



- P R E S S R E L E A S E -

WORLD MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

Migratory bird numbers plummeting globally - warning signs of a changing environment

Bonn/Nairobi, 8 May 2008 – The theme for this year's World Migratory Bird Day: "Migratory Birds - Ambassadors for Biodiversity" draws attention to the link between migratory birds and wider biodiversity as well as the overall state of our environment. Birds are considered to be some of the best indicators for the status and trends of wider biodiversity as they connect, and are inhabitants of, virtually all ecosystems in the world.

Birdwatchers and conservationists in dozens of countries will mark World Migratory Bird Day on the weekend of 10-11 May 2008 with concerts, films and other public events to draw attention to the rising threat to migratory birds and global biodiversity.

The events will be focussing on one of the world's most magnificent natural phenomena - bird migration and the birds' journeys of thousands of miles between their breeding and wintering grounds. However, the global celebrations are being overshadowed by a series of recent reports indicating that the numbers of migratory birds are declining globally.

The decline in numbers is currently being recorded for many of the migratory bird species along all of the world's major flyways - the main migration systems, or corridors, used by various groups of migratory birds in different parts of the world.

For example: 41% of the 522 migratory waterbird populations on the African-Eurasian Flyways are declining and there are reports that numbers of migratory songbirds using the same flyways are also decreasing. A study carried out in Australia shows that populations of 36 species of migratory shorebirds travelling along the East Asian - Australasian Flyway have plummeted by up to 75% over the last 25 years. At the same time Boreal birds in the Western Hemisphere, like the Canadian Warbler, which migrate from the northern tip of Canada to South America are declining due to the loss of their forest breeding grounds.

While the exact reasons for the global declines are complex and vary from species to species and from flyway to flyway, the overall decline in bird numbers may be signalling a wider environmental problem linked to the loss of habitats and biodiversity worldwide.

Migratory birds and in particular long distance migrants are very vulnerable to environmental changes. To complete their annual migrations, they require breeding and wintering areas but also a network of stop-over sites along their flyways where they can rest and refuel before continuing on their journeys. Yet these important natural habitats and sites, which also host numerous other threatened species of plants and animals, are increasingly being lost globally with agricultural, urban, infrastructural and industrial development. For migratory birds, this means fewer sites are left for them to use throughout their migration cycle and that the network of sites they depend on to complete their annual journeys is getting thinner.

The loss and fragmentation of essential habitats is being further compounded by the effects of climate change: rising global temperatures lead to expanding deserts and more frequent storms which impact bird migration and subsequent sea-level rise threaten tidal and wetland areas which are important for many migratory birds – all factors scientists are also linking to their decline.

Both the theme and the timing of this year's World Migratory Bird Day coincide with the forthcoming 9th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to be held in Bonn, Germany later this month. In this context, the message of this year's World Migratory Bird Day is a clear signal to world leaders that more needs to be done to halt the loss of biodiversity and to increase national and international efforts to protect the network of sites required by migratory birds. Protecting these important sites for birds will be beneficial for other biodiversity as well.

Notes to Editors

Quotes from key partners

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP)

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), said: "Migratory birds are some of the most extraordinary creatures on the planet and in many countries bird watching is an economically important leisure and tourism activity. But migratory birds are more than this. Their dependence on healthy habitats and ecosystems makes them among the key indicators as to whether the international community is truly addressing the decline and erosion of the planet's nature-based assets".

"We had a breakthrough last year at the UN climate convention meeting in Bali. We now need a similar breakthrough this month in Bonn at the biodiversity convention meeting. Otherwise we will continue to squander and degrade the planet's life support systems upon which countless species including birds like the sociable lapwing to the wandering albatross, but also Homo sapiens ultimately depend," he said.

Robert Hepworth, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)

"Migratory birds play a key role as biodiversity indicators. Any impact on ecosystems resulting from climate change, habitat degradation or availability of prey is reflected in the migration patterns and timing and breeding output of migratory birds. Both CMS and AEWA work towards addressing these threats to enhance conservation efforts aimed at preventing further declines in populations of these ambassadors of biodiversity."

Bert Lenten, Executive Secretary of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA)

"Migratory birds are not only part of biodiversity they are also good indicators of the state of biodiversity. Many species show a long-term decline which is caused e.g. by the transformation of biodiversity-rich meadows into monocultures. The message of World Migratory Bird Day is that we need to do more to protect their habitats and to do so both for the sake of migratory birds and biodiversity."

Mike Rands, Chief Executive of BirdLife International

Referring to this year's World Migratory Bird Day theme, Dr Mike Rands, Chief Executive of BirdLife International said: "Migratory birds cross many borders each year, linking different ecosystems. Being beautiful, inspirational and international they are excellent ambassadors for biodiversity. By conserving the birds and their habitats, we safe-guard biodiversity on a much wider scale."

