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Waterbirds around the world

A global overview of the conservation,
management and research of the
world's waterbird flyways

Edited by G.C. Boere, C.A. Galbraith and D.A. Stroud

*Assisted by L.K. Bridge, I. Colquhoun, D.A. Scott,
D.B.A. Thompson and L.G. Underhill*



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Cover photography: Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* arriving at Martin Mere, England. Photo: Paul Marshall.
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Address by Max Finlayson, President, Wetlands International

Sunday 4 April 2004

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to be welcoming you here on behalf of Wetlands International. It's a pleasure to be in Scotland at this conference and to have the opportunity to make a few comments about why we are here. First let me record my pride at being able to represent Wetlands International – as we have been around for a long time many of you know a lot about us and I am confident that during this conference you will see further evidence of the ongoing value of our work. We have a long history – our first office opened its doors in 1954 – some 50 years ago – and we have developed many long-lasting partnerships that will come to the fore during this Conference.

We have a great interest in this conference. In collaboration with our partners in the organising group we have made a major effort to ensure that you have a successful conference. By this I mean that we have worked to ensure that you have a conference that should both educate and entertain you, and set the scene for ongoing outcomes for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and waterbirds worldwide. Let me record my gratitude to the organisers – they have worked long and hard to make this conference a reality – thank-you for your efforts.

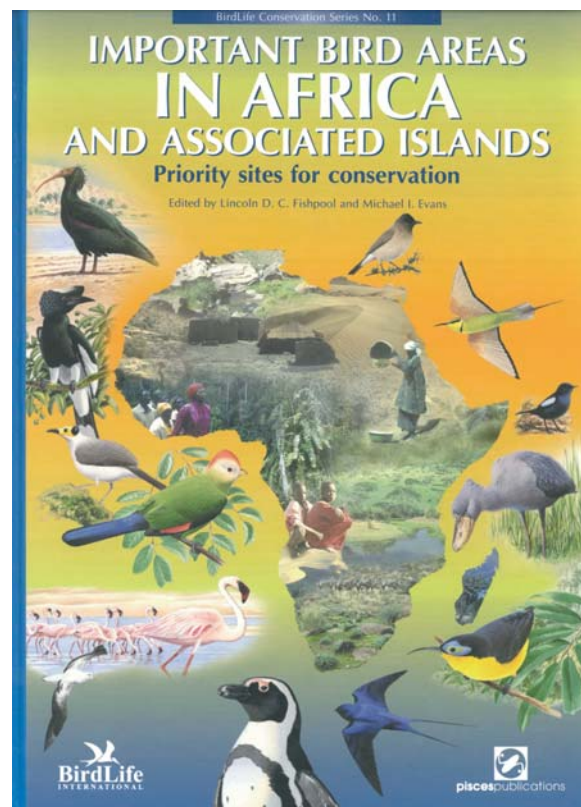
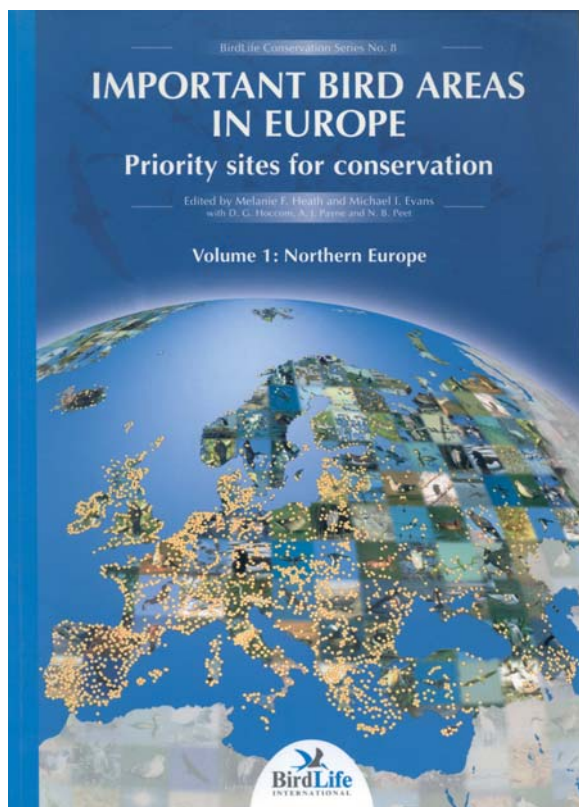
I would now like to focus on the globally important concept of flyways – the networks of sites that support waterbirds around the world. Flyways have for a long time been central to the work of Wetlands International. The term 'flyway' refers to a concept for waterbird conservation that encompasses conservation and wise use of wetlands and waterbirds across multiple sites across very large areas – it is global and it is important.



