

# Survey reveals drastic decline of waterbirds in Irrawaddy River

February 23 2017, by Frank Momberg

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Credit: Fauna & Flora International

Over the last 14 years, waterbirds in Myanmar's Irrawaddy River declined by 60% to 90% depending on the species.

Scientists working for Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and Manfred Hermsen Foundation have repeated an ornithology survey of the Myitkyina to Mandalay stretch of the Irrawaddy River last carried out in 2003. They found that many [waterbirds](#) have declined sharply due to habitat loss, gold panning and poaching. FFI is calling for immediate action to protect at least the most important river section between Myitkyina and Mandalay.

More than 20,000 waterbirds (61 species) were recorded along the river, with small pratincole and ruddy shelduck the most numerous recorded. But despite their relative abundance compared with other waterbirds (see Table 1 below), both of these charismatic species have also experienced a very drastic population decline since the last survey. Species' population declines range from 59 to 98%, compared with survey data from 2003 for the river section between Myitkyina and Sinbo alone.

Lead scientist Christoph Zoeckler said, "The Irrawaddy River is one of the last remaining wild, un-dammed rivers in Asia, with the section between Myitkyina and Sinbo considered to be of particular importance for conservation."

SPECIES	2003	2017	CHANGE (%)
Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	974	316	67.6% DECREASE
Oriental Darter <i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	65	18	72.3% DECREASE
Bar-headed Goose <i>Anser indicus</i>	3220	106	96.7% DECREASE
Ruddy Shelduck <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	5423	1285	76.3% DECREASE
Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	2367	325	86.3% DECREASE
Small Pratincole <i>Glareola lactea</i>	7785	3160	59.4% DECREASE
Eurasian Crane <i>Grus grus</i>	1385	28	98% DECREASE

Table 1: Waterbird decline from 2003 – 2017 (Myitkyina to Sinbo Irrawaddy River Section). Credit: Fauna & Flora International

"Despite the decline, this is still a globally-important site for waterbirds. Therefore we believe it is now critical to secure the designation of this river section as a globally important wetland under the international protection of the Ramsar convention."

Immediate actions that are required include phasing out small-scale illegal gold mining in the river sections that provide key habitats for birds, fish and other aquatic wildlife; introducing community-based or communal waste management systems in the villages along the river; and preventing further agricultural encroachment onto river banks.

"At the moment, the riverbanks are covered in household waste while sandbanks are being dug up for gold-mining. Unless immediate drastic measures are undertaken to reduce the threats in the most important river sections, habitats for waterbirds will disappear and the river will turn into wasteland," said FFI's Myanmar Country Director Frank Momberg.



Small pratincole, a characteristic bird of from the the Irrawaddy River. Credit: Zoeckler/Fauna & Flora International

## **The Irrawaddy River**

The Irrawaddy River is one of the last major remaining rivers in Asia not affected by dams or any other impediments in the water course, and as a result it is able to transport water, sediment and nutrients unobstructed downstream, and provide critical habitat for biodiversity.

Sadly, the human impact on the river is visible and increasing. The serious decline of waterbirds and other birds is associated with the loss of habitats, mostly due to expansion of agricultural land onto sandbanks, riverine swamps and other wetlands, but it is also due to widespread gold panning. Bird trapping and bait poisoning has also been observed



throughout the river and seems to be systemic and wide-spread.



Ruddy Shelduck (male and female). Credit: Zoeckler/Fauna & Flora International.

Despite the worrying declines, the area is still home to good numbers of waterbirds and a rich biodiversity, and conservationists believe that this critical area is able to recover from previous losses if conservation actions are taken. Some sections still qualify as Ramsar sites, but a Man & Biosphere Reserve seems to be the most appropriate way to conserve the key biodiversity areas while also securing the livelihoods of communities along the river.



The dynamic river creates wild places and habitat for wildlife. Credit: Zoeckler/Fauna & Flora International.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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