Jane Madgwick, Chief Executive Officer of Wetlands International

"People, all around the world, are not only touched by birds and their migration, they live with them in the same environment. Wetlands are shared by birds and people and both depend on a network of healthy sites and their ecosystem services. Birds with their amazing and very visible migration bring this home ever so clearly. It is time that the notion of the need to conserve ecosystems and their biodiversity, with birds as ambassadors, becomes core to development in our world."

World Migratory Bird Day

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) is a global initiative devoted to celebrating migratory birds and for promoting their conservation worldwide. This year WMBD will take place on the weekend of 10-11 May and its central theme will be 'Migratory birds – Ambassadors for biodiversity.'

World Migratory Bird Day is being organised by the Secretariat of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (UNEP/AEWA) together with the Secretariat of the Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) – two United Nations (UNEP) administered environmental treaties dedicated to the conservation of migratory animals.

People and dedicated organisations around the world will be using the event to help spread the idea of migratory birds as messengers for the conservation of biodiversity worldwide. They will be conducting bird festivals, bird watching excursions, exhibitions and other educational and public events to highlight the theme and to promote migratory birds and their protection throughout the world.

For more information please see: www.worldmigratorybirdday.org

WMBD Partners:

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the voice for the environment in the United Nations system. It is an advocate, educator, catalyst and facilitator, promoting the wise use of the planet's natural assets for sustainable development. <http://www.unep.org/>

Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) (also known as the Bonn Convention) aims to conserve terrestrial, aquatic and avian migratory species throughout their range. It is an intergovernmental treaty concluded under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Since the Convention's entry into force, its membership has grown steadily to include 108 (as of 1 March 2008) parties from Africa, Central and South America, Asia, Europe and Oceania. <http://www.cms.int/>

African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) is an intergovernmental treaty developed under the CMS dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds. The Agreement covers 235 species of birds ecologically dependent on wetlands for at least part of their annual cycle. The treaty covers a large geographic area, including Europe, parts of Asia, Canada, the Middle East and Africa. So far 59 out of the 118 countries found in this area have become Contracting Parties to the International Agreement. <http://www.unep-aewa.org/>

BirdLife International is a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity. BirdLife International has long been committed to the conservation of migratory birds and the habitats upon which they depend. The BirdLife Partnership is engaged in migratory bird conservation at numerous scales, from projects focused on individual species or key sites, to broader policy and advocacy work to promote migratory species conservation, and involvement in flyway-scale projects. <http://www.birdlife.org/>

Wetlands International is an independent, not-for-profit, global organisation, dedicated to the conservation and wise use of wetlands. Wetlands International works globally, regionally and nationally to achieve the conservation and wise use of wetlands, to benefit biodiversity and human well-being. <http://www.wetlands.org/>

Examples of declining species on major flyways:

Migratory waterbirds along the African-Eurasian Flyway

According to the latest Conservation Status Report (CSR4) of Migratory Waterbirds in the African-Eurasian Flyway the overall trend status of African-Eurasian waterbird populations is declining. Of those internationally protected under AEWA (see description above), less waterbird populations are estimated as increasing (22%) and more estimated as declining (41%) in comparison to 1999. Of the 235 waterbird species protected by AEWA, 19 species are classified as Globally Threatened and a further 15 as Near Threatened; 4 species are classified as Critically Endangered and 5 as Endangered. The four most endangered species covered by the Agreement in the Critically Endangered category, are Northern Bald Ibis, Siberian Crane, Sociable Lapwing and Slender-billed Curlew.

http://www.unep-aewa.org/about/csr4_report.htm

Migratory shorebirds along the East Asian - Australasian Flyway

A recent study carried out in Australia on the number of shore birds shows a dramatic development: the populations of 36 species of migratory shorebirds have plummeted by up to 75% over the last 25 years. The main reason for this loss has been traced back to the degradation and disappearance of wetlands and resting places along the migration routes from Australia to Northern Asia and Alaska.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/04/10/2212835.htm>

Migratory songbirds along the African-Eurasian Flyway

A yet unpublished compilation of statistical accounts conducted by the British Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) reveals alarming declines in many migratory bird species in Britain, especially songbirds. Of the recorded species, almost two thirds have experienced significant losses; some even more than 80 per cent. Furthermore, experts of the RSPB assume that this trend is not confined to Britain, but appears Europe-wide and might indicate problems for the whole African-Eurasian migratory system.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/the-great-migration-crisis-812640.html>

Boreal birds in the Western Hemisphere

The effects of the ongoing destruction of the Canadian boreal forest will be felt as far away as Central and South America. Many migratory birds breed in these forests – the loss of their breeding grounds brings down their numbers. This is sadly highlighted in the Canadian warbler, whose population has declined by 45% over the last forty years.

