

# WorldBirdwatch

MARCH 2016



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 **spea**

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Chinese Crested Tern *Thalasseus bernsteini*,  
Seram, Indonesia, 2016  
(Ken Fung Hon Shing)

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## Flyways bring the world together

March marks the beginning of Spring and the long awaited return of migratory species for those of us living in the northern hemisphere. This issue of World Birdwatch features a series of stories that we hope come fresh as the clean air of Spring, full of news and celebrations from around the globe.

Tracking birds allow us to understand their movements, and identify the threats facing them. However, it is expensive which limits the number of individuals that can be tracked. No more! Our clever friends at Bird Studies Canada (BirdLife Canada, co-Partner) have collaborated with other to develop MOTUS, a tracking system set to increase dramatically our ability to follow many more birds, animals and even insects on their travels.

The tenacity of BirdLife's China Programme has helped us bring back the beautiful and threatened Chinese Crested tern and their hard work is celebrated in this issue now that they are turning 10. The investment is bearing rewards with a volunteer network of birdwatchers helping to monitor key stopover sites for migratory species.

When thinking out of the box is required, BirdLife Partners in collaboration with the Secretariat excel at finding opportunities to protect birds and their habitats. Our story from Malaysia looks at the collaboration between Malaysian Nature Society (BirdLife Malaysia) with global corporate CEMEX. It is an example where we go beyond our comfort zone to ensure that we secure the future of an amazing place for birds.

A critical element of the success of our work is how effectively we involve people, the local communities living where birds fly through, so they become the stewards of safe stopping areas. Our story on 'Living on the Edge' provides an excellent example from the Sahel region of West Africa.

Migratory birds are awe-inspiring and we all have our own special memories of seeing them. Few of us, though, have witnessed at first hand the incredible journeys undertaken by the seabirds roaming the seas and oceans.

Much of the journeys are on the High Seas where no single nation owns or holds responsibility for their conservation and fisheries. The last feature highlights the important work that BirdLife's Marine Programme has been doing on the High Seas to change fisheries management and bring down the estimated 300,000 seabirds killed in longline and trawl fishing fleets every year.

The albatross is a good symbol of healthy oceans, and the annual cycle of bird migration tells us the world is still turning and life is for living!

*Pat Zurita*

Patricia Zurita, Chief Executive

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Partnership for  
nature and people

BirdLife International is a worldwide Partnership of conservation organisations working to protect the world's birds and their habitats.

# BirdLife Partners join forces to prevent illegal poisoning of wildlife

Imagine you are an eagle looking for your next meal over the European countryside. You spot a dead mouse and swoop down to gobble it up. But soon, you no longer have the energy to hunt or fly long distances. The weakness continues to overpower you until you drop dead. Cause of death: an illegal poisoned bait.

Poisoned baits (a food item laced with insecticides, rodenticides, fungicides or herbicides) are used in the EU and some other countries to kill predators deemed a threat to livestock and game species hunted by humans, as well as to protect crops against certain animals. This, despite being banned by Nature Directives—the EU's foremost nature laws—and the Bern Convention.

The illegal use of poison is a direct threat to the Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*, Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*, Red Kite *Milvus milvus* and the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. Very large numbers of birds are killed annually as a result of the deliberate misuse or illegal use of poisoned baits. These baits also endanger other wildlife: they could be eaten by an animal or bird of prey that is not the actual target.

To eradicate this practice, SEO/BirdLife (BirdLife in Spain) and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) has launched the European Network against Environmental Crimes (ENEC). With the backing of the Criminal Justice Support Programme of the EU, ENEC brings together European associations of prosecutors, judges, police and hunters to improve protection of the environment through criminal law.

Earlier this month, the ENEC adopted a proposal for a European Action Plan to combat illegal poisoning of wildlife by coordinating prevention, deterrence, monitoring and prosecution of cases of illegal poisoning in all Member States in the EU in a unified way.

"Many migratory species are threatened by the use of poisoned baits. The problem is that they are not equally protected against illegal poisoning in all territories throughout their flyway", said Juan Carlos Atienza, head of the conservation unit at SEO/BirdLife. "It is useless to act against the use of poisoned baits in one EU country if the effort is not the same in neighbouring countries, where [the birds] could eventually die from poisoning".

The action plan—created with the help of representatives of 20 EU countries, BirdLife Partners, judges, prosecutors, hunters and law enforcement officials—has been submitted to the European Commission, which will include the action plan in their Roadmap on Illegal Killing of Birds to promote joint and harmonised actions across the EU.

The document proposes several measures: to improve the data available on the use and impact of poisoned baits and generate awareness on the issue; to increase prevention, deterrence and monitoring of poisoning of wildlife; to increase efficiency in prosecuting the illegal use of poison according to EU and national laws; and to control the sale of toxic substances likely to be used for making poisoned bait ■



Raptors such as White-tailed Eagle are especially at risk of illegal poisoning (Jaroslav Pap Tanjug)



## Pesticides poisoning birds in the Balkans



White-tailed Eagle found poisoned near a Golden Jackal carcass in Vajska (Marko Tucakov)

You may think bird species of Least [conservation] Concern are not threatened. However, the name belies their true state. The White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* is one such bird. Its Serbian population has been growing: it reached 125 pairs in 2015. The annual growth rate of the species is about 50 birds across Serbia, but only five reach sexual maturity and reproduce in monogamous couples. Losing even one bird is a big loss.

Since 2009, 33 White-tailed Eagle carcasses have been found in Serbia, killed mostly by pesticide poisoning and poisoned baits intended for other predators.

"When a carcass is found, the case must be reported to the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection and the closest veterinarian organisation, which must determine the cause of death", says Marko Tucakov of the Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province. However, analyses were done only in a few cases due to administrative problems.

Increases in rodent population have also led to an increase in use of rodenticides, including banned ones that are still available on the black market.

"In spring 2014, the Bird Protection and Study Society of Serbia (BPSSS, BirdLife Partner) sent an official complaint to the Secretariat of the Bern Convention. We asked them to take administrative measures and the Republic of Serbia to undertake urgent steps to prevent deliberate killing of bird species. The case is still open", says Milan Ružić, president of BPSSS.

BPSSS, along with other Serbian nature organisations have campaigned to promote responsible pesticide use through raising awareness among land owners, farmers, activists, hunters and agriculture experts.

In Serbia, the punishment for poisoning protected species can range from high fines to prison sentences. At least, that is so on paper. The enforcement of the legislation needs to be improved significantly ■

## Vulture poisoning campaign inspires artist

Artist Christopher Durant was so inspired by BirdLife's campaign highlighting the indiscriminate poisoning of vultures that he decided to take action by drawing a White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*. As the artwork progressed, he updated fans with regular posts on Facebook, ([www.facebook.com/LilGodOfArt](http://www.facebook.com/LilGodOfArt)). On completion of the work Christopher commented "that this definitely is the hardest bird I have had to draw" ■





# World failing to protect its migratory birds

A new study published in *Science* has called for a greater international collaborative effort to save the world's migratory birds, many of which are at risk of extinction due to loss of habitat along their flight paths.

More than 90% of the world's migratory birds are inadequately protected due to poorly coordinated conservation around the world.

The research, which included using BirdLife International's data on migratory bird distributions and Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), found huge gaps in the conservation of migratory birds, particularly across China, India, and parts of Africa and South America. This results in the majority of migratory birds having ranges that are well covered by protected areas in one country, but poorly protected in another.

"The study found that of 1,451 migratory bird species, 1,324 had inadequate protection for at least one part of their migration pathway", said lead author Dr Claire Runge of the Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) and the University of Queensland. "Eighteen species had no protection in their breeding

areas and two species had no protection at all along their whole route".

The study examined over 8,200 IBAs that have been

identified as internationally important locations for migratory bird populations. They found that just 22 per cent are completely protected, and

41% only partially overlap with protected areas ■

To read the paper visit: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aac9180>



Migratory Bar-tailed Godwits roosting on an active dredge-dumping site, coastal China (David S. Melville)

## Yellow Sea reclamation causing serious shorebird declines

New research has revealed a 20% reduction in the survival of three shorebirds that use Yellow Sea mudflats to refuel while migrating along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway.

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, Great Knot *C. tenuirostris* and Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* nest in different areas of north-east Siberia, but rely on staging posts in the Yellow Sea before wintering in Western Australia; all three species had their threat status uplisted by BirdLife in the latest IUCN Red List update.

By individually marking thousands of birds with colour rings, an international team of scientists calculated the annual and seasonal survival of the three species between 2006 and 2013. They found that the birds' survival rates remained constant on their breeding and wintering grounds, but declined markedly from 2010 onwards during and immediately after each migration.

Led by Professor Theunis Piersma of the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, the team concluded that the declines stemmed from the loss of habitat and food on Yellow Sea mudflats—a result of land reclamation. Between 1990 and 2013, the area of intertidal flats along the Yellow Sea shrank by an average of 4% per year, with the rate of loss doubling towards the end of the period.

"This research delivers proof that land reclamation around the Yellow Sea puts many migratory birds at risk", said Theunis, "To halt further losses, the clearance of coastal intertidal habitat must stop now".

Professor Piersma is also the chair in migratory bird ecology at the University of Groningen, with funding from Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN, BirdLife in The Netherlands) and WWF-Netherlands; an interview with him which includes his work in the Yellow Sea is in the December 2013 issue of *World Birdwatch* ■

## New list identifies 422 IBAs in Danger

Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) are the world's critically endangered sites—sites of international significance for the conservation of the world's birds and other nature. However, some of these sites are under most immediate threat from damage or destruction, and need our urgent attention: these are the **IBAs in Danger**.

For several decades, BirdLife International has been the official

global IUCN Red List Authority for birds. Since 2013, it has also published a list of IBAs in Danger—the most threatened important sites as identified by BirdLife Partners on the basis of monitoring data. The new, updated 2015 list, launched in February 2016, contains 422 IBAs in Danger, across more than 100 countries.

The most common threats to IBAs are agriculture, poor water

management, fires, hunting, logging, collecting animals and plants, and disturbance.

Unfortunately, protected areas are not immune from these threats, as over half of the currently identified IBAs in Danger have at least partial protection at a national or international level.

