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PROJECT NEWS

'Wings Over Wetlands' project

A major Global Environment Facility project on sustainable wetland networks for migratory waterbirds in Africa and Eurasia was launched on 20 November 2006 in Bonn, Germany. The US\$12 million Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project is the largest international wetland and waterbird conservation initiative ever undertaken in the African–Eurasian region and is intended to conserve the critical areas needed by waterbirds migrating across these continents. The Project was designed and is being implemented as a collaborative effort between Wetlands International and BirdLife International, with support from the United Nations Office for Project Services and UN Environment Program/GEF.

Nick Davidson, Ramsar's Deputy Secretary General, stressed the importance of the project: "WOW is particularly significant as it will help countries to simultaneously deliver their commitments under a number of key Multilateral Environmental Agreements through one set of coordinated actions". These directly include the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the African–Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement, as well as the Convention on Migratory Species and the CBD. He explained that WOW activities will support implementation of the Ramsar Convention in a number of ways, including through wetland sustainable management demonstration projects in a number of designated and candidate Ramsar sites; exchange of knowledge, training and capacity building, with assistance of the Ramsar Secretariat's regional teams; translation of the Ramsar toolkit of guidelines for the wise use of wetlands into Russian and Arabic in order to increase their accessibility for wetland managers and decision-makers in the region; and identification of the key sites network for waterbirds throughout the flyways in the region, which will support Ramsar Contracting Parties in their identification and designation of Ramsar sites.

For further details please see www.flywaysproject.org

CONSERVATION NEWS

Red Knot named candidate for Endangered Species Act protection

Because of the declining population trend in the Red Knot, *Calidris canutus*, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated the species as a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection. For more detail go to: <http://www.whsrn.org/news/whsrnews.html>

Second season of the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Project: April–May 2007

Saemangeum, on the west coast of South Korea, was until recently recognised as the single most important staging site for migratory shorebirds in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. This may no longer be the case, as construction of the Saemangeum sea-wall was completed in late April 2006. The 33 km dam across the Mangyeung and Dongjin Estuaries is part of the largest "reclamation" in the world, and will convert c.400 km² of tidal flats to land and a freshwater reservoir. There is much to be learned about how shorebirds respond to habitat loss of this kind, and their effects on shorebird populations, so it is extremely important that the consequences of the reclamation, both at the local and at the flyway level, are measured and adequately documented. Last year the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG) and Birds Korea formed a partnership to conduct the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Project (SSMP). The objective of the project, a three-year program, is to document the effects of the Saemangeum reclamation on shorebirds, in Saemangeum itself and in adjacent estuarine systems (the Geum Estuary and Gomso Bay) which may receive displaced birds. Results of these studies will be disseminated widely to inform future conservation work in the East Asia–Australasian flyway.

A report on the surveys in April/May 2006 was released at a series of workshops in Korea in September 2006. This, and other information, can be found on the websites of Birds Korea (<http://www.birdskorea.org/saemref.asp>) and Birds Australia (<http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/articles/saemangeum.html>). A technical write-up (to be published soon in volume 50 of *Stilt*) will also be uploaded to these sites in the next month or so. In brief, we counted a minimum of 198,031 shorebirds in Saemangeum, 15 of which (including the endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper) occurred in internationally significant numbers. Great Knot and probably many other species used the region as a final fuelling point for the flight to the breeding grounds. Local distribution of the shorebirds within the Saemangeum area changed after closure of the sea-wall resulted in a decline in tidal range (with dried-out inner estuarine sites being abandoned by shorebirds altogether) and a dramatic die-off of benthic molluscs. Many shorebirds then fed on the dying molluscs and this temporary food source may have enabled them to stage successfully; we had no clear evidence that birds abandoned Saemangeum on northwards migration in 2006. However, in brief surveys in September 2006, enormous areas of tidal flat in Saemangeum had already changed to dry saltmarsh, and the remaining tidal

flat areas appeared to be less rich in benthos and shorebirds than in the past. Therefore the area and quality of suitable habitat for shorebirds in Saemangeum is likely to be greatly diminished by the next northwards migration. We also found a minimum of 82,990 shorebirds in the Geum Estuary on northwards migration, including internationally significant numbers of at least 13 species; these include perhaps the largest counts made at any single site of the globally endangered Nordmann's Greenshank. With the loss of Saemangeum to shorebirds, the Geum Estuary is now likely to be South Korea's premier shorebird site. Unfortunately, it too is threatened by a major land reclamation project, and we believe that the SSMP data will be vital in arguments calling for this internationally important site's conservation.