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/03/boreal_birds.html

Vultures in Asia affected by diclofenac

Within 10 years, many migratory vultures in Asia will be extinct in the wild unless the sale of the veterinary drug diclofenac is stopped. The population of the White-rumped Vulture has dropped to one thousandth of its population size in 1992. Similar declines are observed in other Asian vulture species.

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/04/vulture_declines.html

The Sociable Lapwing – one of Eurasia's most threatened birds

The population of one of Eurasia's most threatened bird species, the Sociable Lapwing, has shrunk to 95% of its former size during the last 15 years. It is suggested that this decline is caused by changes in land use. An International Action Plan has been set up under the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) to prevent the extinction of the species and to help promote international conservation efforts.

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2004/05/sociable_lapwing.html

Lesser Flamingo under threat in East Africa

The proposal to build a Soda Ash extraction and processing plant at Lake Natron in Tanzania could threaten the entire East African population of the Lesser Flamingo. Changes in the hydrology and water quality and the resulting degradation of this recognized Ramsar site may lead to the loss of an Important Bird Area and the only breeding site of the Lesser Flamingo in East Africa.

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2007/07/lesser_flamingo_salt_ash.html

Examples of ongoing flyway-level conservation efforts for migratory birds:

African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA)

AEWA is an international treaty administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) through which countries cooperate to conserve migratory waterbirds and their habitats. The Agreement Area includes Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, Greenland and the Canadian Archipelago. A total of 118 countries are covered by AEWA, making it the largest Agreement concluded under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). AEWA's aim is to maintain or restore these waterbird species and their populations at a favourable conservation status throughout their flyways, meaning along the entire area within which the birds migrate.

<http://www.unep-aewa.org>

East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership

The East Asian–Australasian Flyway Partnership is the international Framework for the conservation of migratory waterbirds on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. It enhances the cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders and has combined site networks for Cranes, Anatidae and Shorebirds into a single network, referred to as the East Asian–Australasian Flyway Site Network.

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/migratory/waterbirds/flyway-partnership/index.html>

The Western Hemispheric Migratory Species Initiative and the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network

The Western Hemisphere Migratory Species Initiative seeks to contribute to the conservation of migratory species in the Western Hemisphere. It focuses on strengthening communication and cooperation among nations, international conventions and civil society and gives political support. A network of key sites across the Americas is established with the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), following the idea that key habitats must be protected in order to conserve migratory shorebirds. The WHSRN includes 69 sites in over 10 countries in North and South America.

http://www.fws.gov/international/WHMSI/whmsi_about.htm

<http://www.whsrn.org/index.html>

Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) UNEP-GEF African-Eurasian Flyways Project

The Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project is the largest flyway-scale wetland and waterbird conservation initiative ever to take place in the African-Eurasian region. The WOW is a partnership among international conservation organizations and national governments, which aims to improve and conserve healthy and viable populations of African-Eurasian migratory waterbirds. One of the key outcomes of the project will be a new web-based tool (information portal) that will provide better information on migratory waterbirds and their key sites along the African-Eurasian Flyways. The project is being supported by UNEP-GEF (The Global Environment Facility), the Government of Germany and a wide range of other donors and partners. For more information please visit: <http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org>

Siberian Crane Wetland Project

In order to sustain a network of globally important wetlands in Asia, the Siberian Crane Wetland Project was launched by the international Crane Foundation and funded by the Global Environment Facility. The Siberian crane, used as a flagship species in the project, links 16 project sites in Asia also crucial to other wetland birds and species. The project focuses on ensuring legal protection of the sites, building capacity and allowing participation of local stakeholders. For more information please visit:

<http://www.scwp.info/>

The 'Migratory Soaring Birds' project

Many migratory birds of prey rely on a migration system which means that large numbers of birds concentrate along relatively confined flyways; where they are especially susceptible to threats such as hunting, habitat destruction and collisions with power infrastructure. The 'Migratory Soaring Birds' project will address the underlying causes of these threats by working with the relevant production sectors in a coordinated 'flyway system' approach, backed by measures underpinning the policy, legal and legislative foundation, to make the eastern sector of the Africa-Eurasia flyway safe for migratory soaring birds. The project is being executed by BirdLife International in Partnership with national NGO partners and government agencies in the Middle-East and Northeastern Africa, and is funded through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). For more information visit:

http://www.birdlife.org/action/ground/soaring_birds/index.html

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For more information & press material please see:

<http://www.worldmigratorybirdday.org> (PRESS)