# Newsletter of the Asian Waterbird Census

**No. 17, December 2009**

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## 1. Letter from the AWC Coordinator

Dear AWC coordinators and participants,

At the end of the year 2009 and the festive season, I would like to wish you all joyful and safe travels during your holidays. At this moment I take an opportunity to update you on the Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) and various developments related to bird conservation in our region since January 2009.

Let me first congratulate all the participants, national coordinators, regional coordinators of the AWC and a dedicated team of Wetlands International who have put in tremendous efforts to achieve a remarkable milestone in the form of a 20 years review report of the AWC, titled – *"Status of Waterbirds in Asia- Results of the Asian Waterbird Census:1987-2007".* I am sure this publication will be very useful to base future waterbird and wetland conservation efforts in the region.

In this issue, I have announced the dates for conducting AWC in January 2010 in the region. In order to update you with latest news on the AWC in the region, I have also collated several articles that have been contributed by the participants, national coordinators, regional coordinators and colleagues from the Wetlands International.

I also request all coordinators and participants to specifically look for threatened Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*) during the AWC in your respective regions. This could be one of the reasons, challenges or lures for many experienced birders amongst us to participate actively in the AWC this year.

It is not encouraging to bring the status of reporting of results of the AWC 2009 to you. Unfortunately, unlike the increasing trend in participation for the last few years, this year a decrease of reporting is noticed. I urge all the national and regional coordinators to encourage the participants to join in good numbers for better coverage of wetland sites in your respective countries and regions and for reporting of the count information in good time.

It has been noticed over the years by many organizations dealing with conservation of biodiversity that the funding support for activities such as bird monitoring and conservation is decreasing gradually. However, I personally feel that Asian Waterbird Census is one such volunteer based activity that has been ongoing for over 20 years now without any major funding support, and we will do our best to help continue the process while bringing in more robustness and enhancing reliability of the results. We are enthused by the increasing awareness on conservation of wetlands and waterbirds. Moreover, recent technological advances have made birdwatching gradually easier and affordable for a wider spectrum of the society which provides us with more trained birders than earlier.I strongly urge the coordinators to put in more efforts in bringing these budding birders together and increase their support to the census. The recent evidence on waterbirds being indicators of climate change further increases the significance of AWC process.

With this request I wish you all the best for a great year ahead and a successful AWC 2010,

*Dr Bharat Jethva, AWC Coordinator*
*bharat.jethva@wi-sa.org*

## 2. Dates for Asian Waterbird Census 2010

*Bharat Jethva, AWC Coordinator*
*bharat.jethva@wi-sa.org*

The dates for the Asian Waterbird Census-2010 decided in consultation with many of you is between **9 and 25 January 2010**. This period would provide us three weekends and some local holidays to conduct the work. I request all the National and Regional Coordinators to urgently communicate these dates to their networks and volunteers. The AWC Site and Count forms to be used remain the same, and are available through the AWC webpage at**:**
http://www.wetlands.org/Whatwedo/Wetlandbiodiversity/MonitoringWaterbirds/AsianWaterbirdCensus/AWCFormsGuidelines/tabid/1069/Default.aspx

In case you require any support in locating these forms please feel free to write to me at:
bharat.jethva@wi-sa.org

I assure you that your contribution, multiplied many times over by your counterparts all across the Asian region, will help us to generate a robust dataset that will continue to benefit the conservation of waterbirds and their wetland habitats. Most importantly, kindly do not forget to request for completed count and site forms to be sent to the national/sub-national coordinators for verification and compilation of datasets.

You may also want to visit our webpage for AWC coordinators at:

http://www.wetlands.org/Whatwedo/Biodiversitywaterbirds/InternationalWaterbirdCensusIWC/AsianWaterbirdCensus/AWCCoordinators/tabid/1073/Default.aspx

## 3. AWC 2009 Results Update

Bharat Jethva, AWC Coordinator
bharat.jethva@wi-sa.org

We are now heading towards the AWC-2010 in a few weeks time! At this juncture it is important to provide you all with an update on the status of the AWC-2009 data received. As of 25 December 2009, AWC Coordinators and individual counters had submitted reports from 379 sites for 2009. It appears that the number of participants and site coverage has decreased this year.