BirdLife is working hard with its Partners to respond to the growing threats faced by IBAs through campaigns to raise public

awareness. It has also helped Partners to develop effective site-safeguard measures. During recent years, BirdLife Partners have been active at 232 IBAs in Danger, carrying out a diverse range of activities at a local and national level; through its Partners, BirdLife also works with an estimated 2,500 voluntary Local Conservation Groups around the globe, who monitor and care for "their" IBAs ■

To view a map of all the IBAs in Danger please follow the links on: [www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/sites-habitats-ibas](http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/sites-habitats-ibas)



**IBA saved! The legislative bill to reinstate full protection of the Bay of Panama happened in 2015 (Karl Kaufmann)**

## 73,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forest lost from IBAs

Conservation scientists from the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), BirdLife International, and colleagues in Italy have used satellite imagery to measure forest loss remotely across the global network of Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). Forest covered around 2.9 million km<sup>2</sup> of land in these 7,000 key sites for nature in 2000, but had decreased by around 73,000 km<sup>2</sup> (an area the size of Scotland) by 2012—a 2.5% loss across all IBAs.

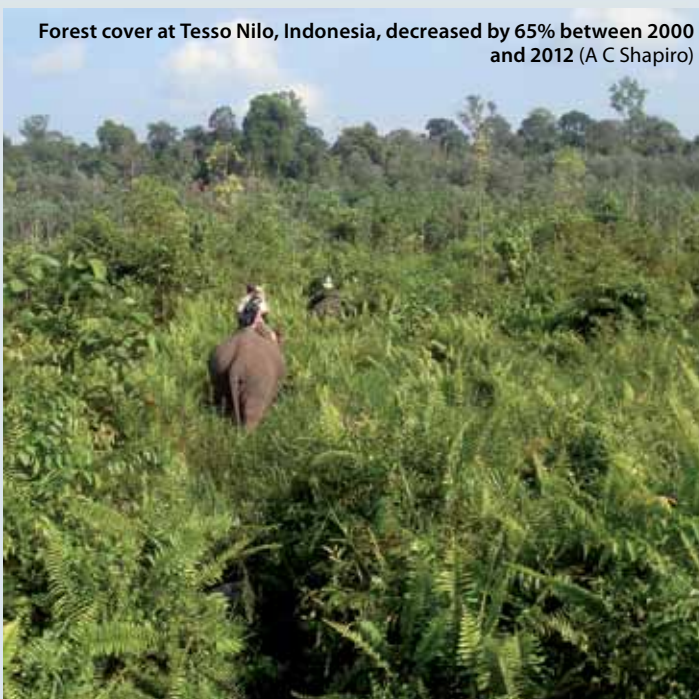
Key countries with the highest forest loss were Brazil, Paraguay, Indonesia, Malaysia, Madagascar and Ghana. These losses were not uniform, with most IBAs losing less than 1% of their forest cover over the period. However, a small number of sites suffered severe levels of deforestation. Encouragingly, formal protection

such as by designation as a national park or wildlife reserve, appears to be associated with lower rates of forest loss.

"It's now possible to monitor changes in forest cover in all of the planet's IBAs. As these areas form the majority of currently known sites of global importance for the persistence of biodiversity, their future conservation is paramount", said Dr Graeme Buchanan, senior conservation scientist at the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, and a co-author of the study.

The full paper ("Patterns of twenty-first century forest loss across a global network of important sites for biodiversity") is freely available to read on the website of the journal *Remote Sensing in Ecology and Conservation* ■

**Forest cover at Tesso Nilo, Indonesia, decreased by 65% between 2000 and 2012 (A C Shapiro)**





# Do not relax nature laws, improve implementation: European Parliament

In a huge vote at the European Parliament in February, Europe's political representatives have stood up to defend threatened key EU nature laws by asking the Commission to drop its intention to amend the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and focus instead on how better to enforce, implement and fund them.

Of 644 MEPs, 592 of them backed better implementation of the nature laws (Flickr/European Parliament)



In a landmark plenary vote in Strasbourg, a report led by Belgian MEP Mark Demesmaecker on the EU Biodiversity Strategy was approved by 592 of the 644 MEPs present to vote. The report, among other things, states that the Parliament "opposes a possible revision of the Nature Directives because this would jeopardise the implementation of the biodiversity strategy... with the risk that it would result in weakened legislative protection and financing, and would be bad for nature, for people, and for business... [T]he on-going REFIT check of the Nature Directives should focus on the improvement of implementation".

The Parliament thus sided with the more than 500,000 citizens that responded to the Commission's public consultation on the Fitness Check of the nature laws to decide whether to reopen them, as well as the 12 national governments that wrote to the Commission on the subject. "With such an unprecedented majority backing this message, it would be inexcusable for the Commission to choose to ignore it", said Ariel Brunner, BirdLife Europe's senior head of policy.

The ball is now in First Vice President Frans Timmermans and Environment Commissioner Karmenu Vella's court. They will have to take a decision on the Fitness Check outcome. A first official document from the Commission (in the form of a staff working document) is expected late spring 2016 ■

## Birdfair breaks fundraising record to help migratory birds

Migratory birds have been handed a welcome boost by fundraising efforts from Birdfair 2015, after a record cheque of £320,000 was handed over to BirdLife International to help vulnerable migratory birds in the eastern Mediterranean.

"I'm delighted that Birdfair 2015 has smashed the previous year's fundraising record. A lot of hard work from organisers, volunteers, sponsors and attendees goes into this event, and we are proud to raise an enormous amount of money to support BirdLife International's work in the Eastern Mediterranean", said Birdfair Co-organiser Tim Appleton.

"Bringing the death toll down from 25 million to zero is a big challenge, and only with strong partnerships like the one BirdLife has with the Birdfair can we make

it more possible", said Patricia Zurita, BirdLife's CEO.

The eastern Mediterranean is used by hundreds of millions of migratory birds on their migration between Europe and Africa each spring and autumn. They face many threats on their epic journey, with a recent BirdLife report revealing that 25 million migratory birds are illegally killed each year. The money raised will go towards a project aimed at reducing the scale and impact of illegal killing of migratory birds, and to improve protection and laws throughout the region.

Over the next three years Birdfair will support BirdLife's work that focuses on the world's most endangered Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs); this year's emphasis will be on saving IBAs in Africa. More than 12,000 IBAs have

been identified globally to date and collectively they represent

the planet's largest network of important sites for wildlife ■

Tim Appleton (left) and Tim Stowe (right) hand over the cheque to Patricia Zurita (Newton Maxwell-Harris/The Creative Mix)





## From bird habitat to tourist haven: the Kaliakra case

The Kaliakra peninsula in Bulgaria, a rocky outcrop stretching into the Black Sea is a migratory stopover site for tens of thousands of birds every year. The site is also an important breeding site for several rare bird species, such as Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*; the inland agricultural areas are feeding grounds for the Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, a globally threatened species.

But in January this year, the European Court of Justice condemned Bulgaria for being in breach of the EU's Birds and Habitats Directives by failing to designate Kaliakra fully as a protected Natura 2000 site and protect it from deterioration.

The peninsula has already lost much of its beauty: the Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) houses a golf course and several hotels. Pieces of the unique steppe grassland have been ploughed and put up for sale; there are a large number of wind turbines. These have reduced the feeding areas available to wintering geese.

Warning after warning by the European Commission, several of

which followed complaints by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB, BirdLife Partner) has been ignored. The Commission now needs to ensure that the Bulgarian government will act to restore and conserve Kaliakra.

In the face of the Bulgarian government's apathy, the BSPB, RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and other conservation organisations have been working to mitigate the environmental damage in Kaliakra through a LIFE+ project to protect the Red-

breasted Goose there through spreading awareness about the species, creating a Species Action Plan and engaging with fishermen, farmers and hunters to minimise the destruction of the bird's habitats and food sources ■



Wind turbines have reduced the habitat and feeding grounds for wintering geese (BSPB)

## Romanian conservationists and hunters unite to save a threatened bird

At the request of the Romanian Ornithological Society (SOR, BirdLife Partner), the General Association of Romanian Hunters & Anglers (AGVPS) has agreed to a temporary hunting ban to protect Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, in Lake Balta Alba, one of the most important Special Protected Areas (SPAs) they use for resting and feeding.

Red-breasted Goose flocks mix with other goose species, such as the Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*, for which hunting is allowed. This increases the risk of Red-breasted Geese being accidentally shot, especially in the morning when the mixed flocks take off together.

Hunters have agreed that from 23 November until 31 December between 6 and 10 am, they will keep a distance of 500 metres from the western part of the lake so the flock can take off safely.

"This partnership has a mutual purpose and we, the hunters, can set in motion an army of over 1,500 technicians and game wardens. We know a lot about Romania's wildlife and we can contribute to all conservation activities", said Neculai Selaru, the executive president of AGVPS.

The partnership between SOR and AGVPS comes after a successful campaign by SOR and 40 other NGOs last summer in Romania to change a new hunting law ■

The main wintering grounds of Red-breasted Goose are in Romania and Bulgaria (Renaud Dengreville/Galatee films)



## Asia's rarest bunting beguiles Beijing birders

A single Rufous-backed Bunting *Emberiza jankowskii* was discovered at Miyun Reservoir, 80 km north-east of central Beijing, by local young birders Xing Chao and Huang Mujiao on 9 January 2016. By 13 January, seven individuals had been found, with at least 12 buntings present on 22 February. These are the first records of this globally Endangered species in Beijing municipality for 75 years.

Rufous-backed Bunting – also known as Jankowski's Bunting – has declined drastically since the early 1970s, most likely as a result of the conversion of its grassland habitat to arable farmland and an increase in grazing livestock. Today the bunting is known only from a restricted area of north-east China.

The BirdLife China Programme and the China Bird Watching Society have been taking action for Rufous-backed Bunting on its breeding grounds in Inner Mongolia for several years, with surveys undertaken in 2014 discovering nine new breeding sites for the species.

To help with BirdLife's work to save the species please visit our *Save Jankowski's Bunting Appeal* page at: [www.justgiving.com/jankowskis-bunting](http://www.justgiving.com/jankowskis-bunting) ■



The first records in Beijing municipality for 75 years (Terry Townshend)

## Guarding the Saffron-cowled Blackbird



In total, more than 40 blackbird nests were found, from which no more than 10 chicks managed to fledge (Jose Leiberman)

During 2015 Aves Argentinas (BirdLife in Argentina) launched a new project to conserve the declining Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus*, a mainly grass and marshland species classified by BirdLife as Vulnerable.

