

Wetland loss, development put Kashmir bird migration at risk

December 17 2015, by Aijaz Hussain



In this Dec. 6, 2015 photo, migratory birds fly above wetlands in Hokersar, about 16 kilometers (10 miles) north of Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir. The cackle and cry of Kashmir's annual bird migration has long been a welcome ruckus for those living in the Indian-controlled Himalayan territory. It signals the summer's end, the coming snows and the global importance of Kashmir's environment for species arriving from as far as northern Europe and Japan. But these days, wildlife experts say they have never seen so few birds - and so few species - feeding and breeding around the wetlands nestled between the region's mountain peaks and plateaus. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

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But these days, wildlife experts say they have never seen so few birds—and so few species—feeding and breeding around the wetlands nestled between the region's mountain peaks and plateaus. A combination of climate change and haphazard urban development are to blame, scientists say.

Colorful birds like the whooper swan, stiff-tailed duck and cotton teal have not been seen in the area in recent years. While there has been little scientific study to quantify the falling numbers, former regional wildlife warden Mohammed Shafi Bacha says he counts only 18 species visiting today out of 28 that came three decades ago.

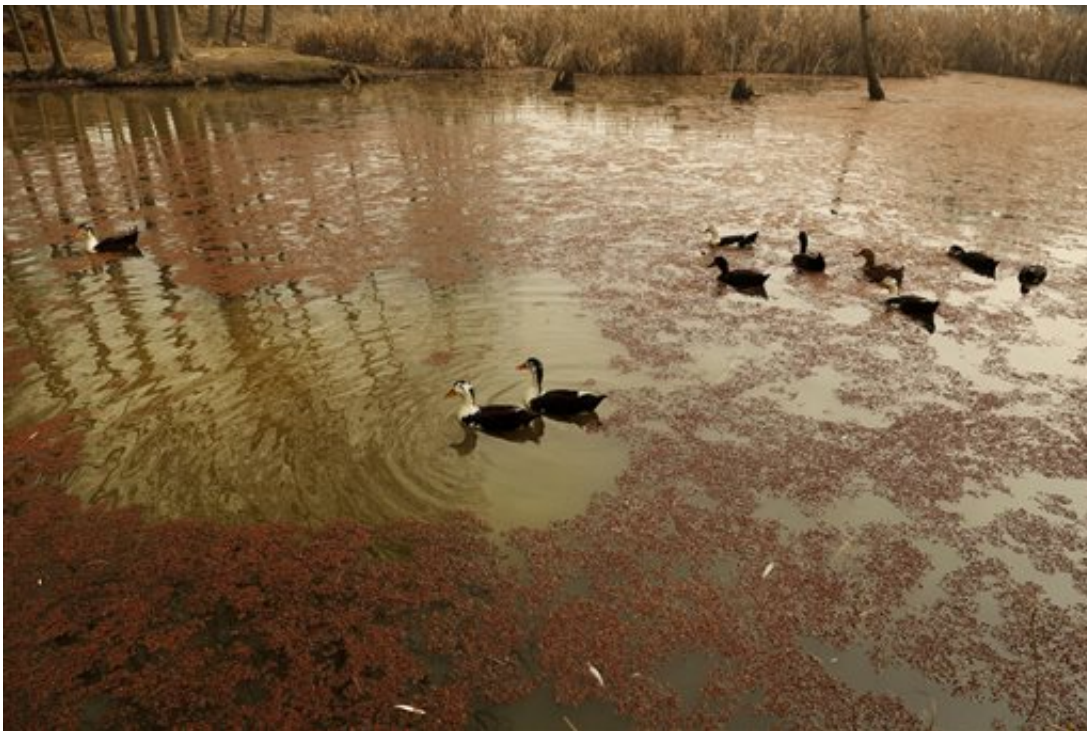
Scientists routinely reject the state's official count of birds as unreliable, but even those numbers show a downward trend: During the winter of 2009-10, authorities said more than 1 million birds visited Kashmir's wetlands. Last year, they counted just over half that number.

"The bird numbers have been fluctuating over the years, but now there is a steady decline," Bacha said. He called for an "urgent and massive effort to revive these wetland reserves for protecting the birds."

Scientists say unbridled construction, piled up trash and the changing Himalayan climate—where warmer temperatures are melting snows more quickly and playing havoc with the seasons—are robbing the birds of their traditional watering holes and, in the case of visiting mallard ducks, their nesting areas.

Scientists say the Earth's atmosphere has already warmed an average of 0.7 degrees Celsius (1.3 degrees Fahrenheit) in the last century, thanks to the release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. But temperatures are rising more quickly at high altitudes like the Himalayas. Kashmir itself has warmed 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees F) in the past century. Local scientists say seasons are shifting from their usual patterns, and precipitation is more often falling as rain instead of snow.