The next SSMP survey will be carried out in April and May, 2007. The objectives of this survey will be:

1. To document numbers of shorebirds occurring in Saemangeum, the Geum and Gomso Bay on northwards migration to enable comparison with baseline data gathered in 2006.
2. To document the timing of shorebird migration through the region, a necessary step if the overall number of birds using it as a staging area is to be estimated;
3. To make resightings of colour-marked birds, so we can assess the migratory origins of Saemangeum birds and predict where population declines caused by Saemangeum will be observed;
4. To document roost locations, local shorebird movements and short-term effects of construction of the Saemangeum sea-wall.

The survey will run from the start of April till late May 2007, and we are seeking further volunteers to assist in this essential fieldwork, particularly during the four key periods when spring tides will enable us to carry out major counts. These are 2–6 April, 15–21 April, 3–6 May and 15–21 May. Volunteers are welcome to come for one or more of these tide series – the more the better. Some financial assistance in regard to accommodation and travel within Korea may be available. Last year we had a diverse group from seven different countries and we encourage a similar group this year. While experience at shorebird counting is preferable we are seeking people with a range of skills. Participation in the program will provide an outstanding opportunity to see some excellent birds, while contributing significantly to one of the most important conservation initiatives in the region, one with direct relevance for the conservation of the Flyway's migratory shorebirds. If you would like further information or wish to discuss the project please contact Nial Moores (Birds Korea) spoonbillkorea@yahoo.com, or AWSG specialists Danny Rogers drogers@melbpc.org.au, Phil Battley philbattley@quicksilver.net.nz and Ken Gosbell ken@gosbell.id.au

*Ken Gosbell, Danny Rogers,
Nial Moores and Phil Battley*

Ramsar News

Liberia has designated four new Wetlands of International Importance, bringing its total of designated sites to five. From a small rice-dominated site to a large mangrove forest along three rivers, to an important mangrove area associated with the capital city, Monrovia, the sites bring an interesting

variety to the Ramsar List, and all are important for the wildlife they support and the services they provide for the population of Liberia. A Ramsar Small Grants Fund contribution was helpful in the preparation of the data for these listings.

São Tomé and Príncipe has become the 153rd Contracting Party to the Convention on Wetlands. Africa's smallest country comprises two small, volcanic islands in the Gulf of Guinea straddling the equator about 250 km north-west of the coast of Gabon, with an overall human population of something like 170,000. The new Party's obligatory first Wetland of International Importance has been named as **Ilots Tinhosas** (23 ha), two small rocky islands, Tinhosa Grande (20 ha) and Tinhosa Pequena (3 ha), unvegetated and uninhabited by humans, lying between São Tomé and Príncipe. The site supports an important community of seabirds and serves as a breeding site for more than 300,000 migratory waterbirds, including Brown Gannet, Sooty Tern, Brown and Black Noddy, and in lesser numbers, Yellow-billed Tropicbird. Considerable assistance to the accession procedure was provided through small grants from the Ramsar Secretariat and from a Wetlands International project funded by the government of the Netherlands. Some photographs of São Tomé's wetlands can be seen at http://ramsar.org/wn/w.n.saotome_joins.htm.

The **United Kingdom** has designated a new Wetland of International Importance located on the Isle of Man. **Ballaugh Curragh** (193 ha) is a complex mosaic of interrelated peatland habitats dominated by grey willow and birch scrub locally known as *curragh*. Of particular significance is the presence of wet bog woodland, natural dystrophic ponds, Molinia meadows on peaty soils, and especially the purple moor-grass-dominated fen pastures with good populations of marsh orchids. Amongst the high diversity of breeding birds the site also supports the threatened Corncrake, which is ascribed to the continuing presence of traditionally managed farmland. The biodiversity of the site is known to have contributed to its cultural importance as an early settlement, and hence to its considerable value as an archaeological resource. Thus Ballaugh Curragh forms a culturally-defined area of the Isle of Man as well as a distinct wetland, and as such it has provided valuable archaeological and palynological (spores and pollen) records.

Uganda has added nine new sites to the List of Wetlands of International Importance. The sites contribute a variety of wetland types to the total area of Ramsar sites, going from Uganda's largest tract of swamp forest to extensive papyrus tracts and an impressive waterfall system. Thanks to the new designations, the country can now afford extra protection to the habitats of endangered species such as the globally vulnerable Shoebill, the Papyrus Gonolek, and the Sitatunga, which constitute important tourist attractions. The cultural and socio-economic value of these wetlands should also be emphasized, as local communities depend on them for their survival in terms of fish, construction material, medicines, flood protection, water filtration, grazing and much more. Brief descriptions of the new sites, with photographs, can be seen at http://ramsar.org/wn/w.n.uganda_nine.htm.

