

JAPANESE WETLANDS



THIS region includes the wetlands on the main southern islands of Japan, other than the coastal wetlands of Kyushu and the Nansei Shoto islands which are treated as part of the China Sea coast (W10). Many waterbirds declined substantially in Japan during the past two centuries, notably Crested Ibis, which is extinct there, Oriental Stork, which no longer breeds, and wintering Baikal Teal. However, Honshu still has an important population of Marsh Grassbird, and Izumi on Kyushu supports a remarkable wintering concentration of White-naped and Hooded Cranes.

- **Key habitats** Freshwater and coastal wetlands.
- **Countries and territories** **Japan** (Honshu, Izu islands, Shikoku, Kyushu).

	Threatened species			Total
	CR	EN	VU	
●	—	—	2	2
✈	—	2	3	5
🐦	—	3	6	9
Total	—	5	11	16

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

About 85% of the global population of Hooded Cranes winters at Izumi on Kyushu.

PHOTO: JON HORNBUCKLE





Table 1. Outstanding Important Bird Areas in the Japanese wetlands.

IBA name	Status	Territory	Threatened species
1 Iwaki-gawa	—	Honshu	An important Marsh Grassbird breeding site
2 Hotoke-numa	(PA)	Honshu	The most important Marsh Grassbird breeding site in Japan
3 Kahoku-gata	—	Honshu	Several hundred Baikal Teal regularly winter
4 Katano Duck Pond	PA ^{AP,R}	Honshu	Several hundred Baikal Teal regularly winter
5 Tone-gawa	PA	Honshu	An important Marsh Grassbird breeding site, Swinhoe's Rail recorded in winter
6 Yashiro	PA ^{AP}	Honshu	Supports a small wintering flock of Hooded Crane
7 Izumi	PA ^{AP}	Kyushu	Holds large flocks of wintering White-naped and Hooded Cranes

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 Status: PA = IBA is a protected area; (PA) = IBA partially protected; — = unprotected; AP = IBA is wholly or partially an Asia-Pacific waterbird network site (see p.35); R = IBA is wholly or partially a Ramsar Site (see pp.31–32).

Almost half of the global population of White-naped Cranes winters at Izumi.



PHOTO: JACOB WIJPKEMA

OUTSTANDING IBAs FOR THREATENED BIRDS (see Table 1)

Seven IBAs have been selected in this region, most notably Izumi which in winter supports c.85% and c.40% respectively of the global populations of Hooded Crane and White-naped Cranes. The three most important breeding populations of Marsh Grassbird in Japan have also been covered, as well as two wintering sites for Baikal Teal.

CURRENT STATUS OF HABITATS AND THREATENED SPECIES

The lowlands of Japan are densely populated, and many wetlands have been converted for agriculture and urban and industrial development. This habitat loss combined with hunting, disturbance, pesticide use and other pressures led to the extinction of the Japanese breeding populations of Oriental Stork and Crested Ibis, and to major reductions in the numbers of some other waterbirds, including wintering

Baikal Teal. Protection and supplementary feeding of White-naped and Hooded Cranes at Izumi on Kyushu has compensated for the lack of suitable wetlands elsewhere, but the abnormal concentration of the entire Japanese wintering populations (and high proportions of the global population) of these two species at a single site makes them vulnerable. Many of the most important wetlands are now well protected, and hunting of waterbirds is no longer a problem.

CONSERVATION ISSUES AND STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS (summarised in Table 3)

Habitat loss and degradation

■ **CONVERSION TO AGRICULTURE**

The Marsh Grassbird requires successional wetlands, and in the past it was able to colonise new sites as the old ones became unsuitable, but nowadays the potential for new wetlands to develop has been greatly reduced in Japan. Several breeding sites were recently under pressure, for example Tone-gawa from a river-widening scheme and Hotoke-numa from conversion into grazing land; however, the project at Tone-gawa is unlikely to go ahead, and the Ministry of the Environment of Japan has decided to create a protected area at Hotoke-numa (although it is not yet clear whether this will cover all of the species's habitat). Hachiro-gata was recently established as a protected area, but the Marsh Grassbird habitat there continues to decline as the vegetation changes through natural succession. The protection of the few areas where this specialised bird is known to breed is critical for its conservation, with management to maintain the necessary vegetation diversity and height, especially to maintain the areas of sedge *Carex*. Increasing the area of suitable successional wetlands within its breeding range, either through management of existing wetlands or even by the creation of new wetlands, will help. Freshwater wetland habitats should also be restored in many parts of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu for the benefit of other threatened waterbirds, especially waterfowl and cranes.

Marsh Grassbird nests at a handful of sites in Japan, where its habitat needs to be carefully protected and managed.



PHOTO: TAKAO BABA

Table 2. Threatened birds of the Japanese wetlands.

