



China adds critical migratory waterbird sites in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea to the World Heritage Tentative List

East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership

Fourteen sites along the coast of the Bohai Gulf and the Yellow Sea of China have recently been added to the tentative list of sites to be considered on the [World Heritage List](#) of sites of outstanding universal value, a significant step towards the recognition and protection of China's coastal wetlands.

The extensive mudflats, sandflats and associated habitats of the Yellow Sea, including the Bohai Gulf, represent one of the largest areas of intertidal wetlands on the planet and are shared by China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (RoK). It is the most important staging area for migratory waterbirds in the greatest of all flyways, the [East Asian-Australasian Flyway](#) (EAAF).

The flyway populations of [Bar-tailed Godwit](#) (*baueri* and *menzbieri*) stage here in the northern spring, after making non-stop flights of seven days from their non-breeding grounds in Australia and New Zealand and they re-fuel there for the next stage of their migration to breeding grounds in Arctic Russia and Alaska. At the time of writing, over 10,000 individuals have already returned to one of the tentative list sites, the Yalu Jiang estuary on the China/DPRK border.





Bar-tailed Godwit © Eugene Cheah/EAAFP



Red Knot © Martin Stokes

[Red Knots](#), of the *rogersi* and *piersmai* subspecies, also stop over at the mudflats, with up to 60% of the global population using another of the tentative list sites, the Luannan wetlands of the Bohai Gulf.



Spoon-billed Sandpiper © Eugene Cheah/EAAFP

The critically endangered [Spoon-billed Sandpiper](#), with a global population of less than 1,000 birds, is vitally dependent on the mudflats of the southern Jiangsu coast, especially during autumn migration.

The region is not just important as a staging area, but supports the entire breeding populations of endemic threatened species, such as the vulnerable [Saunders's Gull](#) and the Endangered [Black-faced Spoonbill](#).

The millions of waterbirds that use these wetlands act as an indicator of the vital ecosystem services provided by the Yellow Sea, including fisheries, tourism, disaster risk reduction and climate change resilience, which profoundly underpin socio-economic development. It provides an ecosystem base for the regional economy and human well-being of the most populated coastal area in the world with an estimated number of more than 200 million people and a density of more than 500/km²

Concern about habitat loss and the plight of migratory waterbirds led to a call to ensure a suitable framework for the conservation and management of the intertidal wetlands of the Yellow Sea, including the Bohai Gulf, and associated bird species at the IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Jeju, Republic of Korea in September 2012, where a resolution on the '[Conservation of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and its threatened waterbirds](#),

with particular reference to the Yellow Sea' was adopted by 100% of voting governments. Subsequently, national workshops were held in Beijing in 2014, organized by Beijing Forestry University, and Incheon, Republic of Korea, organized by the Korean Ministry of Environment in 2016 to implement this resolution nationally, in advance of a joint meeting in August 2016, where representatives of the government authorities of China and the Republic of Korea responsible for World Heritage implementation discussed the nomination of Yellow Sea coastal wetlands. A further resolution "Conservation of intertidal habitats and migratory waterbirds of the East Asian- Australasian Flyway, especially the Yellow Sea, in a global context" was recently adopted at the 2016 World Conservation Congress in Hawaii.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, responsible for World Heritage nomination in China has been very active in identifying key sites and involving different stakeholders to promote the current tentative list, with technical assistance from Shanshui, a Chinese conservation NGO. There is recognition that the tentative list may not be comprehensive, but that optimal solutions can be achieved as the nomination proceeds.

The Republic of Korea is already working on a nomination for the tidal flats of the southwest region including the most important site for migratory waterbirds in the country, Yubu Island.

With these proposed nominations by China and the Republic of Korea, the coastal wetlands of the Yellow Sea are being increasingly recognized for their outstanding global importance and it is to be hoped that this will result in stronger protection and management for the continued survival of migratory waterbirds.

Wen Cheng of Shan Shui noted that "Shan Shui is very pleased to support MOHURD to add these sites in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea coasts of China in view of their importance as coastal habitats and the unique species they support, as well as being a haven for migratory waterbirds in the East Asian – Australasian Flyway. China has a great responsibility to protect these birds and habitats on their long journeys and is actively working with local and national authorities, as well as national NGOs and enterprises, such as Shan Shui, Qiaonyu and SEE Foundations, to further this goal. In recent years there has been a significant increase in public awareness of the need for biodiversity conservation and habitat management, particularly focused around birds, through programs such as Nature Watch".

A remarkable parallel to the Yellow Sea already exists in the East Atlantic Flyway, where the tidal flats of the Wadden Sea, covering Germany, Netherlands, and Denmark, also serve as a vital stopover site for migratory waterbirds and this area is already a trilateral transboundary World Heritage Site, indeed the first ever transboundary World Heritage Site for an intertidal area and with the Banc d'Arguin in West Africa both located on the East Atlantic Flyway, the only existing intertidal World Heritage Sites in the world. As Jens Enemark, former secretary of the German-Dutch-Danish Wadden Sea Cooperation remarks "Any initiative to protect and conserve the inter-tidal flats of the Yellow Sea should be welcomed by the international conservation community. The Yellow Sea is, together with the Wadden Sea (a World Heritage property since 2009), by far the most important intertidal mudflat area worldwide with a global importance far beyond its boundaries, particularly for migratory birds. The Wadden Sea is excited to welcome the Yellow Sea into the family of World Heritage properties to reinforce the protection of intertidal mudflats worldwide, a key habitat for global biodiversity".

Spike Millington, Chief Executive of the East Asian–Australasian Flyway Partnership, an initiative bringing together 35 national governments and non-governmental organizations along the Flyway to conserve migratory waterbirds and their habitats added “on behalf of our partners and collaborators, I would like to congratulate the Government of China on working so hard and so diligently to get these very important sites on to the World Heritage tentative list in such a timely fashion. The support of EAAFP partners, notably [IUCN](#), [BirdLife International](#), [Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna \(CAFF\)](#) and the work of the [Paulson Institute](#), through the [Coastal Wetlands Blueprint Project](#), has been instrumental in promoting Yellow Sea intertidal conservation, culminating in this listing”.

Relevant Links:

- [UNESCO: The Coast of the Bohai Gulf and the Yellow Sea of China](#)
- [IUCN WCC 2016 Side Event for conservation in East Asian-Australasian Flyway](#)