Cameroon has designated as its second Wetland of International Importance the **Barombi Mbo Crater Lake** (415 ha). The site forms, with three other crater lakes in the Southwest Province of Cameroon, the so-called 'Afrotropical Cameroon Crater Lakes Ecoregion'. It is famous among biologists for the occurrence of 12 endemic fish species, rendering it one of the places with the highest densities of endemic species per

area in the world. For evolutionary biologists, the lake represents one of the few examples where new species have evolved within the confines of a small area by 'sympatric speciation'. Lake Barombi Mbo is also important due to the presence of freshwater sponges, one of which is also endemic. It is an important sacred site to the Barombi tribe: the social and cultural life of the Barombi Mbo people is intimately linked to the use of the resources of the lake through fishing, mythology and transport, and to the surrounding land through farming. It is also a source of clean water for the metropolis of Kumba and its environs.

Korea has designated *Mulyeongari-oreum* (31 ha) on the island of Jeju some 100 km south of the Korean Peninsula as its 5th Wetland of International Importance. The site comprises a small crater lake located on top of an 'oreum', or secondary volcano, around Halla mountain formed from volcanic eruptions between 100 and 2.5 thousand years ago. The site, with seasonally varying water levels, provides habitat for two endangered species, the giant water bug and Narrow-mouth frog. It is also known as 'Su-ryeong-ak' which means a hill with holy water. All development activities have been prohibited since the site was designated as the country's first wetland conservation area in 2000 and public access will be prohibited through July 2007 to allow building of a visitors' centre and nature trails. A comprehensive wetland conservation plan has been prepared by the Ministry of Environment. A map and some photographs of the new site are available at http://ramsar.org/wn/w.n.repkorea_mulyeon.htm.

Comoros has designated two volcanic mountain wetlands on the largest and second-largest islands. *Le Karthala* (13,000 ha) is a well-known active volcano with its 3 km-wide caldera. Its western and southern slopes are covered by a dense, humid forest which harbours several endemic species and contributes to global biodiversity conservation. The site hosts the entire bird community of the island, with five endemic endangered species including the Comoro White-eye, the Comoro Scops-Owl, the Grand Comoro Flycatcher, the Comoro Drongo and the Mayotte Drongo. Two threatened butterfly species are also present. *Le Mont Ntringui* (3,000 ha) comprises Mt Ntringui, the island's highest point, and the crater lake Dzilandzé, which is the largest freshwater body on the island. The site provides a habitat for the endemic, critically endangered Livingstone's Flying Fox, one of the world's largest fruit bats; the Mongoose Lemur, also vulnerable; and endemic bird and plant species, which depend on each other for their reproduction, dispersal and survival. Permanent rivers along the slopes of Mt Ntringui are providential for water supply, irrigation and as a source of water for livestock. A photograph and a few maps of the new sites can be seen at http://ramsar.org/wn/w.n.comores_two_e.htm.

There are presently 1,634 Ramsar sites in 153 countries, covering a surface area of 145.6 million hectares.

RESEARCH TOOLS

Shorebird Conservation Toolkit

WWF-Australia with funding from the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust is pleased to announce the launch of the Shorebird Conservation Toolkit (www.shorebirds.org.au) to help protect and enhance shorebird habitat across Australia. The toolkit builds on the success of the national Shorebird Conservation Project (2001–2005), draw-

ing from over 31 on-ground and community-driven shorebird conservation projects. The toolkit is a comprehensive resource that will enable users to:

- ▲ understand and appreciate shorebirds, their habitat and conservation needs;
- ▲ locate important shorebird sites in Australia and access population estimates;
- ▲ develop site survey and monitoring programs;
- ▲ identify/assess site management needs, and implement/evaluate management actions;
- ▲ write grant applications, site communication plans and media releases;
- ▲ access existing resources;
- ▲ identify and advocate international/national conservation options;
- ▲ access organisations with knowledge/expertise in practical shorebird and wetland conservation.

Wildlife counts software

Wildlife Counts is a training program for estimating population sizes. It features seven scenarios: *Swans on Lake*, *Snowgeese*, *Overflight of Geese*, *Salmon in a Stream*, *Ducks on a Pond*, *Caribou Herd*, and *Random Points*, which imitate shorebirds. It offers ten levels of experience (i.e. amount of time you have to make your guess). The output tells you how far off you were and is exportable into a spreadsheet. The program costs US\$39. You can also download a free demo version. See <http://www.wildlifecounts.com/>

Shorebirds of conservation concern in the Western Hemisphere

The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN, pronounced "whissern") has added a new tool useful to shorebird conservationists to their website: an Excel workbook identifying and categorizing 146 taxa (species or subspecies) of high priority shorebirds, based on small population size; known or suspected population declines; habitat loss or high threat of such loss; and in a few cases, severe gaps in knowledge. The workbook also contains a descriptive page with sources, definitions and other documentation. The authors are Brad Andres (US Fish & Wildlife Service), Rob Clay (BirdLife International), and Charles Duncan (WHSRN Executive Office). It can be downloaded at <http://www.whsrn.org/shorebirds/status.html>.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Ramsar Small Grants Fund