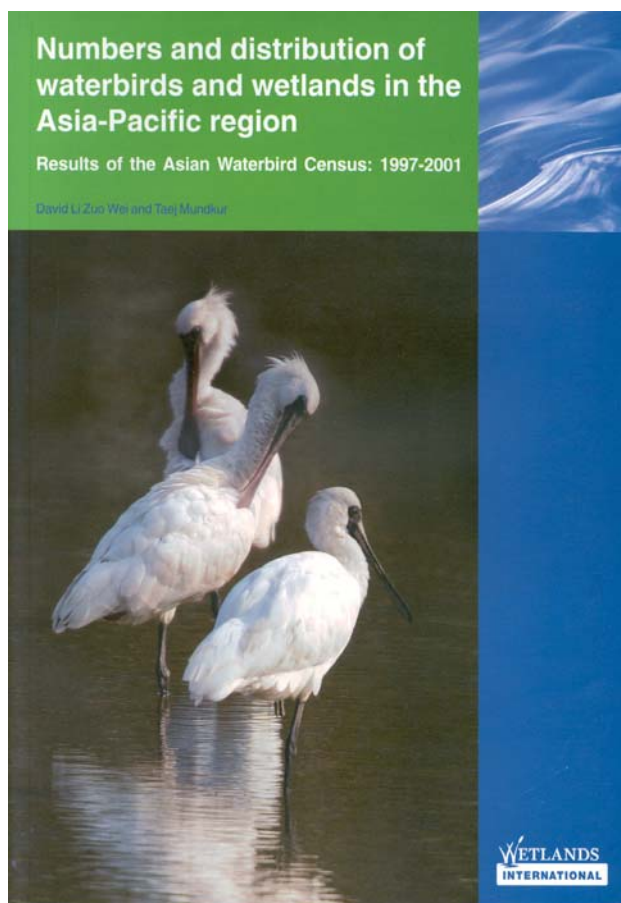
Max Finlayson. Photo: Dougie Barnett.



Stalwarts of waterbird conservation - Hugh Boyd, Geoffrey Matthews, Harvey Nelson and Eckhart Kuijken. Photo: Dougie Barnett.



Important Bird Areas – Birdlife International’s global inventory of key sites for bird conservation.



Asia-Pacific waterbird counts - Wetlands International’s Asian Waterbird Census: part of the International Waterbird Census.

I doubt that any other concept has the same immediate meaning and value for global waterbird conservation and wise use. It can also provide valuable lessons for other conservation planners and managers.

We are keen through the flyway approach to promote concepts and actions that ensure connection between sites, species and the ecological interactions that support these. It is about linkages – both those in the environment and those between people and institutions that support our common goals of conservation and wise use. The concept of linkages is also not new, but recently we have been hearing more and more about interlinkages between conservation efforts globally and locally. Through this conference we can support these efforts – waterbird conservation has long focussed on linkages between sites and between concerned and erudite people. The formation of the Ramsar Convention in 1971 is one example where interlinkages and common purpose came together through the efforts of dedicated and erudite scientists.

This conference presents an opportunity to discuss the science that is needed to conserve our waterbirds – our global waterbirds. Monitoring of waterbirds has been formally undertaken for many decades. The International Waterbird Census was started by Wetlands International (through the component of our organisation that was known as IWRB) in the 1960s and we now have a long time series of data for many species and sites. This dataset and associated products, such as the Waterbird Population Estimates are key resources for the Ramsar Convention. Birdlife International also provides an invaluable data resource through its Important Bird Area program. Many national and international organisations now rely on these datasets. We are pleased to welcome to this conference some of the stalwarts of waterbird conservation and monitoring.

