

Nijhum Dweep: Global hotspot for migratory shorebirds

ANISUZZAMAN KHAN

NIJHUM Dweep is an island on the central coast of Bangladesh in the middle of Hatiya and Shahabajpur estuary facing the Bay of Bengal. It is one of the key shorebird sites in the East-Asia Australasian Flyways. This island has planted mangroves in the centre, surrounded by extensive mud and sand flats and criss-crossed by tidal creeks. It is the southern most staging ground of more than 98 species of migratory birds. A dozen of them are globally critically endangered.

At least 404 species of water birds are recorded in the Asia-Pacific region. Of them, 243 species, by virtue of their nature, undertake annual migrations between their breeding areas and non-breeding grounds, along several different flyways. They visit at least 57 countries and territories in the Asia-Pacific region. A few of the species undertake some of the greatest non-stop flights in the world, covering at least 6,000 km at one go. During their annual migration, water birds halt at sites for very short periods to rest and feed. Conservation of migratory water birds is clearly a collective responsibility of all countries in the flyway. The conservation of species that are resident to any country is equally important.

A recent expedition (27th

The critical wetlands provide abundant food and safe resting areas for the shorebirds during migration. By linking these wetlands in a network of protected habitats, the shorebirds can be saved. This is what the East Asian-Australasian Shorebird Reserve Network seeks to do for our flyway.



Nijhum Dweep supports 50 per cent of globally endangered Indian Skimmer population

February-3rd March 2004) carried out by the IUCN -- the World Conservation Union, Bangladesh -- led by the author discovered that the central coast is possibly the best place for the wintering shore birds in Bangladesh at the cross-

roads of two international flyways. This site supports more than 200,000 migratory birds either as their wintering ground or as staging ground during winter. This is mainly because of its pristine habitat and a huge foraging and

roosting ground. A total of about 98 species of shorebirds has so far been recorded at sites like Nijhum Dweep, Char Bahauddin, Dhal Char, Char Jonak, Char Nogila, Patar Char and Kalkeniy Char. The most common birds visiting the central coasts are waders (50,000), gulls, terns and egrets (80,000) and ducks and geese (50,000). Some of the rare species, which regularly visit, are: Bar-headed Geese, Grey Leg Geese, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-headed Ibis, Goliath Heron, Asian Dowitcher, Spotted Green Shank, Spotted Red Shank, Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Indian Skimmer. These birds start visiting the site from October and return in April. The early migrants are Common Sandpiper, Wagtail, Lesser Sandplover and Brown-headed Gull.

Nijhum Dweep acts as the best habitat for globally threatened bird -- the Indian Skimmer. Of the 10,000 global population, this site accommodates 5,000-7,000 birds.

Spoon billed Sandpiper is the top most threatened species and its global population is around 5,000. This globally threatened species come to the central coasts in huge numbers (1000+). They use Char Bahauddin (East coast Nijhum Dweep) as a regular roosting place. They feed on detritus, polychaetes and algae in the intertidal mudflat. The habitat is small wave like mud mixed with sand. The wave like shore is usually covered with green algae.

Other species visiting the island

are Little Stint, Broad-billed Sandpiper and lesser sand plover. They are normally seen in flocks. They were seen roosting in the sandbars and sandy beaches. Other important sites for these species are East Dhal Char, Patar Char and Ghasiar Char. The habitats of these species have changed with the change in the mudflats. Ghasiar char, Dhal Char, Char Pia and Char Nurul Islam are no longer suitable for them. These chars have changed into grasslands. No regular tidal inundation happens there and the mudflats no longer exist.

This international staging ground of migratory birds in the Bay is facing substantial threats from the recent land grabbers and shrimp fry collectors.

Shorebirds are among the most impressive migrants in the world, using broadly defined flyways between their breeding and non-breeding areas. Shorebirds comprise the plovers, sandpipers, curlews and related species and mainly frequent shallow water in both coastal and inland wetlands. Some species weighing as little as 30 grams may undertake annual migrations of over 25,000km, and some species may fly more than 6,000km non-stop.

A flyway contains a chain of important wetlands. Our flyway, the East Asian-Australasian Flyway extends from the Arctic Circle to more than 45 degree south. Along the flyway, shorebirds use traditional staging areas where they can rest and accumulate reserves of fat to fuel their extended flights. At times, a large percentage of the entire population of a species may be at a single place.

These critical wetlands provide abundant food and safe resting areas for the shorebirds during migration. By linking these wetlands in a network of protected habitats, the shorebirds can be saved. This is what the East Asian-Australasian Shorebird Reserve Network seeks to do for our flyway.

Migratory waterbirds often have a special significance, since many appear at traditional sites at almost precisely the same time, year after year, and during migration usually move through a number of countries. Thus the conservation of migratory species is the responsibility of more than one nation and requires cooperation at regional and international levels.

The challenge of conservation is

especially daunting in a region as large and diverse as the Asia-Pacific. The region comprises over 57 countries and territories, and more than 200 waterbird species migrate between them on a regular basis.

Governments and non-governmental agencies must be committed to work together to

secure the long-term future of the birds and the habitats upon which they depend. To ensure that actions are undertaken in a coordinated and timely manner, an internationally acceptable framework is essential.

It is recommended that countries in the flyway enhance mechanisms for collaborative action to

conserve waterbird species; identify and establish a network of sites critical for waterbirds conservation; and ensure that the species are managed on a sustainable basis according to the "wise use" principles.

Anisuzzaman Khan is head of Bio-diversity Unit, IUCN-Bangladesh.