Birdwatchers gather to save Asia's coastal wetlands

Title

Imagine a bird that every year has to fly non-stop for 10 days over 11,700 km of the open Pacific ocean between its breeding areas in Alaska and its wintering grounds in New Zealand. In Spring it returns north in two flights, from New Zealand to China (a mere 10,300 kms hop), then after refuelling for a month on the rich inter-tidal mudflats bordering the Yellow Sea, it flies a further 6,500 km to return to Alaska. Such is the annual story for some of the Bar-tailed godwits of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Then imagine what happens when that vital mudflat in China or South Korea is suddenly not there anymore.....

The world's biggest fair relating to bird and wildlife conservation is raising money this year to help save millions of migratory birds which rely on Asia's rich tidal wetlands. The Birdfair, which takes place at Rutland Water this coming weekend, is billed variously as "the international wildlife event of the year" or perhaps more prosaically "like Glastonbury for birdwatchers!"

The migrant birds that this year's Fair will help make immense journeys from the high arctic to the tropical coasts of the Pacific, along routes extending from Arctic Russia and Alaska to Australia and New Zealand and crossing the territories of some 22 countries. Over 50 million migratory waterbirds use this flyway annually. Twenty two migratory species, including the Critically Endangered Chinese Crested Tern and Spoon-billed Sandpiper, have virtually their entire global population within the flyway. However, the coastal habitats on which they depend are being lost at an alarming rate and many species are declining rapidly in numbers.

The countries in the Flyway also support more than one-third of the global human population, and most are going through a period of dynamic economic growth. This is causing intense pressure for the conversion of coastal wetlands for urbanisation, and industrial, agricultural and aquaculture purposes. A recent study by IUCN found that losses of up to 51% of coastal wetlands (including marshes) have occurred in China over the past 50 years, whilst in Japan 40% and in South Korea 60% of coastal wetlands are reported lost. This rapid rate of wetland loss is likely to continue, at least in the near future, as many more coastal development projects are ongoing or planned. Other threats include pollution and unsustainable hunting and exploitation of fish and shellfish.

"One of the key activities at the project sites that the Birdfair will fund is to mobilise local communities for the protection and management of wetland habitats", said Richard Grimmett, BirdLife's Director of Conservation. "This will be done by establishing and building the capacity of Local Conservation Groups, site-based groups of local stakeholders, often comprising of volunteers, who will support the efforts of protected area managers and local government agencies. They have already been established at some project sites in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam."

Martin Davies, Birdfair's co-organiser added, "The BirdLife organisations and the LCGs will seek to develop partnerships with protected area and local governments at the project sites, to help strengthen the protection and management of waterbird habitats. Everyone attending the Birdfair this weekend will be helping protect these

amazing places for these marathon-journeying birds.”

This year’s Birdfair, running from Friday 17th - Sunday 19th August, is the 24th to be held at the Egleton Nature Reserve and the fair’s co-organisers are expecting this year’s event to be the biggest yet. The Fair is being opened by His Excellency H.E.U. Kyaw Myo Htu, Myanmar’s Ambassador to the UK. Myanmar is an important wintering ground for tens of thousands of waterbirds including many threatened species.

The Fair has a long history of funding global conservation projects. Since its launch in 1989, the fair has raised well over £2.8 million and has funded a range of conservation projects from albatrosses in the southern Ocean to the rainforests of Ecuador and Indonesia.

Last year’s focus was on migrant birds that journey between Europe and Africa. Over 22,000 people attended Birdfair 2011 which as a result raised £185,000 for vital conservation work to develop highly-targeted conservation programmes through the BirdLife International Partners in several key West African countries. These include Burkina Faso (Naturama, Fondation des Amis de la Nature), Nigeria (Nigerian Conservation Foundation) and Ghana (Ghana Wildlife Society).

Find out more about the British Birdwatching Fair