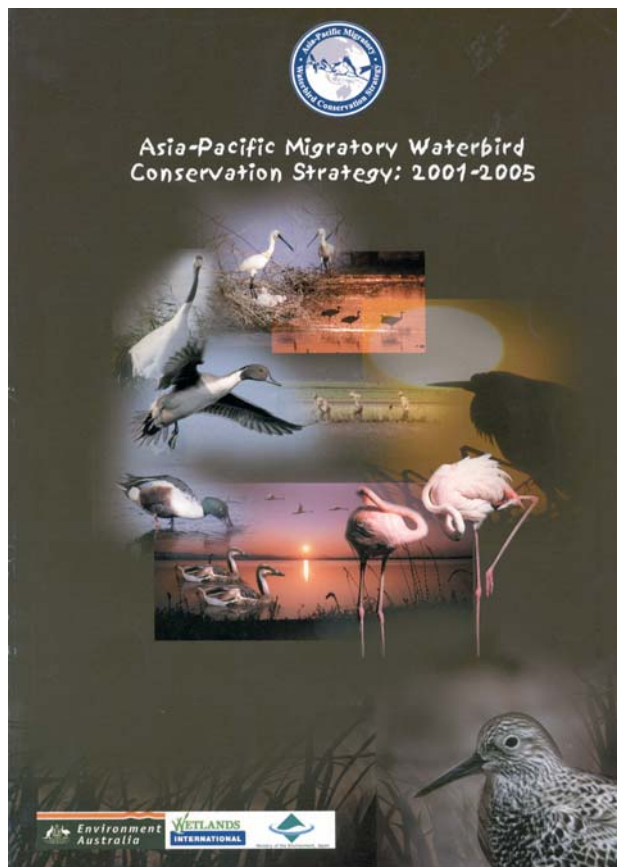


AEWA

African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement

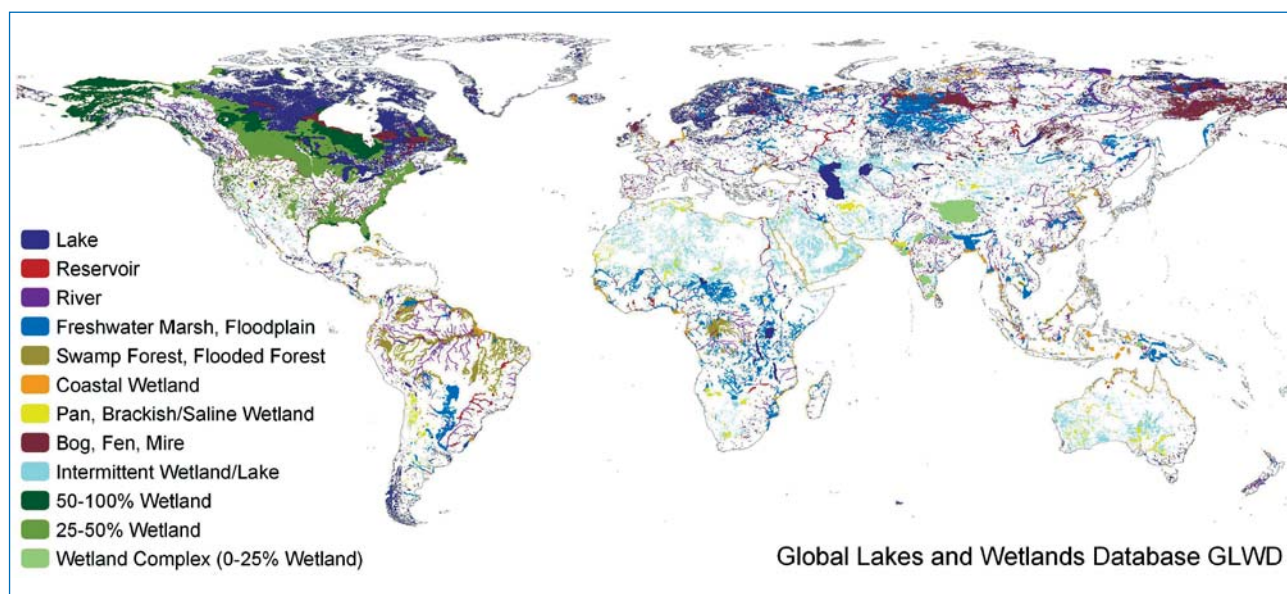
The importance of the datasets that have built up over many years will be well illustrated in this conference. I would also like to draw your attention to the launch of another product from this work, namely, the report of the Asian Wetland Census 1997-2001. This report complements others reporting results from the International Waterbird Census and the *Waterbird Population Estimates*, with the third edition of the latter being launched at the Ramsar Conference (CoP8) in Spain in November 2002, and again demonstrates our commitment to supporting waterbird conservation worldwide.

