

MYANMAR PLAINS



THE Irrawaddy, Chindwin and Sittang valleys were once hugely important breeding grounds for large waterbirds such as Spot-billed Pelican and Greater Adjutant, but their populations crashed in the early twentieth century because of the wholesale destruction of the forests where they used to nest. There is little recent information on the status of these and other threatened waterbird species from Myanmar, but it is possible that the sandbars on these rivers still support breeding populations of Indian Skimmers and that significant breeding populations of birds such as Pallas's Fish-eagle and Sarus Crane occur around large lakes and swamps, while Baer's Pochard may winter in substantial numbers. Pink-headed Duck, a species which may now be extinct, could possibly survive in the poorly known wetlands of Myanmar. This region also supports populations of White-rumped and Slender-billed Vultures, which may prove to be important, given the recent rapid declines in their numbers in the Indian subcontinent (see G03).

- **Key habitats** Freshwater wetlands on riverine plains, cultivation and other open habitats.
- **Countries and territories** Myanmar.

	Threatened species			Total
	CR	EN	VU	
●	3	—	5	8
✈	—	—	—	—
🦆	—	1	2	3
Total	3	1	7	11

Key: ● = breeding in this wetland region.
✈ = passage migrant.
🦆 = non-breeding visitor.

The Myanmar plains region is within Conservation International's Indo-Burma Hotspot (see pp.20–21).

Small populations of Sarus Cranes have been found in several parts of Myanmar during recent surveys. PHOTO: ELEANOR BRIGGS



OUTSTANDING IBAs FOR THREATENED BIRDS (see Table 1)

Five IBAs have been selected, which are known to support some of the threatened waterbirds (and possibly have populations of several more), but future fieldwork is likely to locate many other important wetland IBAs in the Irrawaddy, Chindwin and Sittang river basins.

CURRENT STATUS OF HABITATS AND THREATENED SPECIES

Extensive lakes and marshes associated with the Irrawaddy, Chindwin and Sittang rivers once provided foraging grounds for very large numbers of waterbirds, while tall forests nearby provided secure breeding grounds. Over the past century, many wetlands in Myanmar were bunded and converted to

