SUMMARY REPORT
Asian Waterbird Census 2022

Results of Mid-winter Counts by Biodiversity Management Committees and Asian Waterbird Census Network
Data Collection
Biodiversity Management Committees and Asian Waterbirds Census volunteers

Coordination
State Biodiversity Boards and Union Territory Biodiversity Council
AWC India National and State Coordinators
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We extend our deepest appreciation to the extensive network of Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs), AWC Volunteers, Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations who participated in conducting winter counts of Asian Waterbird Census (AWC), 2022. Their contribution towards field counts and preparation of this report is valuable. Also, we are thankful to the AWC Coordinators and experts for guiding the BMCs on protocol for waterbird monitoring, wetland assessment and participating in AWC.

We are also grateful to all wetland managers and protected area managers for extending their time, energy and enthusiasm to successfully conduct the AWC at their sites.

We are indebted to the officials of State Biodiversity Boards, Union Territory Biodiversity Councils and AWC state Coordinators for meticulously planning and implementing the program within their respective States/UTs. This collaborative endeavor of monitoring waterbirds and wetlands was not possible without their advice and guidance at all stages of this report preparation.

We sincerely acknowledge the guidance provided by the Dr V.B. Mathur, Chairman of the National Biodiversity Authority towards institutionalising AWC within operations of Biodiversity Boards & Councils as an annual affair. We are indebted to Secretary, NBA and the NBA team comprising young professionals, consultants and interns for their contribution in both planning and implementation of this activity. We highly value the support and guidance of the advisory board of the Wetlands International South Asia, Dr Sidharth Kaul (President), Dr Ajit K. Pattnaik (Vice President), Dr J.K. Garg (Honorary Treasurer) towards mainstreaming AWC efforts within national level conservation programmes and actions, and in preparation of this report.

Last but not least, we are thankful to our colleagues at Wetlands International South Asia, Bombay Natural History Society and National Biodiversity Authority for successfully coordinating this collaboration, from the early stages of conceptualisation, to trainings and field counts leading to the release of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Asian Waterbird Census (AWC), a citizen science initiative jointly coordinated by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and Wetlands International South Asia in India, fosters participation of local conservation enthusiasts in monitoring waterbird diversity and wetland conditions.

In order to institutionalise waterbird monitoring in wetlands across the country and beyond the sites designated as protected areas, the AWC network partnered with the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), a nodal organisation on matters relating to the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of its components and equitable sharing of the benefits. The AWC network at the national and state level collaborated with the State Biodiversity Boards (SBB), Union Territory Biodiversity Councils (UTBC), and Panchayat level Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) to promote participation of their members in wetland conservation and waterbird monitoring, and use the census to strengthen People’s Biodiversity Registers (PBR) as mandated under section 41(1) of National Biodiversity Act (2002).

Under the guidance of AWC Coordinators and officials of SBB and UTBC, over 600 BMC members and volunteers representing 119 organisations and 650 volunteers participated in the mid-winter waterbird counts covering 142 wetlands from 19 states and union territories viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi NCT, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhnad, and West Bengal. The nation-wide census reported a total of 179 waterbirds and wetland-dependent avian species, tallying around 1,22,588 (one lakh twenty two thousand five hundred and eighty eight). Many of these species are classified as migratory and use the Central Asian Flyway to visit Indian wetlands during winters. The census also reported several IUCN red-listed threatened species such as Baer’s Pochard, Common Pochard and Lesser Adjutant, underlining its significance as an important biodiversity and habitat monitoring tool.

The collaborative effort highlighted the need of building capacities of the BMC members to realise their full potential in sensitising local stakeholders on biodiversity conservation and preparing ground for community-based biodiversity conservation actions.

The information generated through this process is intended to be used for planning and execution of conservation activities within the country such as identification of wetlands of conservation significance, designation as Ramsar Sites and Flyway Network Sites, inclusion of priority wetlands within national and state level programmes, and promoting community ownership in wetlands management.

The primary objectives of IWC that it has successfully been achieving till now are:

- Monitoring changes in waterbird numbers and distribution by regular, standardized counts of representative wetlands.
- Providing the basis for estimates of waterbird populations (e.g., Bamford et al., 2006).
- Improving knowledge of little-known waterbird species and wetland sites.
- Increasing awareness of the importance of waterbirds and their wetland habitats at local, national, and international levels.

In India, AWC is jointly coordinated by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and Wetlands International South Asia (WISA). The census is carried out by volunteers, interested in collecting information on waterbirds and wetlands. Data collected by the AWC contributes to species and wetlands conservation, development of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, identification and designation of ornithologically important sites (Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas and Ramsar) and studies on bird movements and relationships to avian diseases.