During this conference we have presentations covering activities across all major waterbird flyways. Through these we will cross the globe and we will enjoy it – it will be fun and exciting, and as we do this we will consider the ecology and future of our waterbirds and their wetland habitats from many important perspectives. Wetlands International sees formal flyway agreements as a powerful way of developing cooperation for the conservation of migratory birds. We strongly support the efforts of the Convention on Migratory Species and others involved in these formal agreements. We would like to see them extended wherever possible.

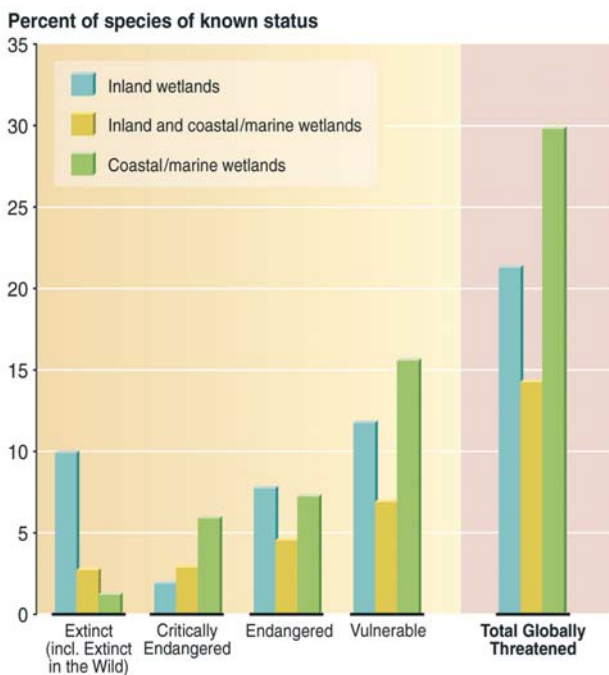


Asia-Pacific Migratory Waterbird Conservation Strategy.

I am also very aware of major issues that still need to be tackled if we are to conserve our waterbirds. The continued destruction of many important waterbird habitats is well known, as is the decline of many waterbird populations. We are broadly aware of the distribution of wetlands around the globe; however, the global wetland mapping and inventory resource is inadequate for many if not most purposes. The Ramsar Convention has been at the forefront of efforts to close these gaps, but there is a long way to go.

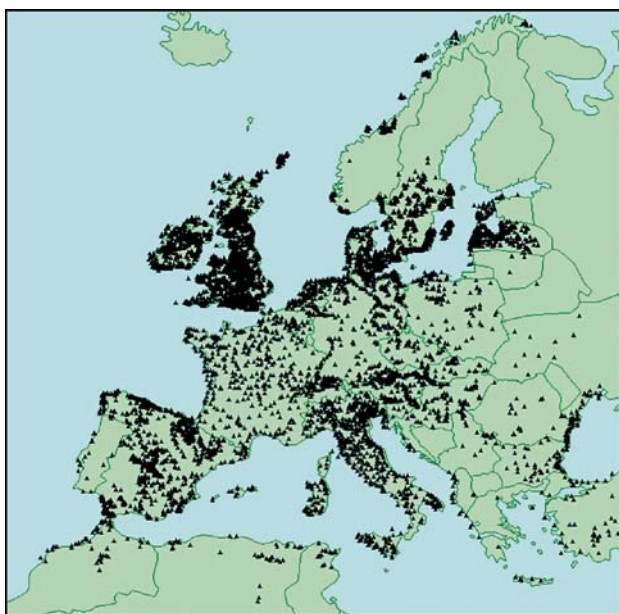


Global distribution of wetlands.

