

Conservation news

Highlights from international meetings on migratory waterbird conservation in the Asia-Pacific

Two meetings on migratory waterbird conservation in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway took place in Changjiang (Hainan, China) in late 2018. This flyway, extending broadly within the Asia-Pacific region, supports c. 285 migratory waterbird species of which 33 are categorized as globally threatened on the IUCN Red List. Here we report outcomes from both gatherings, building on observations from previous meetings (*Oryx*, 2017, 51, 206–207; *Oryx*, 2015, 49, 393–394; *Oryx*, 2012, 46, 479–480).

The first meeting, during 3–8 December, was an implementation workshop of the Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative under the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group of the Arctic Council. This initiative focuses on the conservation of arctic-breeding birds, acknowledging the need for a full-life cycle approach spanning south well beyond the Arctic. Importantly, this initiative brings political engagement at a high-level, as ministers of foreign affairs from all Arctic countries approve the Initiative. With Singapore as an observer to the Arctic Council, the Initiative is looking for ways to expand to South-east Asia through the ASEAN framework. Implementation of the 2015–2019 work plan was reported at the meeting, and input for the 2019–2023 work plan was considered. Key priority actions that emerged were to improve synergies with other institutional arrangements (e.g. the Convention on Migratory Species), better address hunting, strengthen conservation in coastal southern China, and develop national-level strategies to manage smooth cordgrass *Spartina alterniflora*, an invasive species causing habitat loss in intertidal mudflats.

The second meeting, during 10–14 December, was the 10th meeting of the Partners to the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership. The Partnership's membership has now reached 37, with the Paulson Institute and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea becoming partners at this meeting. The Paulson Institute is a not-for-profit organization with strong technical capacity for research and policy influence, focusing on coastal conservation in China. Inclusion of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea rounds out engagement of Yellow Sea range states, a region of great importance for many migratory waterbirds. The country's coastline is the least altered within the Yellow Sea (*Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 2014, 12, 267–272), and surveys have demonstrated its importance for threatened migratory waterbirds (*Stilt*, 2016, 68, 40–45).

The Flyway Site Network of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership, which underpins the Partnership's habitat-focused conservation approach, continues to expand. Since the last meeting of partners eight additional sites have been designated in five countries (Bangladesh, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Myanmar and New Zealand) providing important habitat for threatened species such as the white-naped crane. Importantly, some of these sites include anthropogenic land uses, such as rice paddies and aquaculture, reinforcing the reality that human-modified coastal areas play a vital role in conserving migratory waterbirds in the Flyway. Despite the steady increase in designated Flyway Network Sites, now 141, implementation of adequate management remains an ongoing challenge, and c. 60% of sites have missing or outdated documentation. In light of these issues, the Partnership continues to work towards filling current information gaps and strengthening implementation, including through a proposed seed-funding scheme for newly designated sites.

A series of decisions advanced governance structures within the Partnership, improving capacity and decision-making. A science unit hosted by Beijing Forestry University was established, and Incheon City government reiterated its commitment to continue hosting the Secretariat and funding its operations. Additionally, two recently established committees, technical and finance, will now become subcommittees under the management committee. This new structure will better integrate strategic priorities, articulating budgetary requirements with programmatic activities guided by technical expertise.

Programmatic activities have also advanced. Of particular importance are policy developments in China to curb coastal reclamation (*Wader Study*, 2018, 125, 1–3; *Science*, 359, 500–502) and progress on World Heritage listing of multiple intertidal sites in China and the Republic of Korea. The Critically Endangered spoon-billed sandpiper continues to act as a flagship species for the flyway, being a focal species under various institutional arrangements. Monitoring and research on this species have drawn global attention to the Flyway, and have led to conservation actions that benefit many waterbird species and their habitats. The Partnership's task force on hunting was cemented with the adoption of formal membership and a work plan that includes a situation analysis for South-east Asia. Additionally, Partners adopted an international single species action plan for the conservation of the Dalmatian pelican *Pelecanus crispus*, which has declined dramatically in East Asia. Since the last meeting, establishment of the Partnership's South-east Asia flyway network has gained

momentum through endorsement by the ASEAN framework, which has facilitated resource mobilization from Japan. This region is at the heart of the flyway but has previously lacked conservation capacity.

