

Towards a high quality waterbird monitoring programme

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The census in Sri Lanka will be described. A suggestion will be made to enhance census information by selecting a day or days to optimise the numbers of birds and species surveyed. A few simple methods for better censusing evolved during experience in Sri Lanka will be recounted. Dealing with taxonomic changes will be addressed.

Sri Lanka has numerous wetlands rich in waterbirds. Some of these are, or are within, Protected Areas. The island is the final destination for large numbers of wintering migrants which fly southwards from northern countries through India.

Every year since 1984 a census of waterbirds in Sri Lanka has been conducted by the Ceylon Bird Club, in association with Wetlands International and its predecessor. It was initially countrywide, then excluded certain areas in some years because of the armed conflict, and is now resuming complete coverage. Each year 20-30 members of the CBC assisted by a few selected others have engaged in this activity during chosen days in January or February. The highlights are reported in the CBC's monthly journal. Every year the club publishes a report of the census, with its tabulated data, a review of the status of wetlands, and other relevant remarks, especially on species populations. Sri Lanka's two Ramsar sites were declared mainly owing to the club's proposal and persuasion, and information which was gathered partly from the census.

The total count countrywide has ranged from c. 50,000 to 300,000 birds. The number of species recorded in the census has averaged c. 95.

In certain years large numbers of waterbirds observed during November and sometimes in December seem to vanish with the rains during the latter part of December and January and often reappear a little later. Figures from the census show the count to be on average much lower in such years. For this reason discussion is needed to enhance census information by selecting a day or days to optimise the numbers of birds and species surveyed. Possible movements of birds within the island or externally have to be considered.

The coverage has generally been satisfactory. Bird identification and counting standards have been consistently good. Planning the census, informing CBC members of it, assigning more competent counters for evenly distributing censusing skills geographically, making area allocations by personally contacting members and mailing circulars, providing advice and maps when necessary, co-ordination during the census, etc. have been effected each year, and useful methods in these regards evolved over the years.

The effects of taxonomic changes on the recording of data needs to be addressed.