



Wings over wetlands

With around 15 months left to run, the UNEP/GEF Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) project is already close to achieving many of its goals.

The Critical Sites Network Tool, an innovative internet portal, will go live early in 2010, providing governments and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia with the information they need in order to work together to conserve the 200-plus waterbird species that use the African-Eurasian flyway.

A new cohort of conservationists is being trained in the management of wetlands from a wider, flyway perspective, to build local expertise to conserve migratory waterbirds.

Almost incredibly, given the short time the project has been in existence, not only has the status of waterbirds at some of WOW's demonstration sites already improved, but local communities have enjoyed such dramatic socio-economic benefits that conservation activities are likely to become self-sustaining after the WOW

demonstration projects are wound up at the end of this year.

Launched in November 2006, WOW is a partnership between international conservation organisations, multilateral environmental agreements, and national governments, which aims to improve the status of migratory waterbirds throughout the 118 range states of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). The main partners are Wetlands International and BirdLife International, supported by a coordination team from the United Nations Office for Project Services, and with funding from the Global Environment Facility through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP/GEF). WOW's activities are coordinated not only with the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat, but with the Ramsar

Convention on Wetlands of international importance. WOW has helped a number of national governments to prepare for the designation and management of Ramsar sites, including the first transboundary Ramsar site outside Europe: the Saloum-Niumi complex, shared by Senegal and the Gambia.

The Critical Sites Network (CSN) Tool will unify the conservation efforts of countries along the flyway. At the flyway scale, it will show the key sites for any waterbird population in the AEWA region. At the site level, it will help managers to assess the importance of the site within the flyway for each waterbird population it hosts.

A team is currently working to bring together information on all the wetland Important Bird Areas in the AEWA region, using BirdLife's IBA database/World Bird Database, with

waterbird census information from Wetlands International, and additional data from the Ramsar Site Information Service and the World Database on Protected Areas. The information will be presented in a visual form, and part of the work now going on involves digitising site boundaries.

"Decision makers and conservation planners will be able to enquire by site, and get information on the species and subpopulations that use it, or query by species, and see where the most significant populations occur" explains Jonathan Barnard, Senior Programme Manager at BirdLife International. "We are currently working on criteria to better define the network of sites necessary to conserve migratory waterbirds." There will also be access to species management information.

WOW's training and capacity development



LEFT Migratory birds, like these White-fronted Geese, need joined-up conservation (Simay Gábor)

ABOVE In Nigeria, a management programme has been set up to deal with the invasive *Typha* reed (Jonathan Barnard)

framework has been developed in consultation with a wide range of partners across the region. Largely led by Wetlands International, this aims to change conservationists' thinking by widening the focus from the site or country to the entire flyway. The training modules have been made more regionally specific by WOW's regional offices; for example, the office in Amman, Jordan, has added Middle Eastern examples and is translating the modules into Arabic.

The training is now being implemented on the ground. RSCN, the BirdLife Partner in Jordan, has delivered a seven day "training of trainers" workshop for people already engaged in waterbird conservation in nine Middle Eastern countries. These people are now adapting the training material to communicate the flyways approach to conservationists at home, who in turn will pass it on

to workers and communities at wetland sites.

As well as covering topics like identification, census and monitoring techniques, and the implications of the flyway approach for protected area system planning, the training modules are able to draw on WOW's demonstration projects, where site conservation has been successfully reconciled with socio-economic benefits for communities who depend on the sites for their livelihoods.

Take the Hadejia Nguru wetlands. An IBA and Ramsar site in the Sahel zone of north-eastern Nigeria, this is an important wintering site for waterbirds, with Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, both Near Threatened, among ten waterbird species with numbers at the site exceeding 1% of the biogeographic population. It is also an important stopover

site for birds that cross the Sahara.

Around 40% of the wetland area of Hadejia Nguru consists of permanent lakes. These are connected by channels to seasonal pools, which fill up after the rains. But poorly regulated upstream water use, including dam construction, has made the annual floods more irregular. As a result, native but invasive *Typha* reed has colonised areas of the wetland, blocking channels and open water, and preventing water reaching some seasonal pools, so that farming has ceased to be viable, while flooding elsewhere has displaced communities.

A three-way collaboration between BirdLife, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF; BirdLife Partner) and the community of Dabar Magini has shown how the wetland can be restored. With tools supplied by the WOW partners, local farmers and

fishermen have manually cleared 35 km of channels, working up to their chests in water.

"Water is once again getting to places it hasn't reached in 15 years, so that farmers are able to reclaim their farming and grazing areas", says Jonathan Barnard. "Fishermen have reported dramatic increases both in catches, and the size of fish."

