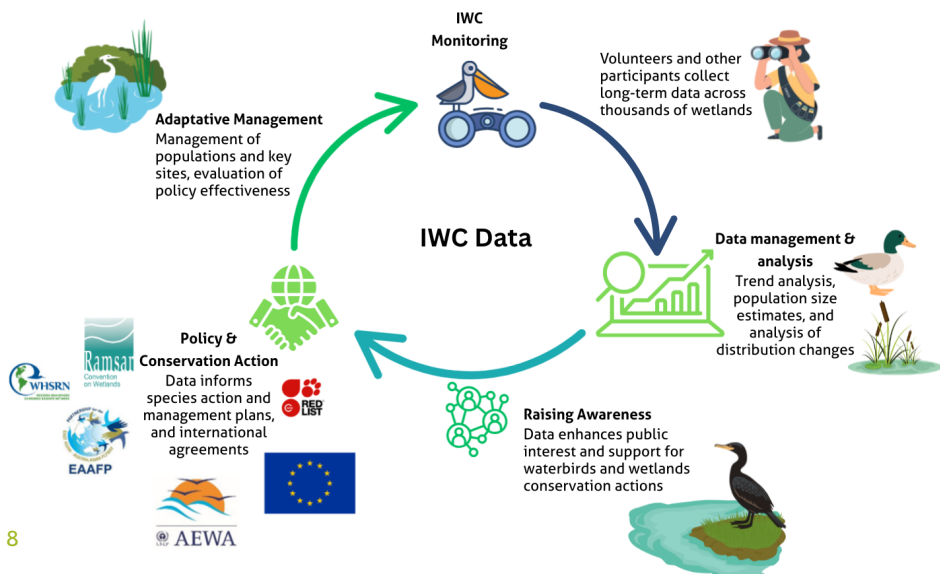
Conservation impact

Informing international policy

The IWC data is directly used in conservation frameworks:

- **The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands:** Local counts provide the evidence for identifying Wetlands of International Importance, and the population estimates derived from the counts are the basis for setting the 1% thresholds for the application of Ramsar Criterion 6. The IWC has helped designate 956 Ramsar sites, covering 1.5 million km² – the size of Mongolia.
- **African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA):** It contributes to classifying waterbird populations in Table 1 of the Agreement, which determines the rules for their conservation and management. In addition, it serves as a basis for many of the success indicators of AEWA's Strategic Plan.
- **East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP):** Identifying internationally important sites for migratory waterbirds for designation as EAAF Network Sites, currently nearly 160 sites in 19 countries.
- **Important Bird Areas (IBAs):** 2,701 IBAs have been identified partly using IWC counts, covering 1.75 million km² – roughly the size of Libya or Mexico.
- **Special Protection Areas (SPAs):** 2,721 SPAs across European Union were identified based on IWC data, covering 418,000 km² – an area larger than Germany.

How the IWC drives conservation action...



Driving science & action

IWC has become one of the most powerful datasets for biodiversity science:

- **Flyway trends:** Multi-species indices generated from the IWC data depict the overall change of waterbirds and provide headline indicators for the EU Birds Directive, AEWA and EAAFP.
- **Waterbird Population Estimates (WPE):** IWC counts form the backbone of these estimates, which guide the identification of key sites for waterbirds under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, AEWA, the EAAFP and the EU Birds Directive.
- **Red Listing:** IWC population trends and distribution data are a major source for IUCN Red List of Threatened Species assessments of waterbird species.
- **Climate change:** Analyses of IWC counts have demonstrated the shift of winter distribution of waterbird species and support flyway-scale climate change adaptation planning to ensure that the protected area network can accommodate it.
- **Protected areas:** IWC data has demonstrated how well-managed protected sites can stabilise populations, while poorly managed ones often fail to prevent declines.
- **Prioritisation of sites for conservation and management:** IWC data has been integral in identifying and prioritising internationally important sites for investments by government and development agencies to develop and implement multi-stakeholder management plans.
- **Fighting zoonotic disease:** Since the first outbreaks of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in wild birds in 2005, IWC data has provided valuable information to improve our understanding of the spread of the viruses between domestic poultry, humans and wild birds working with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), World Health Organization (WHO) and researchers.