The following table provides country wise information on sites covered and status of data submission. We request coordinators that have not yet submitted their reports, to submit them urgently to help collate the data for the year.

**Latest update on the status of the AWC data received by the AWC Coordinator (as of 25 Dec. 2009).**

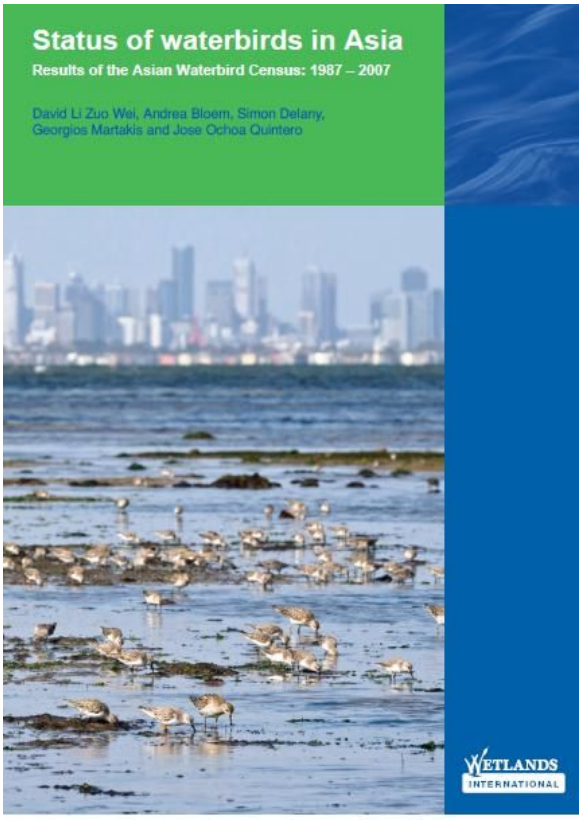
| Country | Sites | Note |
|---|---|---|
| Bangladesh | | Being received |
| Bhutan | | No contact available |
| India | 41 | Gujarat 24 + Maharashtra 17 |
| Maldives | | No contact available |
| Nepal | 11 | |
| Pakistan | | No response |
| Sri Lanka | | To be reported- received data only for 2007 |
| **South Asia** | | |
| Brunei Darussalam | 6 | |
| Cambodia | 10 | |
| Indonesia | | To be reported |
| Lao PDR | 23 | Old data from 1989-2000 (scattered data) |
| Malaysia | 34 | |
| Myanmar | 17 | |
| Philippines | 171 | Being received |
| Singapore | | To be reported |
| Thailand | 47 | To be reported |
| Timor Leste | 1 | |
| Vietnam | | To be reported |
| **Southeast Asia** | | |
| China | 3 | |
| Mainland China | | To be reported |
| Hong Kong | 2 | To be reported |
| Macao | | |
| Taiwan | | To be reported |
| Japan | | To be reported |
| DPR Korea | | No contact available |
| Republic of Korea | | To be reported |
| Mongolia | 11 | |
| Eastern Russia | 2 | |
| **East Asia** | | |
| Australia | | |
| New Zealand | | To be reported |
| Papua New Guinea | | No contact available |
| Total No. of Sites | **379** | |

# 4. AWC News from the Region

## i. Status of Waterbirds in Asia, Results of the Asian Waterbird Census: 1987-2007

Wetlands International congratulates all the contributors to the Asian Waterbird Census to mark their contribution to the milestone review of the Asian Waterbird Census data collected during 1987 to 2007.

With active contributions from participants and coordinators from South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, and Australia; this work was carried out by David Li, Andrea Bloem, Simon Delany, Georgios Martakis and Jose Ochoa Quintero and was edited by Taej Mundkur, David Bakewell and Gabriel Chong from Wetlands International. This publication has been possible due to generous support from the Keidanren Nature Conservation Fund of Japan.