Waterbirds are an important component of wetland landscapes. Wetlands provide a biologically productive and diverse ecosystem, suitable to serve as essential breeding and feeding grounds for a diverse range of resident and migratory waterbirds. Several factors govern the relationship between wetlands and waterbirds, the key being inundation regime and quality of water; availability of food and shelter; and the presence or absence of predators. Conversely, waterbirds may function as indicators of the ecological productivity of wetlands.

Conservation of these species and their habitats needs to be based on quality data and recent information on their distribution and trends. To effectively address this need, AWC has been collating and disseminating information on waterbird counts and wetlands since 1987 to inform governments, conventions, and the public. The AWC runs in parallel with other waterbird censuses carried out in Africa, Europe, Central, and West Asia, the Caribbean, and Central and Southern America under the broad umbrella of the International Waterbird Census (IWC). The IWC is coordinated internationally by Wetlands International (except in the Caribbean and Central America) and is considered as one of the largest and longest-running internationally coordinated citizen-science biodiversity monitoring programmes in the world.

1. ASIAN WATERBIRD CENSUS
2. INSTITUTIONALISATION OF ASIAN WATERBIRD CENSUS IN NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY AUTHORITY PROGRAMMES AND ACTIONS

In order to institutionalise waterbird monitoring in wetlands across the country and beyond the sites designated as protected areas, the AWC network partnered with the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), a nodal organisation on matters relating to the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of its components and equitable sharing of the benefits. The AWC network at the national and state-level collaborated with the State Biodiversity Boards (SBB) and Panchayat level Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) to promote the participation of citizens in wetland conservation and waterbird monitoring, and use the census results to develop local People's Biodiversity Registers (PBR) and summary reports to inform biodiversity conservation and management strategies at various administrative levels.

The collaboration started with a series of training sessions on the AWC for representatives of SBBs and UTBCs. These online training sessions were organised by the NBA, WISA, and BNHS on January 21st and 25th, 2022 (Image 1). The workshops were organised with the objective of training SBB and UTBC officials in conducting the AWC and using it for avian conservation planning and activities. It was attended by over 300 participants representing 28 State Biodiversity Boards and 8 Union Territory Biodiversity Councils. A field-based orientation exercise was conducted on 12th and 19th February 2022 where 14 State Biodiversity Boards collaborated with the AWC State Coordinators and volunteer networks to perform a waterbird census.

Thus, based on the fresh collaborative counts submitted by the respective SBBs of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal, this summary report has been prepared with the objective of serving the purpose of a reporting template and data comprehension. Therefore, this report presents a collation of recent waterbird count information of the above mentioned fourteen states and an analysis of the same for better representation.

Image 1: Snapshots of the virtual training programme on Asian Waterbird Census
3. RESULTS

3.1 WETLANDS & WATERBIRDS REPORTED

The AWC was performed at least once in a total of 142 wetlands from 19 states and union territories viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi NCT, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal. While mid-winter AWC have previously been conducted in many of the above states, some like Meghalaya recorded their maiden AWC. Out of the 142 surveyed wetlands, many fall within the network of protected areas (PAs) and important bird areas (IBAs), while some are classified as Ramsar Sites of India including Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary in Gujarat, Rudrasagar in Tripura, Sambhar Lake in Rajasthan and Bhindawas Wildlife Sanctuary in Haryana. The highest number of wetlands surveyed by BMC members and AWC volunteers under the aegis this joint effort was for Telangana accounting for 39 wetlands, while only a single wetland was surveyed each for the states like Assam and Meghalaya. The highest number of waterbirds counts is reported from West Bengal (30, 235) while the lowest is for the state of Meghalaya (57). State and union territory-wise number of wetlands and total waterbirds counts in the census is displayed in Figure 1 and Map 1.

A total of 179 waterbird and wetland-dependent species were recorded during the survey period. As per the IUCN red list database of threatened species, majority of the species reported in this AWC are classified as LC (Least Concern). However, several threatened species such as Baer’s Pochard (Critically Endangered), Common Pochard and Lesser Adjutant (Vulnerable) and a few Near Threatened species were also reported from this AWC. Thereby, increasing the significance of this survey in the field of waterbird conservation. Many of the reported species also classify as migratory waterbirds as per the BirdLife International database (Birdlife International, 2022). The total waterbirds count reported by the BMC members and AWC volunteers during the AWC 2022 is 1,22,588 (one lakh twenty two thousand five hundred and eighty eight).