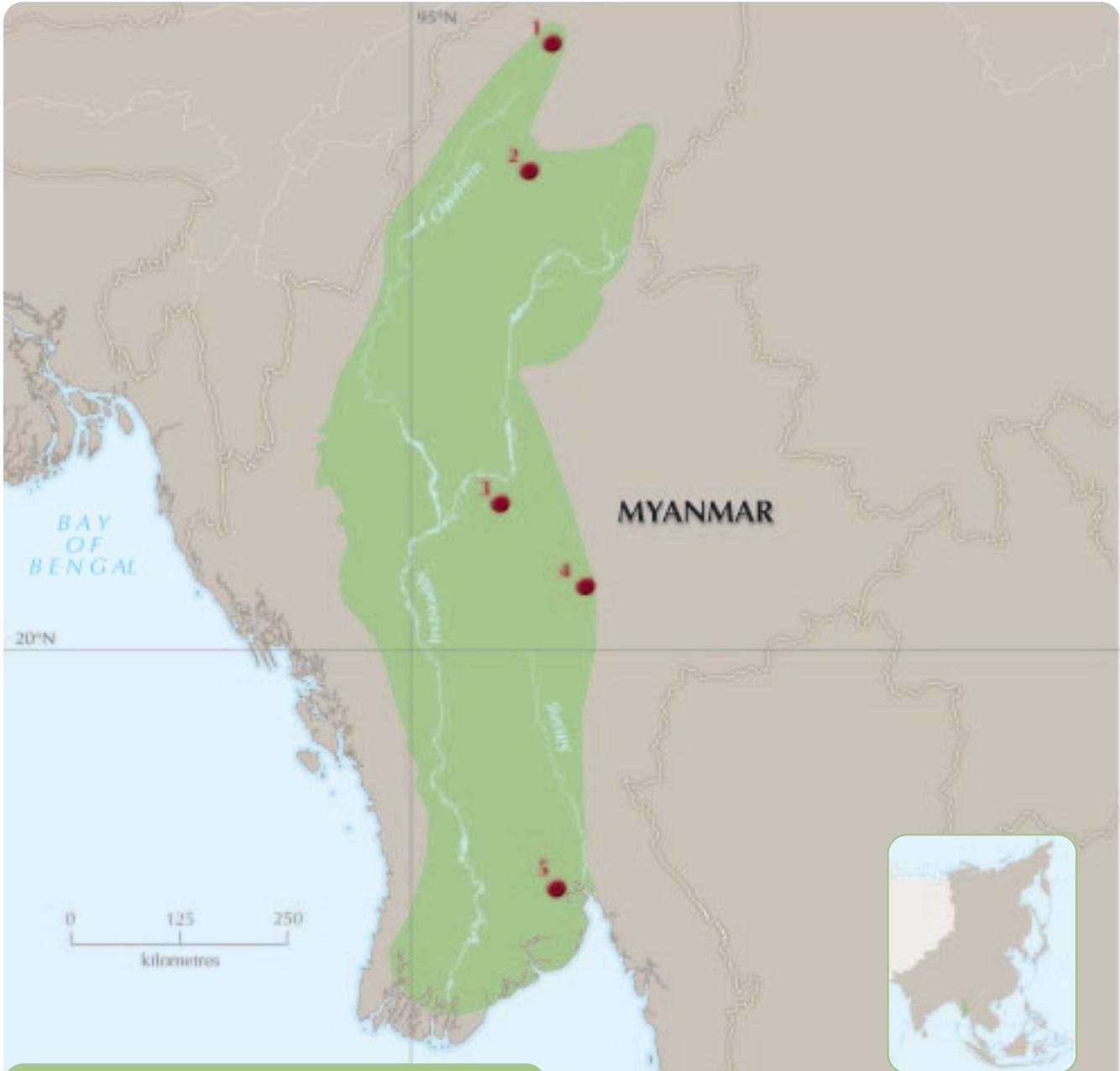


Table 1. Outstanding Important Bird Areas in the Myanmar plains.

IBA name	Status	Territory	Threatened species
1 Hukaung Valley WS	PA	Myanmar	Supports Spot-billed Pelican, Lesser Adjutant and Pallas's Fish-eagle, and wintering Baer's Pochard
2 Indawgyi Lake WS	PA	Myanmar	Spot-billed Pelican, Lesser Adjutant and (at least formerly) Jerdon's Babbler
3 Myittha lakes	—	Myanmar	Wintering Baer's Pochard
4 Inle lake	PA	Myanmar	Wintering Baer's Pochard, small numbers of Sarus Crane
5 Mogyngye WR	PA	Myanmar	Small numbers of Sarus Crane, and non-breeding Spot-billed Pelican

Note that more IBAs in this region will be included in the *Important Bird Areas in Asia*, due to be published in early 2004.

Key IBA name: WR = Wetland Reserve.
 Status: PA = IBA is a protected area; (PA) = IBA partially protected; — = unprotected.

There used to be huge breeding colonies of Spot-billed Pelican and other waterbirds in Myanmar, but numbers crashed following the clearance of the tall forests used for nesting.

PHOTO: TIM LOSEBY



Table 2. Threatened birds of the Myanmar plains.

Species		Distribution and population
Spot-billed Pelican <i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>	🦩 VU	Now rare and thought not to breed
Lesser Adjutant <i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	○ VU	Probably breeds in small numbers
Greater Adjutant <i>Leptoptilos dubius</i>	🦩 EN	Now rare and thought not to breed
Pink-headed Duck <i>Rhodonessa caryophyllacea</i>	EX? CR	Recorded historically in this region, but the species may be extinct
Baer's Pochard <i>Aythya baeri</i>	🦩 VU	Several hundred recently found wintering on scattered wetlands
Pallas's Fish-eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i>	○ VU	Breeding population of unknown size on the upper Irrawaddy
White-rumped Vulture <i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	⊕ CR	Urban and cultivated areas, light woodland and open habitats in the lowlands
Slender-billed Vulture <i>Gyps tenuirostris</i>	⊕ CR	Cultivated areas, light woodland and open habitats in the lowlands
Sarus Crane <i>Grus antigone</i>	○ VU	Small populations breed in several areas
Indian Skimmer <i>Rynchops albicollis</i>	○ VU	Several recent sightings, probably breeds on the major rivers
Jerdon's Babbler <i>Chrysomma altilostre</i>	⊕ VU	Formerly widespread in tall riverine grasslands, but no recent records

In addition to the waterbirds, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (VU; see F01) occurs in winter. Note that three species which occur in forested wetlands in Myanmar, White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*, White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata* and Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata*, are covered in region F06.

○ = region estimated to support <10% of global breeding population, ⊕ = proportion of global breeding population unknown; 🦩 = region estimated to support <10% of global non-breeding population; EX? = probably extinct

permanent agriculture, and the forests were felled, such that waterbird numbers have plummeted. Some parts of the plains are still seasonally inundated, and then provide feeding areas for waterfowl, but they are used for rice cultivation during the dry season (except perhaps along some larger rivers in remote northern regions). Myanmar has some of the most extensive and least disturbed stretches of waterway in South-East Asia, and may retain relatively healthy populations of riverine birds such as Indian Skimmer. However, there is little recent information on the status of threatened waterbirds and their habitats, and surveys are urgently needed to identify priority areas for conservation and the threats to wetlands and waterbirds that need to be addressed.