This milestone review provides a comprehensive analysis of data from over 6700 wetland sites from 27 countries encompassed by two major migratory bird flyways in the region, the Central Asian and the East Asian – Australasian Flyways.

The report details information on the wetlands based on their importance of the waterbird populations they support, species distribution maps and the population trends of selected species in the AWC region.

We strongly feel that the 20 years review report with its comprehensive database provides a strong standalone baseline to compare with future waterbird monitoring efforts in the region. This important work will also go a long way in supporting conservation efforts of migratory and resident waterbirds and wetlands in the near future, particularly when more people realise the value of bird monitoring to support research to understand the impacts of climate change on migratory birds and their habitats...

The report is printed by Malaysia office of Wetlands International and is available for sale from the Natural History Book Service, United Kingdom www.nhbs.co.uk . The report shall be available online soon for free download from the Wetlands International website.

The report has been distributed to all national and regional AWC coordinators. Those who have not received a copy can write to Alvin Lopez of WI Malaysia office on alvin@wetlands.org.my

## ii. Announcing the secretariat for East Asian – Australasian Flyway (EAAF) Partnership

**Aram Aram Lee**
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The East Asian - Australasian Flyway (the Flyway) is one of eight major migratory waterbird flyways around the globe. It extends from within the Arctic Circle in Russia and Alaska, southwards through East and South-east Asia, to Australia and New Zealand in the south, encompassing 22 countries. Migratory waterbirds share this flyway with 45% of the world's human population. The Flyway is home to over 50 million migratory waterbirds - including shorebirds, anatidae (ducks, geese and swans) and cranes - from over 250 different populations, including 28 globally threatened species. There are currently 700 sites recognised as internationally important to migratory waterbirds along the flyway, many of which are located adjacent to human settlement and vulnerable to rapid social and economic development pressures.

The East Asian – Australasian Flyway (EAAF) Partnership was launched in November 2006 (http://www.eaaflyway.net) to foster international collaboration for the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats and the livelihoods of people dependent upon them. The Incheon City

Government, Republic of Korea, has committed to provide funds to establish and support the Partnership Secretariat, under supervision of the Ministry of Environment on behalf of the Partnership. Mr. Roger Jaensch, was appointed as Chief Executive of the Partnership and has settled in Korea to take up his position in November 2009. Five staff, two appointed by the Chief Executive and three seconded from the Incheon City Government are currently working at the Secretariat. The Secretariat wishes to promote the Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) within the flyway by encouraging, and where appropriate supporting, the Partners to participate in the AWC. This role will be enhanced when our Science Officer comes on to staff early in 2010. For further inquiries, please contact Mr. Jaensch at chief@eaaflyway.net or Aram Lee, Communication & Information Officer, at aram0124@gmail.com

## iii. Will Asian Waterbird Census counters find the Slender-billed Curlew?

**Nicola Crockford,**
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The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* is the only lost bird of the Palearctic apart from Crested Shelduck *Tadorna cristata* on the eastern seaboard. Having been abundant during the northern winter in the Mediterranean in the first half of the nineteenth century, there have been no verified records of this Critically Endangered species for about a decade, with none at the last known wintering site, in Morocco, since 1995. From the single confirmed breeding site, near Tara in the Omsk area in south-west Siberia, the only records are from the first quarter of the twentieth century.

To try to find it and take conservation action for it, before it is too late, the first coordinated search of the potential non-breeding grounds of the Slender-billed Curlew has been organised for 2009/2010. The aim is to satellite tag any birds found to determine their important sites, especially their breeding grounds which are regarded as too much of a 'needle in a haystack' to find by searching.

The main focus of the search during the northern winter is North Africa but other countries of the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea and Persian Gulf will be covered in addition. There will also be a major search of potential moult sites in August around the Aral, Caspian, Azov and Black Seas. Spring passage sites are less of a priority to search as the birds are unlikely to be presenting long enough to deploy the international rapid reaction catching and tagging team.