These meetings signal a long-term process of institution building within the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, which is not only facing multiple threats but is embedded within a region of complex geopolitics and socio-economic diversity. Conservation of these migratory species is being championed by policy entrepreneurs who are crafting a way forward through various institutional arrangements. Multilateral efforts are thus well underway to avert waterbird extinctions; the question is whether they can gain traction before it is too late.

For more information, see caff.is/arctic-migratory-birds-initiative-ambi, and eaaflyway.net/.

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Opportunities to boost protection of the grey parrot in Nigeria

The grey parrot *Psittacus erithacus* is native to lowland moist forests of West and Central Africa, ranging from south-eastern Côte d'Ivoire to Kenya and northern Angola. Once widespread, population declines have occurred in many areas, and in some instances have been severe (Ibis, 2016, 158, 82–91). In 2016 the species was categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and in the same year concerns over the impact of capture of live grey parrots for international trade prompted their listing on Appendix I of CITES. In contrast to neighbouring range states, the capture and sale of grey parrots has been prohibited in Nigeria because the species is on schedule I of Nigeria's Endangered Species Decree of 1985 and its Endangered Species Act. Despite formal protection, a report to CITES in 2001 highlighted an ongoing threat to wild populations posed by the capture of young parrots and loss of habitat (P. McGowan, 2001, *Status, Management and Conservation of the African Grey Parrot, Psittacus erithacus in Nigeria*).

In response to concerns over the status of grey parrots in Nigeria (Ostrich, 2014, 85, 205–233) we recently initiated a rapid assessment of the scale and scope of trapping and trade. During 2018 we made visits to 28 sites in the states of Anambra, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, Edo, Lagos, Oyo, Kwara, Kaduna and Kano. Interviews with local community members revealed that trapping, primarily the capture of chicks from nests, occurs at sites adjacent to at least five communities across the Niger Delta states. Trapping was found to be conducted by Ghanaians and Nigerians operating in the remote communities within Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Cross River states. Transboundary movements of grey parrots and parrot trappers between Nigeria and neighbouring countries, notably Cameroon, were also identified. Overt surveys of markets found live parrots and parrot body parts for sale openly in all of the 11 cities visited. All market vendors interviewed stated that they obtain parrots from more than one trapper and several, based in Kano, reported purchasing live and dead parrots, and parrot parts, from merchants coming from Cameroon. Notably, levels of awareness of regulations prohibiting trapping and trading of wild sourced grey parrots was low among market vendors (77% of vendors were unaware) and absent in all communities adjacent to capture sites in the Niger Delta except in Cross River state.

Red parrot tail feathers were found for sale in markets throughout Nigeria. They are used as charms and are incorporated by some local cultures into traditional attire. Harvesting of red feathers from beneath roosts provides a modest income for communities close to roost sites, but the collapse of wild populations threatens to undermine this practice. Our visit to a well-known parrot roost in the Ikodi community, River State, where thousands of parrots were previously recorded to roost (P. McGowan, 2001, op. cit.) found the roost to have been absent for at least 10 years. Its loss has been attributed to threats ranging from trapping of the parrots by non-Ikodians (Naturewatch, 2000, 34–35) to infrastructural developments.

The information collected during these rapid assessments highlights multiple opportunities to address the threats posed by capture and trade of grey parrots in Nigeria. Local communities can act as the first line of defense against illegal wildlife trade, and the situation revealed by our surveys suggests that locally appropriate community-focused initiatives could be effective for addressing the capture of parrots in Nigeria. The design of such initiatives should consider opportunities to leverage the cultural and economic value of wild parrot populations to promote protection and encourage sustainable practices. There are also opportunities to increase awareness of the illegality of capture and sale of grey parrots among target groups, including communities living adjacent to wild populations, trappers, market vendors and civil society. A multifaceted strategy should also include efforts to improve enforcement