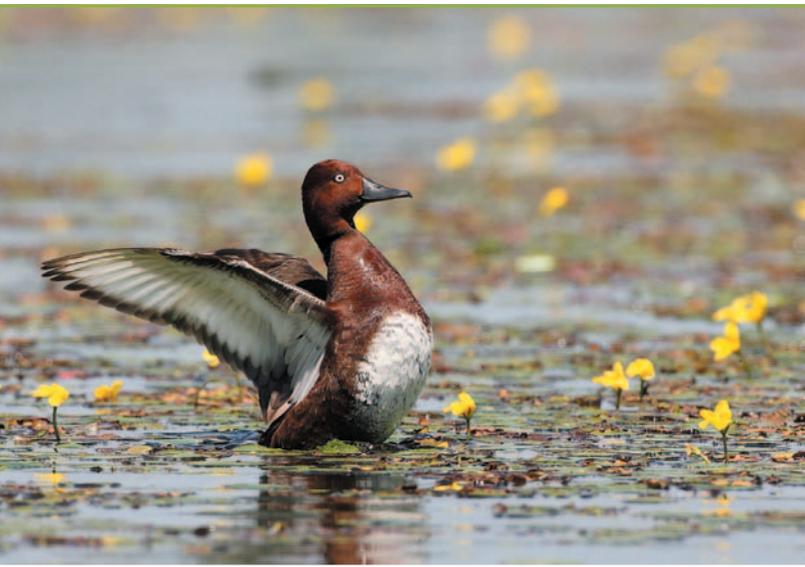
Reported bird numbers have increased too: from 46,055 birds of 37 species in the 2008 winter counts, to 129,186 of 65 species in 2009.

A rolling management programme has been developed for dealing with *Typha*, with farmers and fishermen contributing to the working parties unpaid, while the rest of the community contributes to a big, celebratory meal at the end of the day. Jonathan Barnard believes that this arrangement could become self-sustaining; and other communities among the 1.5 million people who depend directly on the wetland for their livelihoods are keen to implement their own schemes. NCF meanwhile is working with other organisations to ensure the entire catchment area for the wetland is managed properly.

"The community has seen what can be achieved, and are now taking this forward independently, demonstrating their commitment to improving wetland management", says Jonathan Barnard.

"The lessons learnt from this demonstration will be used to extend it further, as well as being applied to the whole WOW initiative."

An important wetland site near a large municipality, Burdur Gölü, (Lake Burdur) in Turkey, has shown vast improvements for both birds and people as a result of the WOW project led by BirdLife Partner Doğa Derneği (DD). The single most important wintering site globally for White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, the lake was suffering both from over-abstraction of water, and from the discharge of sewage. By launching an awareness campaign,



TOP Ferruginous Duck has benefited from WOW projects at several sites. (Simay Gábor)

CENTRE In Hungary, the WOW project is working with a fish-farming company to restore Biharugu Fishponds to commercial viability (Simay Gábor)

BOTTOM Lake Burdur, Turkey has shown vast improvements for both birds and people as a result of a WOW project (Jonathan Barnard; BirdLife)



including the innovative approach of working with the Provincial Mufti to deliver sermons advocating better water management reaching an estimated 52,000 people, DD gained the support of local government and people. A sewage treatment works has been built, a Ramsar management plan has been produced, and winter counts of White-headed Duck, which were declining, have risen. The Burdur Birdwatching Group has been trained in monitoring techniques, local schools are involved in nature study projects around the lake, and the general level of awareness and interest in the lake and its birds has increased.

In Hungary, the WOW project is working with a fish-farming company to restore the Biharuga Fishponds to commercial viability. The fishponds occupy a low-lying flood-plain between Körösnagyharsány and Mezögyán in eastern Hungary, and around 100,000 waterbirds stage or overwinter on them; they are particularly important for Ferruginous Duck, and fishponds in general are among the most important wetlands in the region.

But the ponds were at risk of abandonment before BirdLife's Hungarian Partner, MME became involved through the WOW project. The first output from this project was a feasibility study which assessed the technical and economic options for introducing a fishpond management system within the context of nature conservation. Next came a comprehensive technical report providing a range of recommendations, such as improved feeding techniques, which are already being adopted by local fish farming enterprises.

Meanwhile, abandoned ponds have been reflooded, and artificial nesting islands

constructed. MME is also working with the national parks authority to set up an eco-tourism trail around the ponds, complete with four observation towers which provide views over the reeds to the open water, and a range of interpretative signs about the birds and their migration routes, and the successful coexistence of fish-farming and conservation.

One workshop was attended by 100 people involved in fish-farming elsewhere in Hungary, and Romania. The workshops deal both with making fish-farming economically viable, and with reconciling conflicts – for example, between fish farmers and Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*.

The company running the ponds has progressed from loss-making to breaking even in less than a year, and should be profitable next year. Biharuga Fishponds is expected to provide a model for similar enterprises in the region, showing how the private sector can thrive in partnership with nature conservation.

All the WOW demonstration projects will be wrapped up by the end of 2009, and the many lessons learned synthesised to produce a best practice guide for future projects.

“WOW has been pivotal in starting BirdLife's Flyways programme”, says Jonathan Barnard. “One of its major successes is the number of organisations, including international conventions, local, national and international NGOs, and governments, which are now cooperating at the flyway level, and which wouldn't be working together if it hadn't been for WOW.”

WB

by Nick Langley

For more information visit www.wingsoverwetlands.org