Habitat loss, increasing encroachment of agricultural land, pressures from illegal trapping for bird trade, and high levels of parasitism by the Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis* are among the main threats this attractive yellow-and-black species faces.

Adrián Di Giacomo from the Argentinian National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), took the lead in coordinating the project to save the blackbird. Volunteers enlisted as "Colony Guardians" watched over the species' nests and fledglings, driving away predators and Shiny Cowbirds and deterring potential illegal bird-traffickers.

The capture of Saffron-cowled Blackbirds for the illegal trafficking and trade of birds turned out to be a problem on a much larger scale, with one team suffering at least four intrusions from trappers.

The guarding work will continue apace during 2016 ■



## Ghana's Grey Parrots may soon cease to be

According to a recently published study, in the last two decades Ghana has lost 90–99% of its Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus* population.

The decline of the heavily traded parrot, which is classified by BirdLife as Vulnerable, is evidenced by the near total loss, since 1992, of the species' major roosts in the country. Further evidence indicates an almost a tenfold reduction in bird encounter rates in 2014, compared to the 1990s.

"Dedicated searching, including visits to roosts which previously had as many as 1,200 individuals 20 years ago, yielded just a handful of Grey Parrot sightings", commented Nathaniel Annorbah, a Ghanaian graduate student of Manchester Metropolitan University, and the lead author of the scientific paper ("Trade and habitat change virtually eliminate the Grey Parrot from Ghana") published in *Ibis*:

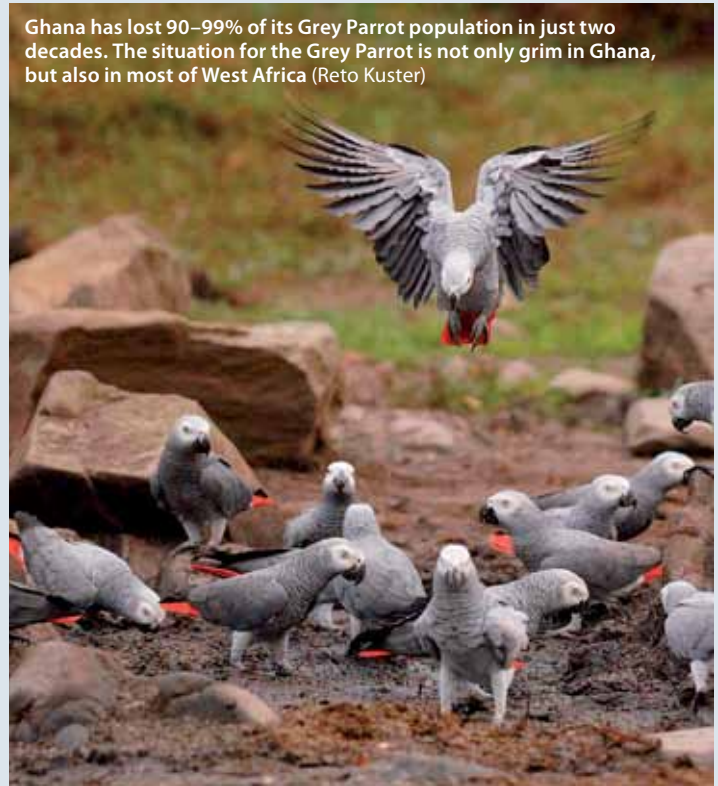
*The International Journal of Avian Science*.

The authors, who included BirdLife's Research Fellow Dr Nigel Collar, attribute the population decline to four main factors: bird-trade; overall forest reduction; silvicultural practices; and farmland timber harvesting.

"Lack of evidence from this and other studies that any Grey Parrot populations in the West Africa region are healthy, suggest that trade in the species must surely be stopped throughout the region", observed Kariuki Ndong'ang'a, the BirdLife Africa Team Leader for Species Science.

In 2013–14, the Africa Secretariat of BirdLife and CITES supported stakeholders in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Côte d'Ivoire to draft national management plans for the Grey Parrot, as well as update an existing one for Cameroon ■

Ghana has lost 90–99% of its Grey Parrot population in just two decades. The situation for the Grey Parrot is not only grim in Ghana, but also in most of West Africa (Reto Kuster)



## Critically Endangered parrots killed by rats at breeding facility

Captive breeding efforts to save the Critically Endangered Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster* – Australia's rarest bird – have suffered a setback.

Fourteen Orange-bellied Parrots were killed by rats during late 2015 at the Taroona (Hobart) captive breeding facility, which is run by Tasmania's Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

The affected birds were being held separately in quarantine from the main breeding stock, as they were suffering from Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease.

Paul Sullivan, Chief Executive of BirdLife Australia, commented: "These incidents clearly show the danger of allowing wild bird populations to decline until they rely on captive insurance programmes".

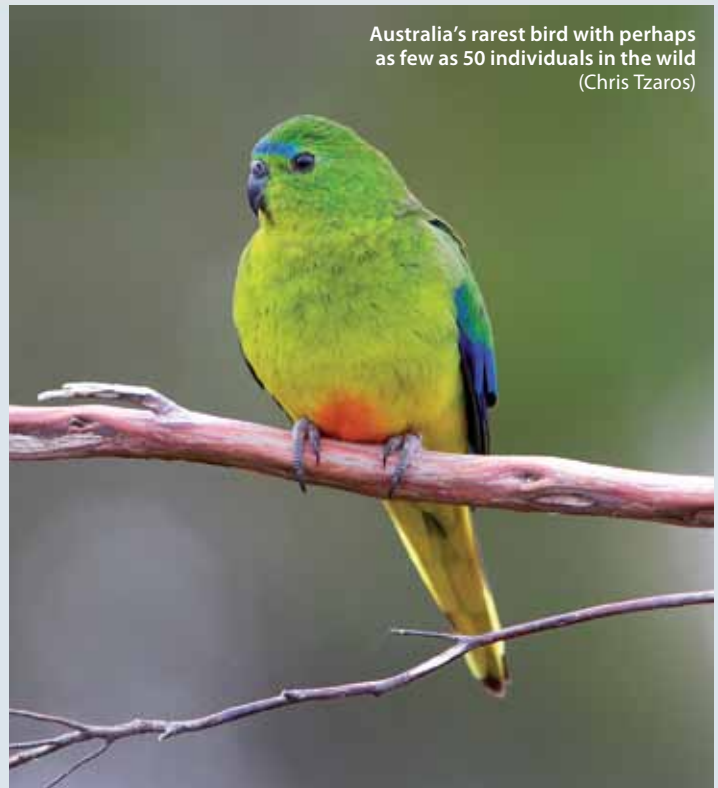
Orange-bellied Parrot is known to breed at just one site, Melaleuca in south-west

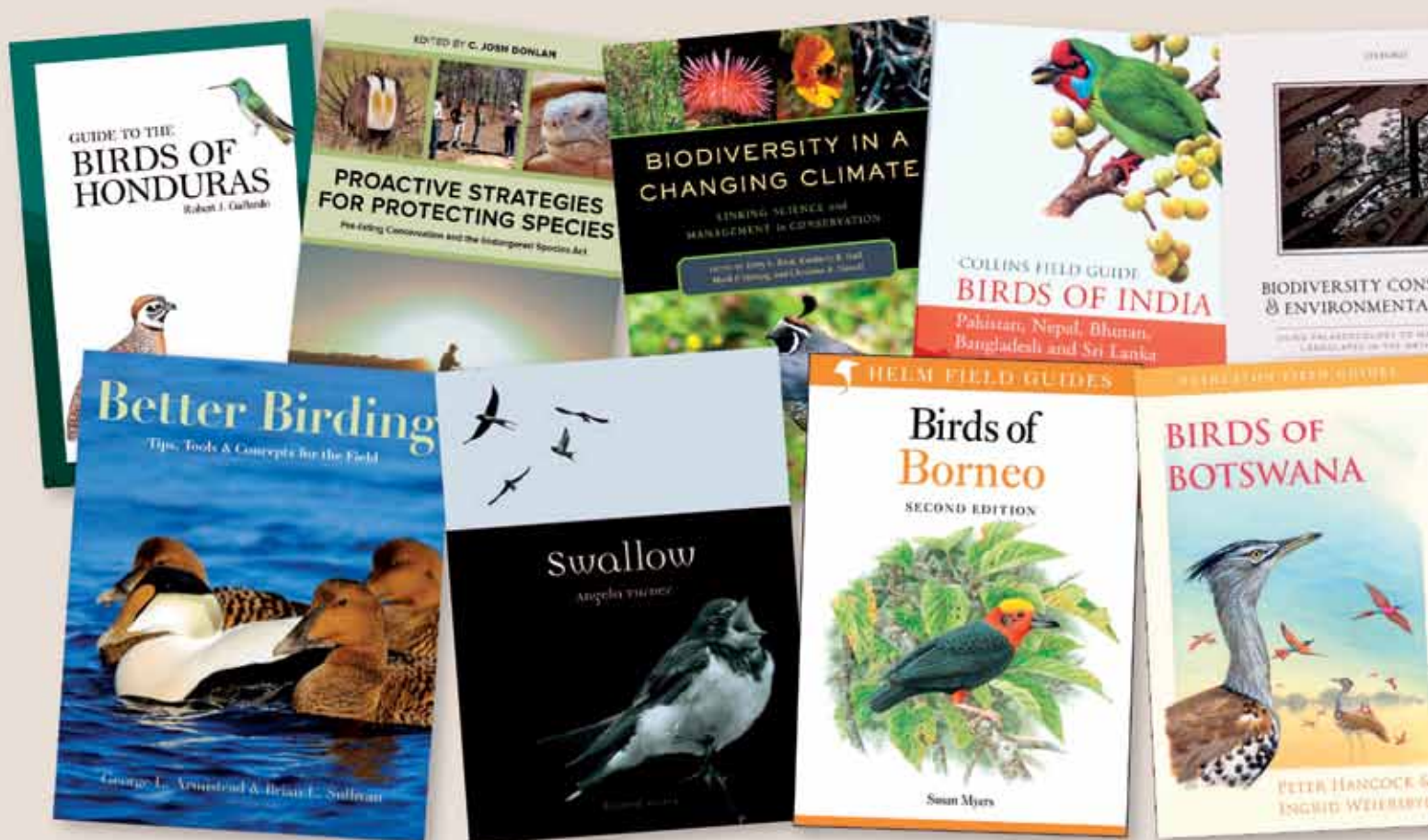
Tasmania, before migrating to the Australian mainland to winter on saltmarshes.