Species	Distribution and population	
Chinese Egret <i>Egretta eulophotes</i>		VU Uncommon migrant at coastal wetlands, which has attempted to nest
Oriental Stork <i>Ciconia boyciana</i>		EN Formerly a common breeding bird, but now a rare migrant and winter visitor
Black-faced Spoonbill <i>Platalea minor</i>		EN Rare migrant at coastal wetlands
Swan Goose <i>Anser cygnoides</i>		EN Rare winter visitor
Lesser White-fronted Goose <i>Anser erythropus</i>		VU Rare winter visitor
Baikal Teal <i>Anas formosa</i>		VU Uncommon winter visitor, but significant concentrations at several localities
Baer's Pochard <i>Aythya baeri</i>		VU Regular but rare winter visitor
Scaly-sided Merganser <i>Mergus squamatus</i>		EN Scarce winter visitor
White-naped Crane <i>Grus vipio</i>		VU Large numbers winter at Izumi on Kyushu, and sometime small numbers in Kochi prefecture on Shikoku
Hooded Crane <i>Grus monacha</i>		VU Large numbers winter at Izumi on Kyushu, and small numbers at Yashiro in western Honshu
Swinhoe's Rail <i>Coturnicops exquisitus</i>		VU Rare migrant and winter visitor
Spotted Greenshank <i>Tringa guttifer</i>		EN Rare migrant at coastal wetlands
Spoon-billed Sandpiper <i>Eurynorhynchus pygmeus</i>		VU Rare but regular autumn migrant, generally along the Pacific coast
Saunders's Gull <i>Larus saundersi</i>		VU Rare migrant and winter visitor at coastal wetlands
Styan's Grasshopper-warbler <i>Locustella pleskei</i>		VU Localised breeding species on the Izu islands and small islands off Honshu
Marsh Grassbird <i>Megalurus pryeri</i>		VU Breeds at six sites in northern and eastern Honshu, and winters along the Pacific side of Japan from central Honshu to Shikoku

○ = region estimated to support 10–50% of global breeding population; = region estimated to support 50–90% of global non-breeding population, = 10–50%, = <10%, = proportion of global non-breeding population unknown; = region estimated to support <10% of global population on passage, = proportion of global population on passage unknown

Protection and feeding has greatly benefited wintering cranes at Izumi, but concentration at a single site makes them vulnerable to disease or some other catastrophe.



PHOTO: JACOB WIJKEMA

Table 3. Conservation issues and strategic solutions for birds of the Japanese wetlands.

Conservation issues	Strategic solutions
Habitat loss and degradation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ CONVERSION TO AGRICULTURE ■ OVER-CONCENTRATION CAUSED BY SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Protect and manage Marsh Grassbird breeding sites, and increase the area of successional wetlands available to the species ➤ Restore freshwater wetlands on Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu ➤ Encourage the wintering cranes at Izumi to disperse to other sites in southern Japan
Protected areas coverage and management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GAPS IN PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM ■ WEAKNESSES IN RESERVE MANAGEMENT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establish protected areas at any new wintering sites for cranes ➤ Manage Marsh Grassbird breeding habitat at Hachiro-gata to prevent natural succession
Other conservation issues	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ CAPTIVE BREEDING AND REINTRODUCTION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reintroduce Crested Ibis and Oriental Stork to Japan, once former threats have been removed

■ **OVER-CONCENTRATION CAUSED BY SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING**
 Food provision at Izumi on Kyushu has produced an unnaturally large concentration of wintering White-naped and Hooded Cranes, which are at elevated risk from disease or some other catastrophe. Natural habitats and food sources no longer exist there, and the cranes depend completely on intensive management (supported by the Japanese government and local groups), with fresh water being pumped over the agricultural fields where the cranes are fed to cleanse the area. To counter the risk of disease and other threats, the artificial feeding at Izumi should be gradually reduced, and the cranes encouraged to disperse to other potential wintering sites in southern Japan.

Protected areas coverage and management

■ **GAPS IN PROTECTED AREA SYSTEM**
 Should the attempts to attract White-naped and Hooded Cranes to other potential wintering sites in Japan be

successful, these sites should be protected, possibly including compensation to farmers whose land is used by the cranes.

■ **WEAKNESSES IN RESERVE MANAGEMENT**

The Marsh Grassbird breeding site at Hachiro-gata has recently been established as a protected area, but the reserve needs to be managed to maintain the vegetation diversity and height required by the species.

Other conservation issues

■ **CAPTIVE BREEDING AND REINTRODUCTION**

Several captive Crested Ibises from the population in China have been sent to Japan. When the captive population in Japan has increased sufficiently, a reintroduction programme at carefully selected sites could be considered there, but only once the former threats have been removed. There are also plans to re-establish a breeding population of Oriental Storks in Japan using captive-bred birds.