CONSERVATION ISSUES AND STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS (summarised in Table 3)

Habitat loss and degradation

■ **CONVERSION TO AGRICULTURE**

Many floodplain wetlands in Myanmar have been drained and converted for permanent agriculture, and there is still pressure to convert wetlands to rice paddies. All important wetlands for threatened birds must be safeguarded from any

Fishing provides a vital source of protein to the large human population in the lowlands of Myanmar.



PHOTO: SIMBA CHAN

further reclamation. An education and awareness programme is needed to inform decision-making bodies and local communities about the importance of healthy wetlands in maintaining water quality and preserving fish stocks.

CUTTING OF NESTING TREES

The loss of secure breeding sites in tall lowland forest appears to have been the main factor in the rapid disappearance of the vast Spot-billed Pelican and Greater Adjutant colonies in Myanmar. Any surviving waterbird colonies should be protected by working with landowners and managers, and developing new protected areas and/or community conservation projects. These and former nesting sites should be developed for the future by planting suitable tree species for nesting (or even by constructing artificial nest platforms).

DISTURBANCE

The plains of Myanmar have a large rural population, and many wetlands are doubtless badly affected by human disturbance. Rivers are used for transport, and the disturbance caused is likely to put serious pressure on riverine birds such as Indian Skimmer which nest on sandbars and islands. Human use of important wetlands and stretches of river (particularly within protected areas) therefore needs to be managed, keeping some areas undisturbed to maintain populations of wildlife and aquatic resources.

POLLUTION

There is evidence that pollution is a problem at some wetlands in Myanmar, for example at Inle lake where discharge of effluents is affecting fish and waterbird populations and causing eutrophication. Dynamite and chemical fishing are reported to be common. Gold mining in the upper Irrawaddy river is affecting sedimentation and water turbidity, as well as causing disturbance to sandbanks. The levels and sources of pollution need to be investigated, and existing (and if necessary new) laws used to control the release of toxic chemicals into the environment.

Protected areas coverage and management

GAPS IN PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM

Only a few of Myanmar’s wetlands are legally protected within reserves. The government is currently reviewing the country’s protected areas system, and there is a need to identify and protect further important wetland sites. Particular priorities are the protection of sites with nesting colonies of large waterbirds (or the potential for former nesting colonies to be restored), and of undisturbed stretches of riverine habitat and representative examples of other types of wetland.

Exploitation of birds

HUNTING

Levels of persecution and poaching are reported to be high in Myanmar. Migratory ducks are apparently netted by hunters and brought to markets in large quantities in winter. Hunting and trapping of all threatened birds should be banned, wetland protected areas more intensively patrolled, and levels of trade in markets monitored. Gun and net ownership should be controlled at important sites. The plight of large waterbirds and the laws protecting them need to be widely and clearly communicated, with a view to reducing persecution and disturbance.

Gaps in knowledge

INADEQUATE DATA ON THREATENED BIRDS

There is little recent information on threatened waterbirds and vultures and their habitats in Myanmar, and surveys are required to improve understanding of their current status, identify priority areas for conservation, and clarify the most important issues affecting these species and sites. Although it is possibly extinct, surveys should be conducted for Pink-headed Duck, including analysis of satellite images to locate potentially suitable areas.

Wetlands provide many resources to local people, such as fodder for their livestock, but human disturbance is likely to be affecting threatened waterbirds in many areas.



PHOTO: SIMBA CHAN

Table 3. Conservation issues and strategic solutions for birds of the Myanmar plains.

Conservation issues	Strategic solutions
Habitat loss and degradation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ CONVERSION TO AGRICULTURE ■ CUTTING OF NESTING TREES ■ DISTURBANCE ■ POLLUTION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Safeguard key wetlands for threatened birds from reclamation for agriculture ➢ Protect active waterbird colonies, and plant nest trees or erect artificial nest platforms for threatened waterbirds ➢ Regulate human activities at key wetlands to minimise disturbance ➢ Enforce laws to control wetland pollution
Protected areas coverage and management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GAPS IN PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Establish a network of wetland protected areas in Myanmar, including all colonies of large waterbirds and representative examples of all types of wetland
Exploitation of birds	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ HUNTING 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Ban hunting and trapping of all threatened bird species ➢ Patrol protected areas, and control gun and net ownership at key sites
Gaps in knowledge	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ INADEQUATE DATA ON THREATENED BIRDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Conduct surveys of wetlands throughout Myanmar, to locate the key sites for the conservation of threatened waterbirds ➢ Search for Pink-headed Duck