Since 2005, when the wild population was estimated at around 150 individuals, the species has undergone a rapid decline, with surveys in 2010 finding fewer than 50 birds at Melaleuca, and no birds at other historical breeding sites. To try to mitigate these declines there is a well established captive breeding programme, with 345 Orange-bellied Parrots held at various facilities on Tasmania and the mainland as of May 2015.

However, more promising news has recently come from the wild population at Melaleuca, where 23 birds had returned by the end of January 2016, including two birds ringed as fledglings at the site in 2014, indicating that they had successfully undertaken their arduous migration for the first time ■

Australia's rarest bird with perhaps as few as 50 individuals in the wild (Chris Tzaros)





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Supporting birdwatching organisations to increase overall public awareness about birds and the environment has been one focus of the China Programme's work (Vivian Fu)

# Stepping out across China

In 2015, BirdLife International and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society celebrated ten years of our joint China Programme.

**There is a Chinese saying** “*qiān lǐ zhī xíng, shǐ yú zú xià*”: a thousand mile journey begins with the first step. In 2015, BirdLife International and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (BirdLife Partner in Hong Kong SAR, China) celebrated the tenth anniversary of their joint China Programme. The bulk of the route to safeguard China's birds may remain to be hiked, but this initiative has progressed well beyond its first step.

In the early 2000s, the BirdLife Secretariat and its Asian Partners concluded that establishing a programme in the world's fourth largest and most populous nation was important and urgent. In terms of importance, only six nations have more Globally Threatened Birds (89) than China, and only seven have more bird

species (1,240). As for urgency, recalls Mike Crosby, Senior Conservation Officer in BirdLife International Asia Division, “rapid economic growth was putting huge pressure on the natural environment”.

The Programme's proverbial first step was to support development of birdwatching organisations across mainland China. BirdLife's inaugural vision, recalls Simba Chan, Senior Conservation Officer in BirdLife International Asia Division, was that these organisations would “increase overall public awareness about birds and the environment, then engage in conservation”. “At that time”, recalls Vivian Fu Assistant Manager of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society/BirdLife International

China Programme, “environmental education was a very new concept to China”.

Public engagement has proved critical to the Programme's success—and for good reason. Simba Chan explains that wildlife is typically valued in China for providing food or medicine. “Changing Chinese attitudes to the value of wildlife”, says Simba, is a key target outcome from the Programme. Terry Townshend concurs. Director of EcoAction (a Chinese organisation dedicated to environmental education and ecotourism) and BirdLife Species Champion for Rufous-backed Bunting *Emberiza jankowskii* (Endangered), Terry laments that environmental issues “are almost completely absent from the Chinese state curriculum”,

which “is why it is so important to focus on public education, especially in schools”.

Birds have proved a good way in, says Vivian Fu: “as birds can be seen everywhere, they are a good starting point for people to get closer to nature”. Awareness of environmental issues, says Mike Crosby, “is rapidly increasing thanks to press and social media, providing a great opportunity now to promote actions to address conservation issues”.

In addition to producing key publications (*Important Bird Areas in China*, a Chinese edition of *Saving Asia's Threatened Birds*), the Programme has strengthened the capacity of Chinese birdwatching societies through technical training workshops, site conservation activities



and bird festivals. The collective participation in China's 30-odd birdwatching societies may now be as high as 20,000—and “their growth in expertise has also been amazing”, observes Mike Crosby.

This interest has blossomed into full-on “citizen science” (research by non-professional scientists). At the 2015 China Ornithological Society congress, delegates highlighted citizen science as a key opportunity for the study and conservation of wild birds. Vivian Fu flags the China Coastal Waterbird Census, which has been run collectively by volunteer participants for ten years, as “a great example” of citizen science.

This matters because China's coastal wetlands harbour some of the East Asian—Australasian Flyway's most significant passage and wintering sites, used by millions of shorebirds. Bai Qingquan of the Forestry Bureau of Dandong was lead author on a 2015 paper published in *Avian Research* that summarised eight years of monthly surveys. Volunteers recorded 21 globally threatened birds and found internationally important congregations of 75 species. “We discovered at least 10 sites of international importance for birds, yet still without proper protection”, Bai says.

For 13 species—including Siberian Crane *Leucogeranus leucogeranus* (Critically Endangered), Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi* (Vulnerable) and Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (Endangered)—more than one-fifth of the total Flyway population were found at a single wetland. Without Census volunteers, that degree of dependence might never have been discovered. Little wonder that Vivian Fu hopes “that more people from different stretches of

the Chinese coast will join the Census”.

Given its focus on people, you might conclude that the Programme had little time to do anything about birds. Far from it. Conservation successes during the initiative's inaugural decade are impressive.

Projects, most in partnership with local birdwatching societies, have targeted four Globally Threatened Birds: Chinese Crested Tern *Thalasseus bernsteini* (Critically Endangered); Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* (Critically Endangered); Blue-crowned Laughingthrush *Garrulax courtoisi* (Critically Endangered); and Rufous-backed Bunting.

Fewer Blue-crowned Laughingthrushes exist than there are days in a calendar year, and all cram into a few sites in China's Jiangxi Province. Bird-monitoring groups have now been established at six schools near Laughingthrush breeding locations.

Surveys for Spoon-billed Sandpiper shed light on the extent of illegal bird trapping threatening this and other shorebirds. One count revealed a combined length of 11.5 km of mist-nets flanking key roosting sites. Swift intervention by the local government authorities eradicated the problem. Just as important, says Vivian Fu, was the “growth and evolution of local partners”. At a personal level, Vivian was also particularly proud of contributions by hundreds of Chinese children to an animation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's journey along the East Asian—Australasian Flyway. (If you haven't seen this yet, you're missing a treat: visit <http://www.tinyurl.com/SpoonieVideo>)

Perhaps only a few thousand Rufous-backed Buntings remain, testament to conversion of natural grasslands for agriculture, pasture and forestry. The Programme unearthed

new breeding sites and ran workshops that, says Species Champion Terry Townshend, persuaded local government authorities to help conservation efforts. “Provided we can secure further support”, says Terry, “I am optimistic that this beautiful bird will be saved from extinction”.

Even these fine examples of BirdLife conservation in action are eclipsed by Programme efforts to deny Chinese Crested Tern an entry in the catalogue of expired species. At the start of the Millennium, this seabird was presumed extinct. Fifteen years later, 16 chicks fledged from a brand new colony established in innovative fashion through decoy terns and audio playback. Education initiatives have reduced collecting of seabird eggs for human consumption. See feature article on pages 14–17.

All those involved in the Programme look back on a first decade of achievements with immense pride. Nevertheless, Vivian and colleagues are clear that BirdLife's work in this

massive country is still in its infancy. Future priorities for expansion include capacity building, species conservation activities, the conservation of intertidal wetlands, using citizen science to “keep common birds common” and counteracting illegal hunting of wild birds.

Looking ahead a further decade, what does the Programme want to have achieved? Simba Chan's aspiration is for “BirdLife's presence in China to be wise and strong”. Vivian Fu wants the Programme to “exert more influence on conservation and environmental issues”. Mike Crosby hopes for strengthened local birdwatching and conservation organisations that “help government agencies address the conservation issues affecting threatened species and IBAs throughout China”. If the China Programme achieves such aims, it will have covered impressive ground along the proverbial thousand-mile journey.

WB

By James Lowen

Children being Spoon-billed Sandpipers and learning about the importance of the Yellow Sea for migratory birds (Vivian Fu)







Active conservation by a team of people has helped increase breeding success of Chinese Crested Tern (Simba Chan)



# Brighter future for world's rarest tern

Recent work suggests that the outlook for Chinese Crested Tern is now brighter than at any moment since its rediscovery at the turn of the century.





**The rediscovery** of the enigmatic Chinese Crested Tern *Thalasseus bernsteini* is one of the most remarkable stories in 21st century ornithological history. This medium-large, pale tern, which has a distinctive black-tipped, orange-yellow bill, had not been positively recorded anywhere in the world for more than 60 years, before its rediscovery off the east coast of mainland China in the summer of 2000. Four adults and four chicks were found among a mixed tern colony in the Taiwan-administered Matsu Islands, offshore from China's Fujian Province, which is about 750 km to the south of Shanghai; and a second breeding ground was discovered on the Jiushan Islands, Zhejiang Province, 200 km south of Shanghai in 2004.

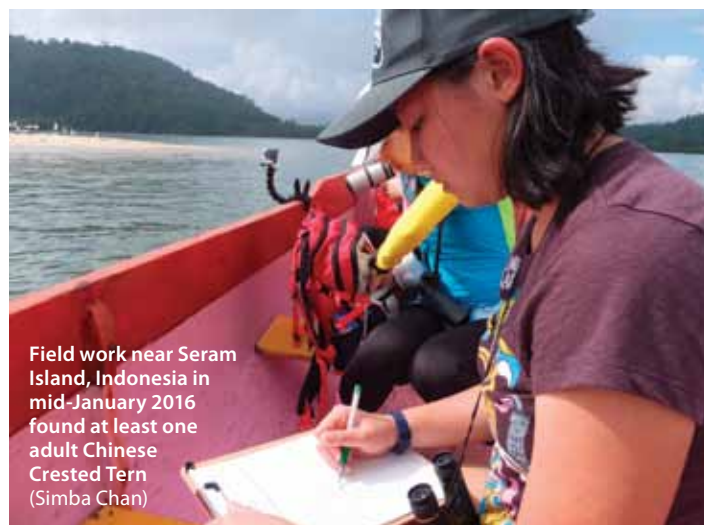
Despite a few subsequent ups and downs (for instance no breeding birds were located during a number of the following years; the tern's eggs were illegally collected by local people from the Jiushan Islands in 2007), recent events suggest that the outlook for the species is now brighter than at any moment since its rediscovery.

Classified by BirdLife as Critically Endangered, the present global population of Chinese Crested Tern is estimated at around 70–100 adult birds. There are three known breeding sites, with 2015 being the first year that birds bred successfully at all of them. The largest colony is at Tiedun Dao in the Jiushan Islands, with smaller colonies on the Wuzhishan Islands (also Zhejiang Province), and the Matsu Islands (the location of the species' rediscovery).