"Loss of habitat and climate change are major factors," wildlife department researcher Samina Amin said.



In this Dec. 6, 2015 photo, migratory birds swim in wetlands in Hokersar, about 16 kilometers (10 miles) north of Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir. The cackle and cry of Kashmir's annual bird migration has long been a welcome ruckus for those living in the Indian-controlled Himalayan territory. It signals the summer's end, the coming snows and the global importance of Kashmir's environment for species arriving from as far as northern Europe and Japan. But

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The birds have long been a highlight for residents in the famed Kashmir Valley—a vast collection of connected wetlands and waterways known as much for its idyllic vistas and flower-filled meadows as for its decades-long battle for independence that has killed 68,000 people.

The violence has subsided in recent years, with resistance now mostly expressed through street protests. But the mountainous region is still crisscrossed with thousands of miles (kilometers) of barbed wire and patrolled by hundreds of thousands of Indian troops.

The tense security situation has made addressing environmental issues harder.

Compounding the environmental challenge is a rapid change in how people are using the land. New neighborhoods are popping up around wetlands, with little regard to maintaining water flow. Swamps are frequently clogged by garbage. Water-logged rice fields are quickly being converted into orchards. Deforestation is unleashing soils that are filling in lakes.

"I clearly remember a coin swinging down into the crystal clear water after I dropped it while crossing a small wooden bridge," said businessman Showkat Dar, who grew up near a vast swamp dense with willow trees and squawking geese that has since become a high-end marketplace in the main city of Srinagar. "That coin must be still buried somewhere under these commercial buildings."

The loss or degradation of many wetlands has also left the region unable to absorb and channel floodwaters, leaving it increasingly exposed to flooding. Srinagar was inundated last year in disastrous floods that caused \$17 billion in losses to infrastructure and homes.

The decline in visits by migratory birds seeking refuge from colder winter climates further north should sound alarm bells for Kashmir's future, environmentalists say.



In this Dec 3, 2015 photo, an elderly Kashmiri man crosses a wooden foot bridge over a shrunken and polluted swamp in Srinagar, Indian-controlled Kashmir. The cackle and cry of Kashmir's annual bird migration has long been a welcome ruckus for those living in the Indian-controlled Himalayan territory. It signals the summer's end, the coming snows and the global importance of Kashmir's environment for species arriving from as far as northern Europe and Japan. But these days, wildlife experts say they have never seen so few birds - and so few species - feeding and breeding around the wetlands nestled between the region's mountain peaks and plateaus. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

"There's a great danger ahead if urban development is not linked to wetland management in Kashmir," said Ritesh Kumar, the head of Wetlands International in South Asia. The birds, he said, were "greatly impacted."

The Hokersar wetland, for example, has shrunk from nearly 19 square kilometers in 1969 to 12.8 square kilometers today, according to a study by Kashmir University's Department of Earth Sciences. Meanwhile, birds were already flocking back to a once-dried up wetland brought back to life by last year's floods in saffron-rich southern Pampore.

Recognizing the importance of Kashmir's wetlands, India's Supreme Court last year ordered authorities in both New Delhi and Srinagar to identify and preserve these ecosystems in the region. Still, there have been no discussions about conservation and no action taken since then.



In this Dec. 8, 2015 photo, a Kashmiri man walks while talking on his cellphone near an almost dried up swamp in Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir. The cackle and cry of Kashmir's annual bird migration has long been a welcome ruckus for those living in the Indian-controlled Himalayan territory. It signals the summer's end, the coming snows and the global importance of Kashmir's environment for species arriving from as far as northern Europe and Japan. But these days, wildlife experts say they have never seen so few birds - and so few species - feeding and breeding around the wetlands nestled between the region's mountain peaks and plateaus. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

"The last nail in the coffin has been the changing climate and land use patterns," said Majid Farooq, an expert in tracking environmental change by satellite at the state-run Climate Change Center in Srinagar.

Meanwhile, 60-year-old peasant farmer Gulam Nabi regrets the declining number of birds visiting near his home at the Hokersar wetland each year. It's been years since he's spotted a little cormorant or black swan.

"Their presence has always soothed my nerves," he said. "We've destroyed their homes, and in turn they've abandoned us."



In this Dec. 4, 2015 photo, a Kashmiri shepherd herds sheep near a portion of a dried up wetland in saffron-rich southern Pampore in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The cackle and cry of Kashmir's annual bird migration has long been a welcome ruckus for those living in the Indian-controlled Himalayan territory. It signals the summer's end, the coming snows and the global importance of Kashmir's environment for species arriving from as far as northern Europe and Japan. But these days, wildlife experts say they have never seen so few birds - and so few species - feeding and breeding around the wetlands nestled between the region's mountain peaks and plateaus. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

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