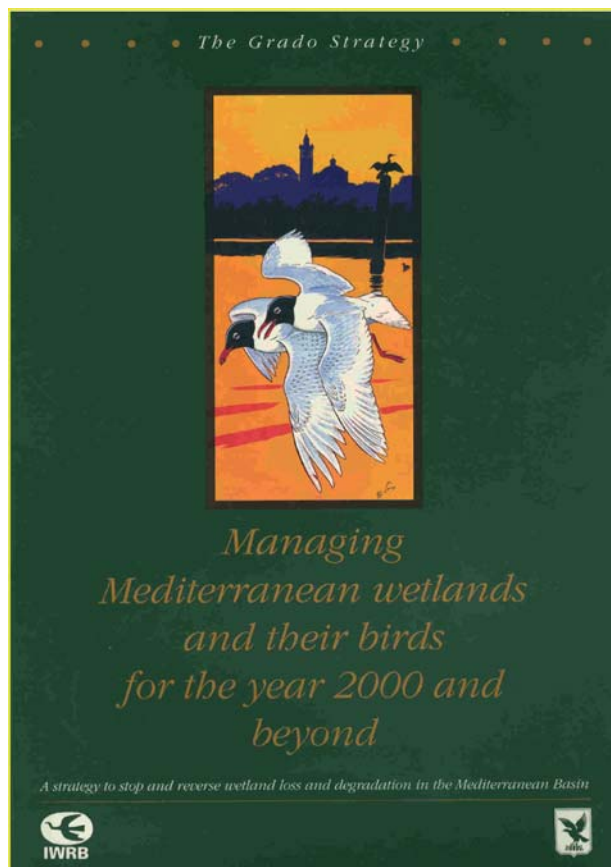


Percentage of Globally Threatened waterbirds, including seabirds, in different threat categories. Each waterbird family is allocated as either depending on only inland wetlands, depending on only coastal/marine systems, or depending on both inland and coastal/marine systems (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment & BirdLife International).

We are also aware that many waterbird populations are in decline with many threatened at a global level by a litany of problems that are all too familiar. We are also aware that our data resources and management both need improving if we are to stop and reverse recent trends. The issue of adequate data is one that recurs regularly. I would like to reinforce Wetlands International's



International Waterbird Census sites in Europe and northern Africa.



The Grado Strategy – the forerunner of MedWet.

support for a statement that I first heard at a wetland conference held in Italy in 1991. A now deceased British hydrologist, Dr Ted Hollis, was metaphorically pounding his fist and loudly seeking support for holistic and concerted action to “halt and reverse wetland loss and degradation” in the Mediterranean. He did not obtain universal support from the assembled scientists and managers who were stumbling over the concepts of halting and reversing loss and degradation – was it possible?

But times have changed and we recognise that we need to both halt further destruction and to restore or rehabilitate what has already been lost or degraded. To achieve this we need political commitment and support for meaningful outcomes. We need capacity in all parts of the world. We also need science, and we need *quality* science. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of that last point – the rigour of our data is paramount if we are to make our points and be believed and influence managers and policy-makers. Wetlands International is a science-based organisation and our much lauded global monitoring programs must provide the type of data that we require for effective management actions. For this to occur these monitoring programs must be scientifically rigorous and supported fully by the users.

On that closing note – a note that emphasises the importance of basing our work on sound science - I welcome you to this conference and implore you (if this is needed) to enjoy yourselves as you devote your time to this scientific forum. Thank you and welcome on behalf of Wetlands International.