The most significant development in the species' conservation came in 2013, when Tiedun Dao was restored as a seabird colony. Vegetation was cleared, 300 tern decoys were placed on the island and solar-powered playback



Habitat restoration and the use of 300 tern decoys (see arrow) has brought terns back to Tiedun Dao (Simba Chan)



Field work near Seram Island, Indonesia in mid-January 2016 found at least one adult Chinese Crested Tern (Simba Chan)

systems were used to play the contact calls of Greater Crested Terns *T. bergii*, as well as their rarer relative; This conservation strategy was developed by Professor Steve Kress of Cornell University and Audubon (BirdLife in the USA). From late July, 19 adult Chinese Crested Terns (the largest count since the species'

rediscovery) and 2,600 Greater Crested Terns were present; by September, at least one juvenile Chinese Crested Tern had successfully fledged.

In 2014, a minimum of 43 adult Chinese Crested Terns were present on Tiedun Dao for the breeding season, a figure even bettered during 2015, when at least 52 adult

terns were attracted to the site by the decoys and sound-playback system. Remarkably, this constituted more than 70% of the global population; 25 pairs subsequently formed, fledging a minimum of 16 chicks.

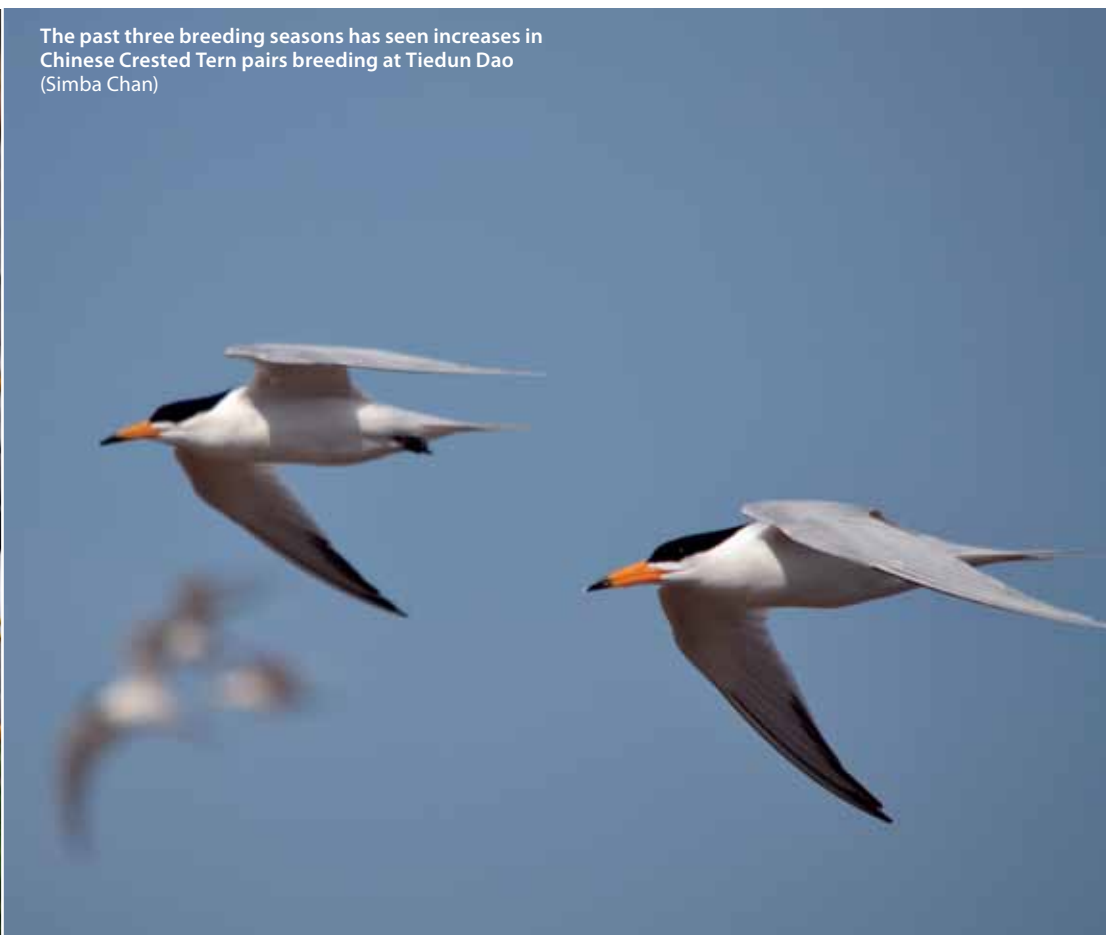
Simba Chan, BirdLife's Asia Division Senior Conservation Officer, was instrumental in the colony's breeding success. For the second year running, he stayed on the island throughout the season to monitor and protect the birds, even braving a severe typhoon that struck during the middle of the breeding season, to ensure the colony's survival.

"Although the typhoon was very strong and hit us directly, less than 5% of the colony were casualties because we maintained vegetation to shelter the colony, and tried to discourage the chicks from moving down to the shore before the typhoon hit the island", says Simba





The past three breeding seasons has seen increases in Chinese Crested Tern pairs breeding at Tiedun Dao (Simba Chan)



Chan. “This shows how we could apply our scientific observations from the previous year to improve the survival rate of the terns”.

### **Solving the mystery of where Chinese Crested Terns winter**

It is also hoped that another project may help to build more knowledge of this little-known species. In August 2015, some 31 crested tern chicks (probably all Greater Crested Terns, which share the colony with their rarer relatives) were ringed with numbered red bands at Tiedun Dao. This formed the first step in a systematic study that aims to investigate the movements of the colony’s terns and to start to build a definitive picture of where Chinese Crested Terns go during the non-breeding season. It is assumed that both species probably winter in the same localities; future observations of banded

birds will hopefully act as confirmation.

Other recent observations are already beginning to shed some light on this mysterious species’ movements. In mid-January 2016, at least one adult and possibly one first-year Chinese Crested Tern were seen in a flock of up to 250 Greater Crested Terns near Seram Island in Indonesia, approximately midway between Sulawesi and Papua, by a survey team led by Burung Indonesia (BirdLife Partner) and BirdLife’s Asia Division. Threats to the site and the birds were assessed in detail during the week long survey; the team also visited local university and government institutions to raise awareness of the nearby presence of this Critically Endangered seabird.

Despite its common name, Chinese Crested Tern was first found near Halmahera, in the Wallacea region of eastern Indonesia. However, after its 1861 discovery, the species was

not subsequently recorded in Indonesia (apart from an unverified record in Bali) until December 2010, when a lone bird was photographed near Seram. As a result of this initial sighting, along with further reports in 2014/15, BirdLife and Burung Indonesia believed that the area might perhaps be a regular wintering site. A survey team was formed, including local conservationists and three university students from Hong Kong.

“Although the number of Chinese Crested Terns found during the survey is low, it does confirm that the species is a regular wintering bird to the Seram Sea, and it is very likely that Wallacea is a main wintering area for this species. As the local authorities and community are starting to be aware of and feel proud of its presence, it will surely only be a matter of time before more sightings are reported from the region”, explains Simba Chan.

BirdLife is planning to carry out more surveys and outreach work around Seram in the future.

**WB**

**By Edward Parnell**

The Tiedun Dao restoration project was initiated in 2010 by the Xiangshan Ocean and Fishery Bureau, the Zhejiang Museum of Natural History and the Wild Bird Society of Zhejiang, with technical support from the tern group at Oregon State University (USA) and Hong Kong Bird Watching Society. The Seram winter survey was sponsored by the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong and BirdLife’s Preventing Extinctions Programme, with invaluable advice from Craig Robson. Both projects show the benefit of a team of partners working together to secure the future of a globally threatened species.

The people of Oursi turned to local BirdLife Partner, NATURAMA, when sand dunes moved into the lake (Wil Meinderts)

# Living on the edge

Can birds become a symbol of harmony and hope in West Africa?  
Can we alleviate poverty, stabilise water supplies and increase food security by protecting them?

**The rural community** of Oursi is used to adapting to an environment of extremes. Located in the remote far north of Burkina Faso, it is a poor, land-locked country in West Africa, on the edge of the Sahara desert. Rainfall is unpredictable here; water is scarce.

Oursi is an arid place; although it is home to a cluster of lakes, only one holds its water throughout the dry season, making it a life source for the community. A decade ago, sand dunes moved into the lake. This environmental change was too extreme, even

for Oursi. Local people knew that something had gone terribly wrong. If they didn't act, they would face losing their water supply and fisheries.

The people of Oursi turned to local BirdLife Partner, NATURAMA, for help. Having already developed a strong relationship with the community, it was easy for NATURAMA to unite the people behind their plan to save Lake Oursi.

Action began with reforestation. An acacia forest once hugged the lakeside, but it had been severely degraded by unsustainable wood harvesting,

leaving the water exposed to the encroaching sand. Now, every year, a communal tree planting day is held, where people come together to restore the protective forest.

Farmers have agreed to restrict the land used for cattle grazing; they no longer water their livestock at the lake, but instead at newly sunk boreholes. Many community members joined a Local Conservation Group (LCG); they began monitoring birds and were trained by NATURAMA to take part in scientific research, essential for understanding the health of

the ecosystem. The LCG grew to become a community-based organisation, representing land users—farmers, livestock breeders, women's groups and teachers—from many villages in the surrounding area. People in Oursi have been empowered. An ecological balance has been restored.

Walk into the acacia forest today and you will be surrounded by large flocks of Turtle-doves *Streptopelia turtur*. These dainty doves were the sound of summer for many Europeans, but their populations have rapidly decreased: Europe has lost up





the ambitious initiative ‘Living on the Edge’.

Now involving four countries across the Sahel region of West Africa—Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal—the Living on the Edge initiative is working in collaboration with local people to restore natural habitats and develop sustainable, improved livelihoods around 14 sites, which are all Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). The project is coordinated by the BirdLife Africa Secretariat in Accra, Ghana.

### Threats facing the Sahel

Each year, some two billion birds from Europe make the incredible journey to Africa. The Sahel provides the first stop for birds after crossing the Sahara, as well as the last opportunity to refuel before the immense desert crossing on the return migration. It is a crucial transition zone, but the Sahel is changing.