The Ramsar Small Grants Fund was established by Ramsar in 1990 as a mechanism to assist developing countries and those with economies in transition in implementing the Convention and to enable the conservation and wise use of wetland resources. Since then, it has provided funding and co-funding for up to 40,000 Swiss francs (about US\$ 32,000) per project, for something like 165 projects totalling about 6 million francs. The deadline for the submission of project proposals for the 2007 cycle will be 30 June 2007. General information on the Ramsar Small Grants Fund can be seen at http://ramsar.org/sgf/key_sgf_index.htm.

PUBLICATIONS

Ramsar Handbooks for the Wise Use of Wetlands – 3rd edition

The *Ramsar Handbooks for the Wise Use of Wetlands* were first published in 2000. In the 3rd edition, there will be 17 volumes of guidance grouped under the “three pillars” of the Convention (Wise Use of Wetlands, Ramsar Sites, and International Cooperation). Five volumes are already completed, and they are available for download and eventually on CD-ROM in PDF format. The menu of both completed and awaited volumes can be found at http://ramsar.org/lib/lib_handbooks2006_e.htm.

Economic valuation of wetlands

The Ramsar Convention has long recognized the importance of wetland economic valuation in contributing to well-informed planning and decision-making. A new report offers guidance on practical methods for wetland valuation: *Valuing wetlands: Guidance for valuing the benefits derived from wetland ecosystem services* is now available in a 50-page PDF (1.6MB), published jointly as Ramsar Technical Report No. 3 and as No. 27 in the Convention on Biological Diversity’s CBD Technical Series. You can download it at http://ramsar.org/lib/lib_rtr03.pdf.

Avian influenza and wild birds

The International Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza has produced an 8-page brochure, *Avian Influenza and Wild Birds*, aimed at the public on the state of scientific information about the spread of avian flu, particularly with regards to wild birds and wetland habitats. It’s available in PDF format at http://ramsar.org/features/features_avianflu.pdf.

They have also produced a new web site on Avian Influenza, wildlife, and the environment (<http://www.aiweb.info>). The goals of the AIWebsite are to:

- ▶ distribute and disseminate substantive information on avian influenza and the environment with a particular focus on migratory birds;
- ▶ offer a global and comprehensive perspective (involving input from several organisations/experts) on AI and migratory birds; Raise awareness and educate different stakeholders on the role of migratory birds in the current spread of AI (including the media, policy makers, and the general public among others);

- ▶ provide a medium through which to maintain and consolidate UNEP/CMS’s effort in bringing together the Task Force and sharing its specialized knowledge with the global community.

Arctic Breeding Conditions Newsletter No. 8

The latest issue of the *Breeding Conditions Newsletter* (no. 8, English) is available for download from the website of the Arctic Birds Breeding Conditions Survey (ABBCS) (<http://www.arcticbirds.ru>, exact link: <http://www.arcticbirds.ru/newsletter2006.pdf>).

WADERS IN THE MEDIA

Knots in not-so-protected marine areas

The *New Scientist* reported in November (13 Nov 20067) that the so-called ‘Marine Protected Areas’ did not provide any protection for the Red Knot. Until 2004, mechanical cockle boats were allowed to dredge the Dutch Wadden Sea, an area protected under two intergovernmental treaties. Jan van Gils and colleagues of the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research showed that ‘as a consequence of the dredging, the meat-to-shell ratio of cockles fell 11 per cent per year for five years. The scrawny cockles did not supply enough food for the Red Knots, whose numbers fell by 80 per cent, enough to account for the 25% decline of knots across Europe’. The study (‘Shellfish dredging pushes a flexible avian top predator out of a Marine Protected Area’) is published in the *Public Library of Science Biology*, vol. 4(12), e376. See also *PLoS Biol* 4(12): e418 for a commentary on the study.

... AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST!

Ruddy Turnstones use public transport without paying

According to British newspapers, TV and radio, staff on the St Mawes Ferry, which traverses the Fal estuary between Falmouth and St Mawes in Cornwall, UK (4 km), four times an hour, have been astonished by the behaviour of the turnstones they have nicknamed Fred and Freda who, without fail, hop on board the first crossing of the day, then return in late afternoon for the last trip back. The birds take up their positions on the gunnel of the boat at Falmouth pier at 8.15 every morning. They stay for the short hop to St Mawes then fly off, not to be seen again until 4.30 pm, when they are back on board ready to go home. This is the second winter Fred and Fedra have been appearing for their daily commute.