However, there is some reason to speculate that the bird did not just migrate south westwards from its breeding ground, as has previously been supposed. Reports of Slender-billed Curlew from Gujarat, India and Pakistan, and a couple of skins collected in Honshu Province of Japan hint at the possibility of an undetected southern or eastern migration route. The bird could have been overlooked in Asia if present in countries that have been relatively inaccessible to skilled birders and because the bird poses identification challenges and may feed on habitats, some way from wetlands that are not frequented by birdwatchers.

The International Waterbird Census (IWC)/Asian Waterbird Census (AWC provides the main framework for the search. However, it takes time to distinguish Slender-billed Curlews from other curlews and whimbrels, and they may feed on agricultural land as much as two kilometres away from the water bodies where they roost. Hence, it is desirable for regular AWC counters to be supplemented by additional bird identification experts, well equipped with telescopes, telephoto digital photographic/video equipment and ideally sound recording equipment, which can focus on the Slender-billed Curlew search.

Various materials are available on the website www.slenderbilledcurlew.net to aid search efforts. These include an identification leaflet with guidance on how to report any possible Slender-billed Curlews, videos and sound recordings (which make good mobile phone ring tones!) and the August 2009 IWC newsletter devoted to the Slender-billed Curlew search.

As well as encouraging participation in the search we are urging people to help narrow the search by submitting any past (possible) Slender-billed Curlew records, including of skins, to nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk

For any records of birds that may still be present, please send records/digital images/sound recordings etc immediately to the
- Slender-billed Curlew Working Group Coordinator: timcleeves@yahoo.co.uk, mobile +44 7920050670, 11 Plessey Crescent, Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear NE25 8QJ United Kingdom and
- Slender-billed Curlew Working Group Chair Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk, tel +44 1767 680551.

Photo by Richard Porter, Slender Billed Curlew and Curlew, Yemen Jan 1984 AA

## iv. Waterbird monitoring training course held in Yangtze basin, China

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and
**Lei Gang & Lei Jinyu**
WWF- China.

Efforts to improve the monitoring of waterbirds in the middle and lower Yangtze basin continued recently during a training course in waterbird monitoring that was held near Dongting Hu, Hunan, on 8-11 December 2009. This course was organised by WWF-China and the State Forestry Administration (SFA), both key supporters of the Yangtze Wetland Network, and supported by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT). Around 30 participants attended the course, primarily managers of wetland reserves throughout the Yangtze region (Hunan, Hubei, Anhui, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, and Shanghai). Lectures included waterbird identification, monitoring frameworks and counting techniques, and data management, as well as opportunities to further develop identification and counting skills in the field.

This was the fourth such waterbird monitoring training course organised through the Yangtze Wetland Network in recent years, and the first as a partnership between WWF, SFA and WWT. Further activities to continue the development of a comprehensive waterbird monitoring network are planned for 2010, including more training courses, the production of an updated identification guide, and the development of improved data management systems. If funding can be found, it is also intended to repeat the comprehensive waterbird census in the middle and lower Yangtze basin last carried out in February 2005. These activities all help to support the AWC and the recently agreed Ramsar Resolution of Flyways, which calls for greater reporting on the state of waterbird populations. This monitoring work is also helping to underpin WWF-Chinas ongoing work to reduce the impact of climate change at wetlands in this region, under their partnership with HSBC.

Finally, waterbird research also continues to flourish. Under the guidance of Cao Lei (University of Science and Technology China, in Hefei) and Tony Fox (NERI, Denmark), researchers and students have been studying the ecology of Lesser White-fronted Geese at Dongting Hu and Swan Geese and Shengjin Hu for the past two northern winters. This important work will help to ensure these crucial sites are managed appropriately for these species in the future.