Climate change and an increasing population are forcing people to exploit their natural resources at an unsustainable rate, putting greater pressure on an already stressed environment. A collapse in biodiversity is being driven by unsustainable practices: agricultural intensification; overgrazing; overharvesting of wood; and the loss of floodplains as a result of hydrodams. More often than not, rural poverty increases as a result.

### Conflict over water in Nigeria

In northern Nigeria, a lack of water was causing regular conflicts between fishermen, crop farmers and cattle rearers; all these people depend on this limited resource for their livelihoods. These communities live alongside the Hadejia-Nguru Wetlands complex, one of the five most important wetlands in the Sahel. While being an essential water source for an estimated 700,000

to 50% in just over 15 years, with some countries witnessing a decrease of 90% since 1970. Turtle-doves are on the brink of an irrecoverable decline. In Oursi, at least, they find a safe haven, offering a beautiful symbol of harmony and hope.

The success in Oursi shows how water and food security is intertwined with migratory bird conservation. The commitment shown by local people and the impressive achievements of NATURAMA inspired Vogelbescherming Nederland (BirdLife in The Netherlands) to bring BirdLife Partners together to develop



Clearing wetlands of the invasive plant species, *Typha*, has helped local people and wildlife (Jonathan Barnard)

Wetlands such as Hadejia-Nguru Wetlands complex are and essential for wintering birds such as Ruff (Daniele Occhiato)





people, it also hosts large numbers of migratory birds: Garganey *Anas querquedula*, Pintail *Anas acuta*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* and White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*, to name but a few.

This habitat was seriously threatened by an aggressively invasive plant species, *Typha*. Decreased water levels, as a result of dams and water extraction, created the conditions for *Typha* to spread. Its stranglehold on the habitat meant that there was simply not enough water to meet all the people's needs. Conflicts broke out.

The Nigeria Conservation Foundation (NCF), BirdLife Partner and project partner of Living on the Edge, stepped in with a solution. By working in collaboration with the communities, NCF cleared an impressive 30 kilometers of the water channels to eradicate the *Typha* in the vast majority of the wetland complex. Waterbirds returned, conflict ceased, livelihoods improved. In fact, daily fishing income increased over threefold, from €9–13 to €34–43.

This is just one of many successes achieved by the Living on the Edge initiative.

Its range of activities is broad, from reducing wild bird hunting by providing alternative livelihoods through poultry farming, to empowering women through the creation of sustainable micro-enterprises, such as dyeing cooperatives.

"The success of Living on the Edge", explained Mohammed Garba Boyi of NCF, "is not only improving the habitat for wildlife and people but enhancing communities' source of income and improving their livelihoods". For NCF, this has been especially beneficial when working with young people. "Through the bee farming initiative", said Mohammed, "young people now have a source of income that they can depend on. As a result, they don't impact negatively on the environment but are careful and courteous about the way in which they interact with nature".

The Living on the Edge approach is proving popular. "The communities are very happy with it", said Mohammed, "and we've even seen the Local Conservation Groups take ownership of the projects and carry them forwards independently of us.

This means we can establish an exit strategy and the projects will continue long term".

### Future challenges

The on-the-ground successes of Living on the Edge stretch across four countries within 14 IBAs, but there are still many challenges to face. To create a living environment in West Africa, the initiative must challenge agricultural trends and strengthen the economic sector.

"Ironically, one of the initiatives to improve food security is to increase agricultural production through large scale farming of monocultures", explained Bernd de Bruijn from Vogelbescherming Nederland, which is running Living on the Edge in collaboration with the BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat and four African partners—NATURAMA, NCF, Nature Mauretanie and the Association Inter-Villageoise de Ndiäël in Senegal. "Initially, this may raise food security and it may strengthen the economic sector of agriculture, but for rural people it is also a real risk. If the monoculture fails, then they have lost all the other

alternatives that diversified farming would have naturally afforded them".

Living on the Edge is promoting a more holistic approach to land use that increases diversity and resilience. That starts off with understanding the livelihood system and how it connects to natural resources and bird habitat. Like birds, people in sub-Saharan Africa need a sufficiently diverse environment to be able to spread their risks.

"The governments' investment in food security is well meant", said Bernd, "but they need to be better informed as to how to do it in a way that is sustainable, in terms of ecology but also for climate resilience and future livelihoods for rural people. There is a negative cycle in terms of land use in the Sahel, but we've shown that this cycle can be reversed".

Dr Julius Arinaitwe, Regional Director of BirdLife Africa Partnership Secretariat, added: "Efforts of BirdLife Partners in Africa showed considerable success: initiatives developed in close collaboration with rural communities achieved both restoration of natural habitats and improved livelihoods. By addressing livelihood challenges and designing more sustainable ways of using natural resources, the environment for both birds and people improved, as well as their resilience to cope with climate change effects".

Living on the Edge proves that nature conservation in Africa works, that it is not a luxury but a necessity, and that we are interconnected in global challenges and solutions—with birds as a beautiful symbol.

WB

By Bethan John

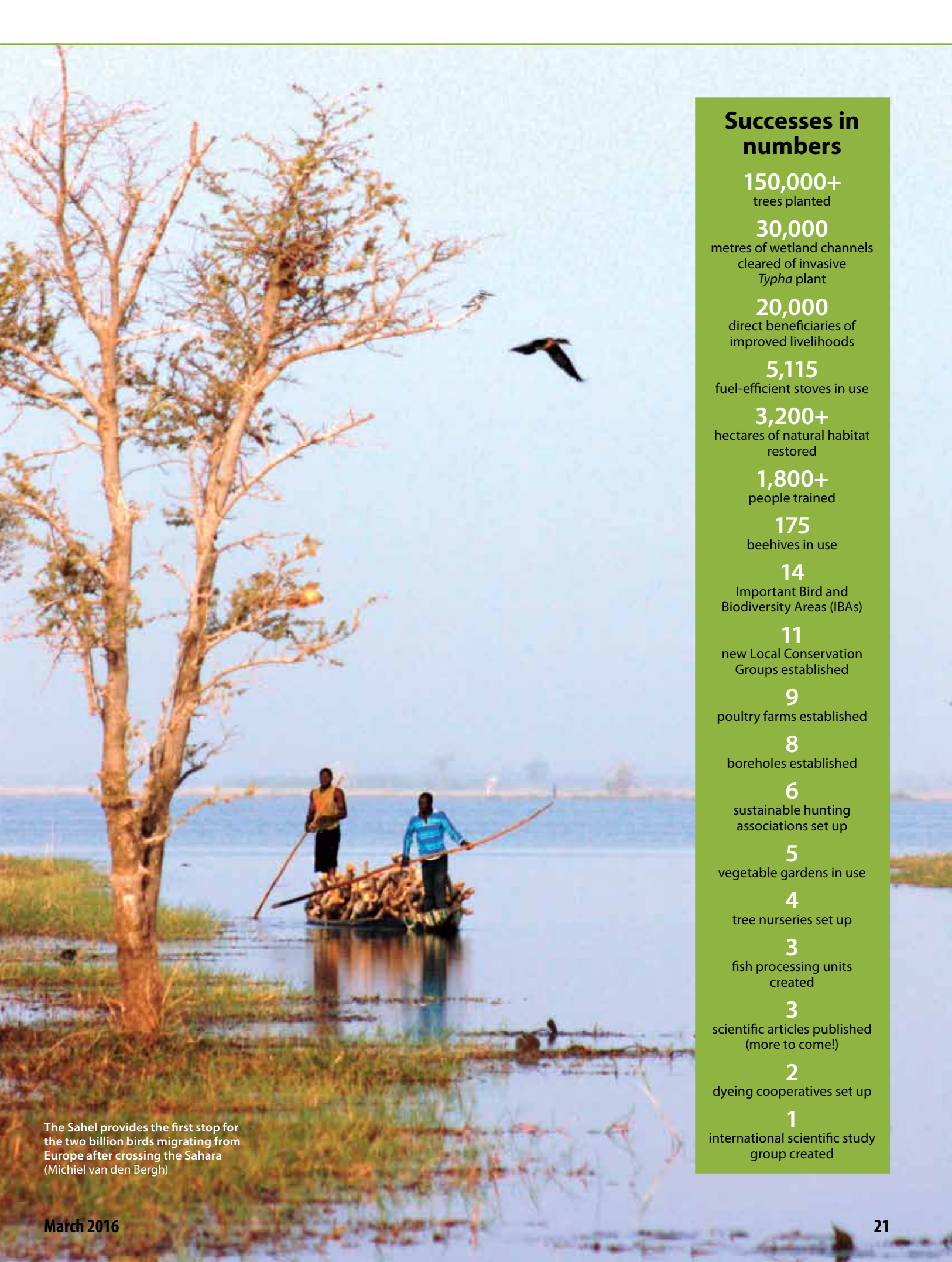


Much time has been spent with local communities to understand their use of natural resources (Bernd de Bruijn)

### Further information online

Living on the Edge Project  
<http://bit.ly/24G525X>





The Sahel provides the first stop for the two billion birds migrating from Europe after crossing the Sahara (Michiel van den Bergh)

## Successes in numbers

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trees planted

**30,000**  
metres of wetland channels  
cleared of invasive  
*Typha* plant

**20,000**  
direct beneficiaries of  
improved livelihoods

**5,115**  
fuel-efficient stoves in use

**3,200+**  
hectares of natural habitat  
restored

**1,800+**  
people trained

**175**  
beehives in use

**14**  
Important Bird and  
Biodiversity Areas (IBAs)

**11**  
new Local Conservation  
Groups established

**9**  
poultry farms established

**8**  
boreholes established

**6**  
sustainable hunting  
associations set up

**5**  
vegetable gardens in use

**4**  
tree nurseries set up

**3**  
fish processing units  
created

**3**  
scientific articles published  
(more to come!)

**2**  
dyeing cooperatives set up

**1**  
international scientific study  
group created



# New bird tracking initiative will revolutionise migration studies

With transmitters weighing less than 0.3g many species can now be tracked with the groundbreaking Motus Programme

**Our knowledge** of the movements of migratory birds looks set to be radically increased with the development of one of the world's most ambitious bird tracking initiatives. The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is a pioneering programme of Bird Studies Canada (BSC, one of the two Canadian BirdLife Partners), in partnership with collaborating researchers and organisations.