"The International Waterbird Census is the backbone of AEWA's work. It provides the robust, long-term data that enables our Parties to make informed, evidence-based decisions to better conserve and manage migratory waterbirds and their habitat across Africa and Eurasia."

Jacques Trouvilliez,
Executive Secretary of AEWA

The importance of the IWC for...



The Initiative for Central Asian Flyway (ICAF)

The IWC has provided annual information on waterbird numbers and status of wetlands across Central, West and South Asia since 1987, supporting designation and monitoring of protected areas and Ramsar Sites. It supports government and partner capacity building efforts and encourages local communities to monitor wetlands and the populations of migratory and resident waterbird depending on them. The census has fostered international cooperation and exchange amongst countries, feeding into policy and management decisions.

Adopted in 2024, ICAF will be a platform for international cooperation of 30 countries under the umbrella of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) to further strengthen regional cooperation for the conservation of all migratory waterbirds and other bird groups and their habitats in the flyway.

In a region with many knowledge gaps and capacity limitations, the IWC will play a crucial role to support ICAF's development and meeting its many objectives.



East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP)

The EAAFP is a unique flyway partnership of governments, intergovernmental agencies, international NGOs, an international organisation and an international private enterprise that aims to protect migratory waterbirds, their habitats and the livelihoods of people dependent upon them. The Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) supports EAAF National Partners in ensuring that "*national monitoring systems to assess the status of migratory waterbirds and their habitat are established, maintained and enhanced*".

The AWC also supports reviews of waterbird population size estimates and trends such as the EAAF Conservation Status Review. The waterbird population estimates provide the latest 1% population thresholds that are required by Partners for designating EAAFP Network Sites.

The annual count data help to identify new wetland sites of international and national importance for waterbirds, and inform prioritisation for conservation. The annual monitoring of condition of the wetlands and new or ongoing threats to waterbirds and wetlands supports local awareness raising and a basis for supporting conservation action.

"The waterbird count is an annual exercise that my organisation, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, leads in the country. While my participation began as an official assignment, the exercise has evolved into an annual event that we eagerly anticipate. It gives us the opportunity to interact and experience first-hand how the ecological matrix is impacted by human activities and changes in average weather conditions. It also affords us the opportunity to enlighten and interact with local communities that live in critical wetland habitats across the country. Finally, the results from the observations made during this count provide the data that we use to design conservation interventions in some of these sites."

Stella Egbe, IWC Coordinator for Nigeria



Waterbird counting in Barr Al Hikmann, Oman. Photo by Taej Mundkur

Support the IWC!

Give to your national network

Every January, thousands of volunteers head out to wetlands to take part in the IWC. You don't need to be a professional birdwatcher or scientist to support the count in your country!

- **Everyone:** Support our conservation action, make a donation to your local coordinating organisation or the Waterbird Fund: waterbird.fund.
- **Local NGOs & Communities:** Use the IWC to highlight the importance of wetlands near you.
- **Media:** Share the story of one of the world's largest biodiversity monitoring efforts.

To find out more about the IWC in your country, visit our website: iwc.wetlands.org and contact your national coordinator.

*Donate now,
scan this QR code!*



Counters around the world. Photo credits - Steeve Mathieu - GEPOMAY, Igor Tupitsyn, Laban Kayitete, F. Sibomana, Richard Kipngeno, Mohamed Elmekki Ali Elbadawi Hussien, Mohamed Abd El Hafeez, Mamikon Ghasabyan, Slave Nakev, Mariagrazia Citterio, Slobodan Marković, Paolo Bocchini, Indawgyi Wildlife Sanctuary, Queensland Wader Study Group (QWSG), Andrej Vizi, Siniša Veselić



Our vision is a world where wetlands are treasured and nurtured for their beauty, the life they support and the resources they provide. Our mission is to inspire and mobilise society to safeguard and restore wetlands for people and nature.



Photo Nicky Petkov

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