## v. AWC in Nepal- plan for January 2010

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The 2010 January will be a special count year for us. During this count year we will aim to cover five of Nepal's nine Ramsar Sites. Our focus will be all the lowland Ramsar Sites including the Rara Lake situated in the mid-hill region. Rara is the largest of the lakes in Nepal and has been recently declared as a Ramsar Site. Among the Ramsar sites situated in the mountain region, this lake has a high potential to hold larger number of waterbirds. While few species may be using the lake area for breeding, most waterbirds seen here use the lake as staging point during their migration. The counts will be carried out by the government staff who is working for the Rara National Park.

Four major Ramsar wetlands of terai region will be counted under the stewardship of various local organizations that are based close to these sites. Community-based organization Ghodaghodi Lake Conservation and Preservation Committee has kindly agreed to cover the Ghodaghodi Lake of far western Nepal. This charity has been responsible for active protection of the birds and fish in the lake. Jagdishpur Lake Conservation and Tourism Promotion Centre have kindly agreed to cover Jagadishpur Reservoir of western Nepal. Although this local NGO is active in the area for the lake protection, recent fish-farming contract in the lake has been detrimental to birds, fish and several species of tortoise. Himalayan Nature will provide technical assistance during this count and will highlight the plight of the birds our wetland birds are facing. In the central Nepal, Bees Hazaari Tal will be counted by members of Bird Education Society (BES), the leading bird conservation organization in the region. BES has been providing Bees Hazaari Tal counts for a number of years and is actively engaged to raise concerns about the protection of the lake. Similarly at Koshi, Himalayan Nature will concentrate on conducting census and intends to involve more than a dozen

local people to ensure all the important wetlands are covered and the approach becomes participatory in nature.

After we have conducted counts at Koshi Tappu this year, we intend to publish a paper specifically looking at the changes in birdlife communities before and after the flood. We will consult our international partners regarding the relevancy of such a paper.

Bird Conservation Nepal, the leading bird conservation organization in the country will be assisting in the counts in Kathmandu and Pokhara valley. National Trust for Nature Conservation will help count the wetlands in Bardia National Park and Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve. Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge and TigerTops Tharu Village are helping with their excellent count data for Pokhara and Chitwan. Koshi Camp, Sukla Phanta Wildlife Camp, Machan Paradise View and Motel Avocado are few private companies that have been supporting and involved for midwinter waterbird count. We very much look forward to work with Conservation and Sustainable Use of Wetlands in Nepal (CSUWN) –a UNDP/GEF/Government of Nepal-funded project in two of the Ramsar sites of Nepal –Koshi Tappu and Ghodaghodi Lake for any possible collaboration and support.

## vi. Satellite Tracking of Lesser Flamingos in India

**B. M. Parasharya**
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India may join an international project to satellite-track the movements of Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* under a study proposed by scientists from Germany and India to tag birds from Gujarat's coastal sites.

The scientists plan to observe long-distance travel and local conditions associated with the movements of Lesser Flamingos into and out of Gujarat — one of only four regions of the world with a high concentration of this species.

Dr. Volker Salewski, a senior ornithologist at the Max Planck institute is the Principal Investigator of the project whereas Dr. B. M. Parasharya, an agricultural ornithologist at the Anand Agricultural University, Gujarat is the project's Indian collaborator.

Researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology at Radolfzell in southern Germany and the Anand Agricultural University in Gujarat, India plan to fix solar-powered transmitters on the backs of 20 to 25 Lesser Flamingos between February and April 2010. Position-tracking satellites will pick up the transmitter signals, allowing scientists to observe the movement of the birds for about four years.

Lesser Flamingo populations in Africa and Asia appear clustered in four regions — eastern Africa, western Africa, south Africa and western India. The Rann of Kachchh is among a small number of regular breeding sites for the birds worldwide. It is not know whether the four regional populations are connected. The project, yet to be approved by the Indian government, is intended to corroborate — or disprove — speculation that the Lesser Flamingos may be moving between eastern Africa and India, flying along coastal zones or island hopping. Lesser Flamingos are not migratory — they do not show regular movements between breeding sites and fixed areas where they spend non-breeding seasons. But there is abundant evidence for their nomadic, irregular movements. Dramatic fluctuations in Lesser Flamingo populations have been a long-standing mystery in Gujarat. This study will throw some light on their nomadic movements.