Motus (which means “movement” in Latin) utilises miniaturised radio transmitters weighing less than 0.3g, which can be unobtrusively fitted onto the backs of birds, including small passerines such as warblers. (Even smaller transmitters have also been developed that can be fitted to insects: for instance, one study already underway is tracking the movements of Monarch butterflies *Danaus plexippus*). The transmitters, or tags, emit a short burst or pulse every 5–30 seconds, each with

a unique numerical pattern. These pulses are then picked up by automated very high frequency (VHF) receivers, which can automatically detect and record signals from the tags at distances of up to 15 km.

Thousands of tags can be simultaneously deployed and tracked within the system, which, as of February 2016 comprised more than 300 receiving stations. At the moment these receivers are located mainly across eastern Canada and the United States. Resembling oversized television aerials, the receivers can be fixed to existing structures such as towers or lighthouses, on trees, or on stand-alone poles that are around 30 feet in height. The receivers can also be located out to sea; some receivers have

already been placed on offshore oil and gas platforms in coastal Nova Scotia.

“What’s new and exciting about Motus is that it harnesses the collective resources and infrastructure of numerous

researchers into one massive collaborative effort. Indeed, it is the depth of these collaborations that makes the entire system possible”,

explained Stuart Mackenzie, Motus Programme Manager for BSC. As birds—or other animals, such as bats and large insects—pass within range of any receiver in the network, data is recorded automatically into BSC’s central database in Ontario, where it is shared with researchers. “As each tag has a unique signature we can extract a massive level of detail about

movement and behaviour, including learning where and how quickly the bird in question has travelled, and for how long they may have stopped *en route*”, added Stuart.

A large number of individual study projects are currently underway that utilise Motus’ open source technology. These include: studying the stopover and migration ecology of various waders (including Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla* and White-rumped Sandpiper *C. fuscicollis*); monitoring the migration routes of Grey-cheeked *Catharus minimus* and Swainson’s Thrushes *Catharus ustulatus*; and investigating the post-breeding dispersal of Ipswich Sparrow, the *princeps* sub-species of Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis* that breeds only on Sable Island, Nova Scotia.

One of the big advantages of Motus over other methods

*“Motus offers us access to a new and exciting level of knowledge about the movements of animals and birds—meaning that we can make sure that our scant, ever stretched conservation budgets are utilised in the most effective way”.*



Motus receiving station  
in Nova Scotia  
(David Bell)



of tracking bird movements—such as ringing (banding) or the use of geolocators or other archival tags—is that Motus-tagged birds don't have to be recaptured in order for the data to be accessed. Indeed, Stuart estimates that the chances of recovering data from a tagged Motus bird is something like a thousand times greater than with traditional ringing recoveries. "With the 2015 project that studied migratory Grey-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes on their Colombian wintering grounds, migration data was obtained from around 30% of the birds involved—19 out of 67 tagged birds—an unprecedented figure compared to previous transcontinental migration studies", said Stuart.

A striking level of insight is already being gleaned into the movements of thrushes. For instance, a Swainson's Thrush tagged on 19 March 2015 remained at the Colombia study site, a shade-grown coffee

plantation, until 14 April. On 18 May, it was detected flying past a small array of towers in Canada's Chaplin Lake in Saskatchewan, an astounding journey of nearly 6,000 km in just 34 days; this equates to flying at least 175 km per day for a month. And one of the study's Grey-cheeked Thrushes travelled over 3,200 km from Colombia to Indiana in just 3.3 days, meaning it flew an average of 986 km a day.

Motus is poised to expand rapidly over the next few years. "This really is a project with global potential", explained Stuart. "Perhaps one of the most exciting developments for 2016 will be the deployment—working alongside Audubon Panama [BirdLife Partner]—of receivers across the canal zone of Panama, meaning that most tagged birds that migrate from North to South America will have to cross through and be recorded by the Panama Gateway".

In addition, Motus now has a foothold in Europe, with the tagging of songbirds taking place on the German island of Heligoland. "The Motus network is starting to expand at a very encouraging rate. Alongside Panama and Germany, 2016 will see an array take shape in Florida, around the Gulf of Mexico. America's Pacific Flyway will also begin to get receiver coverage, and enquiries have been made from further afield—including Australia—from researchers expressing an interest in using this groundbreaking technology", said Stuart.

WB

By Edward Parnell

Further reading online  
Motus, including animations  
of some of the movement  
data already obtained,  
please visit the BSC website  
[www.birdscanada.org/  
motus](http://www.birdscanada.org/motus)



Black-throated Blue Warbler *Dendroica caerulescens* sporting a radio-tag at Long Point, Ontario (Bethany Thurber)



Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus* with radio-tag (Stuart Mackenzie)





# Beyond boundaries to benefit nature

A recent project in Malaysia shows how looking beyond the quarry boundary can enable extractive operations to have an overall positive impact on nature.

## What has aggregates

extraction got to do with conserving birds and other wildlife? BirdLife International has been working with the global cement and aggregates company, CEMEX, since 2007.

In the early 2000s, CEMEX acquired a number of operations around the world. As well as their extractive potential, CEMEX recognised the need for better understanding of the importance of biodiversity at their sites, and they sought input from conservation specialists. Safeguarding biodiversity needs both global and local information and expertise—something at the heart of the BirdLife International Partnership. The CEMEX-BirdLife collaboration began!

Through the collaboration, BirdLife helped CEMEX to

develop a management tool to take action for nature at its sites. This tool, known as the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) standard, sets out how to identify, evaluate and conserve or enhance biodiversity in and (crucially, in this case) around CEMEX quarry operations.

## Legacy for nature

Some CEMEX quarries overlap with Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), which means an area has met internationally agreed criteria for its biodiversity value. For example, the CEMEX Soto Pajares quarry in Spain is bordered by Cortados del Jarama IBA: patches of riverine forest and marsh vegetation frequented by priority species such as European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* and Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. In

this instance, it is easy to see how CEMEX's operation has focused on protecting, and also enhancing, the site both during and after their operations—creating shallow lakes from gravel extraction, restoring forest and work to increase the extent and connectivity of marsh vegetation.

One of the pilot sites selected to test out the BAP process for the CEMEX-BirdLife collaboration was Bukit Tambun quarry in mainland Penang State, Malaysia, where CEMEX began work with the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS, BirdLife Partner). The MNS-CEMEX team got stuck into the BAP's first steps at Bukit Tambun quarry and surrounding environs, including a wide range of surveys for birds, reptiles, vegetation and threats.

The Bukit Tambun quarry is enveloped by oil palm plantations, and remnant forest was degraded and fragmented long before the quarrying even began. The team realised that the value for nature in restoring this 13 ha hard rock quarry was not the best use of resources—especially as CEMEX's lease on the site was coming to a possible close, meaning the future of any restored forest was unfortunately not secure from further development.

So what was the best way to achieve an overall positive impact for nature through this site's BAP?

## Looking beyond the quarry border

Landscape-scale conservation looks at a site or patch of interest in the context of everything else around it (often at scales





Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda Coast IBA is an important waterbird migratory site on the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (Dave Bakewell)

of tens to hundreds of square kilometres). To use a simple analogy of a patchwork quilt, it's caring for the whole quilt, rather than patching up a single square.

A wider study was initiated to look at the entire Penang State, evaluating potential areas to enhance or protect from predicted threats.

"The team developed a conservation prioritisation index using the wealth of citizen-science bird record data from Bird i-Witness and eBird", comments Dr Simon Attwood, who coordinated the study. "We produced a threat matrix for all globally threatened bird species occurring in the region, and determined which birds were likely to be declining and had gone extinct in Penang State and on Penang Island".

The study identified a globally significant 7,200 ha IBA

facing significant conservation challenges. The Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda Coast IBA consists of mudflats, mangroves and associated agricultural and secondary regrowth habitats. The area is home to a host of threatened species (amidst many thousands of waders and other water birds) and is a conservation priority for MNS at the national and state level.

The support from CEMEX energised MNS' monitoring and conservation work at the IBA. Regular surveys confirmed that the site is a very important wintering area for the globally Endangered Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*, with the highest count of 90 individuals possibly representing as much as 13% of its population. Further surveys only reinforced the team's choice, when survey leader Dave Bakewell found a Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* using the mudflats to overwinter—one of only a handful of records for Malaysia!

### Valuing the coasts of East Asia

The Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda Coast IBA is located on one of the most important waterbird migratory routes: the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. All along the flyway, intertidal wetlands are fast being lost to coastal development, so any remaining wintering and staging sites

are crucial for migratory shorebirds. However the value of Penang's coastal mudflats and mangroves to people and the Penang State Government is less obvious, and they are being degraded owing to multiple threats including mussel cultivation, mangrove clearing for aquaculture, and construction of jetties.

The MNS team used BirdLife's Toolkit for Ecosystem Service Site-based Assessment (TESSA) to evaluate the likely impacts of continued degradation, disturbance and incremental loss of the IBA.

"The team found that, if unchecked, its conservation value could greatly diminish", says Yeap Chin Aik, Conservation Manager at MNS. "Along with the multiple ecosystem services it provides such as climate regulation, wildlife habitat, fishery breeding and spawning areas, water quality and nature-based recreation".

Now armed with this information, and renewed monitoring data, MNS is engaging with the State and local Governments, showing how threats to the birds and other wildlife of the IBA are also threats to local people's livelihoods and wellbeing. In December 2015, MNS Penang Branch was one of the four key speakers in a forum on the ecotourism potential of the Seberang Perai district organised by the Seberang

Perai Municipal Council. Encouragingly, the IBA made news headlines as one of the potential ecotourism sites for the district.

Nature-based tourism plans will begin to come to life over the coming months and years. It is hoped CEMEX will help to support the establishment of a wetland nature education centre, plus Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) activities as part of a multi-pronged approach to safeguard the IBA's future.

"Working for nature at a landscape-scale is a good example of what the private and not-for-profit sectors can achieve through collaboration", said Charlie Butt, CEMEX-BirdLife Partnership Manager.

"This project began towards the later stages of this granite quarry's working life. We want to see the entire extractives sector have a 'net positive impact' (NPI) on biodiversity and it is important to remember that with other types of quarrying—especially for limestone—this is best achieved through biodiversity impact avoidance early on in the development life cycle. Where on-site impact avoidance or restoration isn't feasible, such as at the Bukit Tambun quarry, the landscape-level approach can help meet NPI goals for nature".