Although a number of terrestrial birds having conservation significance were also recorded during the survey, yet their counts have not been used for analysis and report preparation as it’s beyond AWC’s scope and purpose.
The abundance pattern of the waterbird species from the census shows that the Lesser Whistling Duck was most abundant followed by the Northern Pintail, and Green-winged Teal. The list of the five most abundant waterbird species and the number of wetlands they have been found in is displayed in Figure 2. While most reported avifaunal species are classified as LC (Least Concern) some are classified as VU (Vulnerable) and NT (Near Threatened). The IUCN Red List contains explicit criteria and categories to classify the conservation status of individual species on the basis of their probability of extinction and current conservation status. Each category of the list serves as an essential indicator of the health of the wetland’s biodiversity. For more than a list of species and their status, it is a powerful tool to inform and catalyse action for biodiversity conservation and policy change, critical to protecting the avifaunal assemblage in the wetland ecosystem. This report enlists several birds under critical categories with the primary objective of focusing on their immediate conservation actions.

Figure 2: Five most-abundant waterbird species reported during the census (LC stands for least concern and indicates the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species category).

3.2 WETLANDS CONDITION

In addition to the waterbirds counts, the AWC reports on waterbirds habitat features, threats and uses of the wetland as a standard protocol. During this AWC, all major wetlands types of India such as mountain lakes, large reservoirs and coastal wetlands were reported from the 19 States and Union Territories. The assessment reported some of the most common yet pertinent threats to these waterbirds’ habitats, including rampant pollution by solid and domestic wastes, agricultural run-off, encroachment over fringes due to urbanization and catchment level land-use changes. Few wetlands were reported to be affected by disturbed water regime (rise and fall in water levels), mass tourism, and invasion by weeds such as water hyacinth.

This brings to fore the importance of AWC and participation of local communities & BMC members in mitigating the process of wetlands degradation through statutory means mentioned in Biological Diversity Act, 2002.

Gitanjali Kanwar
3.3 CENSUS PARTICIPATION

A total of 622 individuals from 119 organisations and 650 volunteers across 19 states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi NCT, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal participated in the census. The highest number of participants that took part in the census were from Telangana (300), followed by Goa (60) and Maharashtra (49). The respective State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs) of the concerned states who took part in the census were the primary reporting bodies besides/along with other notable national-level organisations, universities, colleges, civil society groups, and community-based associations. The number of participating organisations and participants/attendees from each state have been demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: State-wise participation of volunteers and organisations in AWC-SBB joint exercise in January-February 2022
4. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The citizen-led AWC fosters community participation in monitoring and conservation of waterbirds and their habitats. It provides an opportunity to BMC members and other concerned citizens to strengthen People’s Biodiversity Registers with systematic information on wetlands and waterbirds, and documenting traditional knowledge associated with their conservation and wise-use. The information generated through the AWC can be used to maintain healthy wetlands and promote their sustainable management through livelihood linkages. This joint effort between AWC and NBA network highlighted that such initiatives can help in raising awareness on waterbirds and their conservation issues, effecting behaviour change towards biodiversity conservation, upscaling community-based habitat conservation activities and preparing People’s Biodiversity Registers. Albeit, the survey is primarily focused on assessing waterbird counts, the methodology involved often goes beyond the margins of conventional habitat monitoring, delving into the details of the significant aspects of wetland functioning.

In spite of multi-faceted opportunities and benefits associated with the annual census programme directed primarily at the conservation of wetlands and waterbird habitats, it encounters a number of challenges in its implementation. Primarily, inexperience in waterbirds identification, difference in bird nomenclature and counting. Quality and uniformity in the data reporting/reported are also major issues that can be addressed through regular engagements in terms of capacity building programmes and field visits. There is no information about trend quality for the majority of the species, and a significant amount does not have quality assessments. Finally, the census coverage of major Indian states has not been reported indicating a significant void in data representation and major bias in competitive interpretation.

5. WAY FORWARD

The following measures can help increased participation of BMC members in AWC India:

1. Identifying AWC Champions in each BMC to undertake the census and update the People’s Biodiversity Registers.
2. Training of AWC Champions and local community in waterbirds identification, wetlands conservation and wise-use.
3. Enhancing coordination and reporting mechanisms between BMC members and AWC network of coordinators and volunteers.
5. Improving AWC coverage in the Himalayan and Northeast region of the country.
6. Institutionalising the AWC programme into BMC operations.
7. Improving technology interface in the census process and database management of fair access and use.
## ANNEX
### SUPPLEMENTARY DATASET

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<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>WETLAND</th>
<th>TOTAL COUNT</th>
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Asian Waterbird Census 2022: Summary Report
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