In the past, ornithologists have observed rapid but temporary declines in Lesser Flamingo populations in eastern Africa coinciding with increases in head-counts in southern Africa or western India.

The tracking project began when Dr. Salewski and his colleagues tagged four Lesser Flamingos at Lake Abijatta in Ethiopia in April this year and 15 more birds at Lake Bogoria in Kenya in June. The backpack transmitters showed a bird from Ethiopia flying 95 km northeast, while a few birds from Kenya had moved southward, one of them reaching Lake Manyara in Tanzania.

But Lesser Flamingos respond quickly to changes in environmental conditions. When the Rann dries up, the birds move to the coastal areas. Whether in Africa or India, the birds appear to rely on relatively few patches of good feeding habitat.

The scientists hope to correlate the birds' movements with environmental changes at their breeding sites and feeding zones. "Insights into the movement ecology of these birds would be important for conservation strategies.

Although the Lesser Flamingo is the most numerous flamingo — the world's largest concentration in eastern Africa accounts for up to 2.5 million birds, about 75 per cent of the global population — it is classified as "Near Threatened" under the IUCN Threat Category because of a lack of suitable breeding sites.

## vii. Tribute to Dr. Chaman Lal Trisal (14.06-1948-10.09.2009)

Dr. Chaman Trisal, Founder Director of Wetlands International – South Asia and a wetland conservationist of exceptional calibre left for his heavenly abode on 10 September 2009.

Dr. Trisal started his professional career in January 1981 as a Scientist working with UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme. He gradually worked through various positions to finally being a Director within the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1993. By this time, he had already established his vision by playing a crucial role in shaping of the National Wetland Programme in India. He represented India in the Ramsar Convention and was nominated to its first Scientific and Technical Review Panel. He contributed immensely to India's position in all the meetings of the triennial Conference of Parties of the Ramsar Convention.

Dr. Trisal left the Ministry of Environment and Forests of India in 1996 to establish the Wetlands International – South Asia office in New Delhi. In 1997, he launched his first major initiative in north east India within the support of India Canada Environment Facility. The project, implementation of which lasted for more than 7 years, was an ambitious programme for conservation of Loktak Lake, with focus on collection of scientific data on various wetland functions and ecological processes and building capacity at multiple levels for lake management. It is to his credit that the Loktak Development Authority transformed from an engineering organization to an organization capable of implementing integrated wetland management initiatives.

Dr. Trisal firmly believed in multi-disciplinary approaches to wetland conservation, and mentored a strong team of hydrologists, ecologists, economists and GIS specialists within his organization. He particularly focused on role of water in wetland management, and designed initiatives aimed at supporting integration of wetlands into river basin management. It was this recognition that was behind the invitation to Dr. Trisal to the Ramsar Convention Secretariat to present the guidelines for integrating wetlands into river basin management in the Conference of Parties Meeting held in Costa Rica in 1999.

His extensive knowledge on the high altitude wetland systems made him an avid supporter of their priority consideration in the promotion and development of conservation and management programmes. He played a crucial role in initiating a dialogue between Himalayan countries – India, China, Bhutan and Nepal. His efforts yielded the Delhi Declaration on conservation of Himalayan wetlands endorsed by the four countries in February 2008.

When Dr. Trisal breathed his last he was working on a book on wetlands and climate change adaptation primarily focused on high altitude systems. He finally left for his heavenly abode on September 10, 2009 after a brief illness. When his ashes were finally immersed in River Yamuna, a wetland scientist was finally rested to the place he loved the most – a wetland. He is survived by his wife Sudesh Trisal and three daughters, Deepshikha, Priya and Monal.

**Dr. Trisal will be sorely missed by his large group of friends and collaborators worldwide.**

**Ritesh Kumar**
Wetlands International – South Asia
New Delhi