WB

By Simon Attwood, Yeap Chin Aik and Charlie Butt



Bukit Tambun quarry is surrounded by oil palm plantations, and remnant forest was degraded and fragmented long before quarrying began (MNS)





# High hopes for the High

The work of BirdLife International's Albatross Task Force may be better known, but our Marine Programme's efforts on the High Seas are just as vital.

**For landlubbing humans,** the principal difficulty with conserving seabirds is inherent in their name: they mainly inhabit open oceans. Albatrosses, petrels and other 'tubenoses' are literally out of sight—and thus out of conservationists' minds until recent decades. Now, of course, we know that the tiny proportion of people who are ocean wanderers—commercial fishermen—rather than landlubbers have unintentionally hauled seabirds many steps closer to extinction.

Half of seabird species are declining; for example, 15 of the 22 albatross species are globally threatened, with accidental capture ("bycatch") from longline and trawl fisheries being the principal pressure. But, thanks to

BirdLife International's Marine Programme, winds of change are now gusting over the High Seas as well as through sovereign waters.

Readers of this magazine should be familiar with the Programme's work in the national waters of 120 countries. World Birdwatch has regularly reported on the Albatross Task Force's (ATF) endeavours to reduce bycatch from longline fishing in Exclusive Economic Zones (200 nautical miles from the coast) through bird-scaring devices, weights, night-fishing and more. But conservation on the High Seas—international waters—is a different kettle of, well, fish.

The fundamental problem is that no single nation owns the High Seas or holds responsibility for their fisheries. Vessels

under various flags jostle for the piscine haul. This is where Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) step in. Under mandate from the United Nations, RFMOs now manage the majority of the world's marine fish resources, cooperating with fishing States to set appropriate conservation and management measures.

Thus, argued Cleo Small, Head of BirdLife International Marine Programme, in a 2005 review of RFMO environmental performance, RFMOs "are of central importance to sustainable management of oceans". Many marine species, including seabirds, sharks and sea turtles, could, Cleo wrote, "only be conserved through collaboration between States",

but RFMOs were not yet effectively addressing bycatch. Building on these observations, BirdLife International's Marine Programme (see box) set about engaging strategically with RFMOs. In the subsequent decade, progress has been remarkably swift.

Berry Mulligan, BirdLife International Marine Programme Officer, explains the two strands to BirdLife's High Seas endeavours: "We work with RFMOs on international policy, pressing for the assessment and reduction of bycatch. Then we help specific distant-water fleets to use bycatch mitigation measures, particularly those with significant, far-reaching longline fisheries such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea".

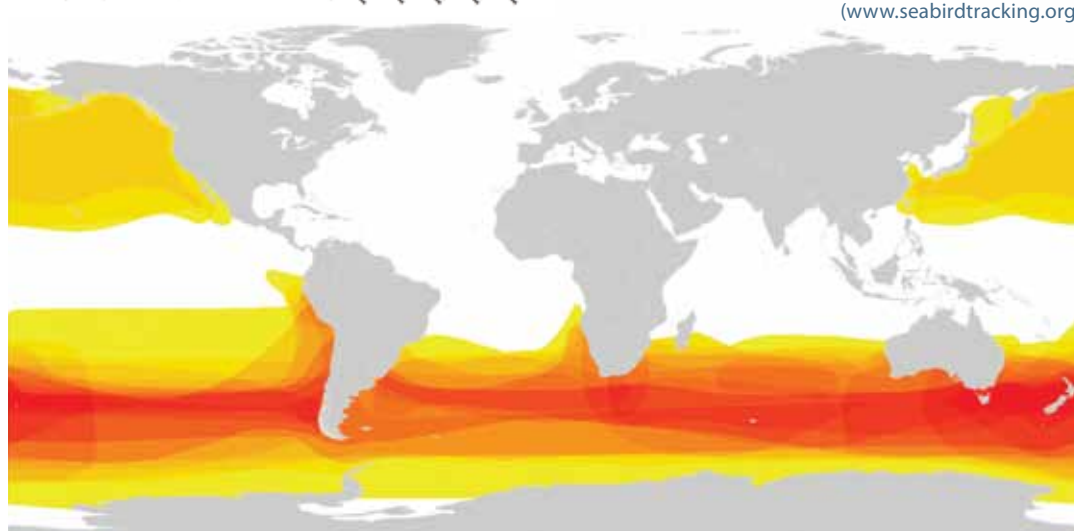
With around 20 RFMOs worldwide, prioritising those





No single nation owns the High Seas or holds responsibility for their fisheries (Bokamoso Lebepe)

Number of Albatross Species



Most of the world's albatrosses roam the High Seas – Data from Tracking Ocean Wanderers ([www.seabirdtracking.org](http://www.seabirdtracking.org))



The goal is to turn around albatross declines so that they come off the Red List (Yellow-Nosed Albatross, A Silva-Costa)

to work with is critical. The RFMO involved in Antarctic waters had already reduced albatross bycatch by 95%, says Cleo Small. This demonstrated what could be achieved, but other RFMOs had done little. Overlaying data on seabird distribution and fisheries, says Cleo, provided compelling evidence that “albatross declines were principally due to adult mortality in tuna longline fisheries”. BirdLife homed in on the five tuna RFMOs whose combined geographical scope—the southern sections of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans—coincided with four-fifths of global albatross distribution.

But how to get widespread recognition of the problem, let alone adoption of the solutions? Changing international

policy is tricky, admits Cleo Small. It involves presenting evidence to scientists, working with member governments (particularly those with positive experiences of the ATF), and lobbying persuasively. The key, suggests Ross Wanless, BirdLife International Marine Programme African Coordinator, is “to convince the RFMO’s own scientists, to shepherd evidence through Science Committees and ensure that it is presented to RFMO Commissioners as advice”. “To get across the line”, he continues, “you have to do the hard yards and roll with the punches”.

Tough going it may be, but this approach seems to work. BirdLife’s involvement with RFMOs has been widely welcomed. David Wilson, Acting Executive

Secretary of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, particularly appreciates BirdLife’s inclusive approach: “BirdLife’s willingness to work collaboratively with our membership has resulted in it becoming the most effective and respected NGO working on bycatch matters in the Indian Ocean”.

Better still, BirdLife’s efforts are paying off. Back in 2005, Cleo Small reckoned that only the Antarctic RFMO was performing satisfactorily. Fast forward a decade, and Cleo is particularly proud that “all five tuna RFMOs, plus their non-tuna equivalents in the South East Atlantic and South Pacific, now require fishing vessels to

The BirdLife International Marine Programme finds solutions to protect seabirds, marine life and the habitats on which they depend. It works through the BirdLife Partnership, in collaboration with government bodies, industry, NGOs, communities and individuals. The Programme:

- identifies key areas for conserving marine life;
- assesses the impact of threats;
- proposes and implements solutions;
- promotes the sustainable management of fisheries;
- protects the most important places for seabirds;
- ends seabird bycatch, and
- prevents seabird extinctions.

See more at [www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/marine](http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/marine)





Through BirdLife's work, keeping albatrosses off fishing hooks will become central to all fisheries management (Black-browed Albatross Mortality, Martin Abreu)

use seabird bycatch mitigation measures in most areas overlapping with albatrosses". Meanwhile, Esteban Frere, BirdLife International Marine Programme South American Coordinator, celebrates the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) now factoring birds into sustainable fisheries management.

Clearly, suitable policies are essential—but they are worthless without effective implementation. "You could just end up with lots of paper", says Cleo Small, "so we need to engage real fishermen". Accordingly, the Marine Programme invests substantial energy in helping fleets operating on the High Seas to introduce inexpensive measures to comply with the new seabird-friendly requirements. "Transitioning fleets from theory to practice is challenging and takes a long time", says Ross Wanless.

The prize is worthwhile: a forecast 80% reduction in albatross bycatch. So how does BirdLife do it? Changing a fleet, says Ross, requires carrot or stick. "Frankly, the stick—punishment for non-compliance—is nowhere to be seen, so we are pretty much confined to the carrot. It's about convincing the system—officials, vessel

owners, skippers—that they can change, should change, and that doing so benefits everyone".

Ross is particularly proud of BirdLife's "remarkable success" with the Republic of Korea. In 2012, Ross recalls, Korea was minded to "block a good seabird conservation resolution at the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission". Then the government changed heart, agreed the resolution and invited BirdLife to "help its fleet transition to using best-practice seabird bycatch mitigation measures". Four

years on, Ross continues, "Korea's fleet has implemented these measures. If we can emulate that with other distant-water fleets, we'll be doing sensationally well".

The omens for this are positive. In 2015, BirdLife developed an educational video, in Taiwanese, targeting those involved with Taiwan's 1,300 tuna longline vessels. "This video", says Mayumi Sato, BirdLife International Marine Programme Asia Coordinator, "helps us explain both threats and solutions directly to fishers and fisheries officials". The same year, following two years of negotiations, BirdLife delivered a successful workshop for Chinese fisheries' representatives. Ross Wanless describes the links made as "vital" and judges that China now "appears keen to meet international obligations".

Saving seabirds will never be plain sailing. In late 2015, Karen Baird, Seabird Conservation Advocate at Forest and Bird (BirdLife in New Zealand), returned from a Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission meeting with less than hoped. "Although we achieved a

breakthrough in Northern Hemisphere fisheries", Karen says, "unfortunately agreement could not be reached on acceptable measures to protect vulnerable seabirds between 25°S and 30°S in the Southern Hemisphere".

Such setbacks will not deter the Marine Programme team; indeed, they spur members on. Esteban Frere's immediate priorities include "strengthening mitigation measures in the IATTC", whilst Mayumi Sato is determined to get the message through to the Taiwanese industry. Mindful that high-quality data are imperative for RFMOs to act, Cleo Small seeks improvements in the consistency of monitoring across RFMOs. By 2020, her headline goal is "to turn around albatross declines so that species come off the Red List and for bycatch avoidance to be seen as a central component of fisheries management". I'll raise a landlubber's glass to that.

WB

By James Lowen

BirdLife's work on the High Seas is supported by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation [www.packard.org](http://www.packard.org)

The Marine Programme helps fleets on the High Seas introduce inexpensive equipment to prevent seabirds getting caught on fishing gear (Black-browed Albatross, Ben Lascelles)







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