# Asian Water-bird Census

## What is the issue?

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- Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) that surveys sites across 23 countries (including Australia) was recently conducted.
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- The trends highlight the dangers facing water birds and their habitats.
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## How does the migratory bird landscape look?

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- Every winter, the thousands of wetlands that dot India, transform from muddy slips of water to harsh bird parties.
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- Ducks and geese from Ladakh and Tibet swim through aquatic vegetation, and wader on half-submerged banks, and ‘oriental darters’ spear the water for fish.
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- While the data for the current census isn’t out yet, the census by energetic citizens over the years has pointed to some clear trends.
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- India has the biggest species diversity among the regions sampled by AWC, tallying to a mean figure of 1.8 million water birds over 300 sites.
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- Chilika Lake in Odisha alone supports a staggering half-a-million water birds.
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- Most of these water birds are migratory and winter in India’s wetlands.
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- For instance, the bar-headed goose, breeds in Mongolia, Tibet and Kyrgyzstan and crosses the Himalayas and Hindu Kush to reach India.
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## Are the bird numbers declining?

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- There has been a noticeable decline in several species visiting India over the years, which is concerning.
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- The Oriental darter (long necked), which was once a common sight in many wetlands, numbered just 4,000 in the sites that got surveyed currently.
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- The Indian skimmer (with a bright orange bill) — which can ‘skim’ over water to snap up fish, were counted to be just 300.
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- Sarus crane, the world’s tallest flying bird, often found in pairs or small groups, accounted for as little as just about 100 birds over several years.
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- These are mainly because, the wetlands, which are cherished equally by local residents, and birdwatchers are in peril.
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## What is the status of wetlands in India?

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- The National Wetland Atlas, prepared by the ISRO in 2011, found that India has over 2 lakh wetlands, most which aren’t notified as such.
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- They thus run the risk of being destroyed and many court cases across the country reflect the precarious existence of wetlands.
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- The iconic East Kolkata Wetlands, which is also designated ‘Ramsar wetland’ of international importance, is being steadily eaten up by construction.
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- Like in many cities, this wetland too is becoming a sewage canal, and a case has been filed with the National Green Tribunal (NGT).
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- In Delhi-NCR, birdwatchers have filed a case to protect the Basai wetland, which is fed by sewage but continues to harbour almost 300 bird species.
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- Similar cases were also filed to conserve Najafgarh jheel (a riverine wetland).
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- Also, Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh, Deepor Beel in Guwahati, and the lakes in Nainital, are all choked by sewage, garbage and encroachment.
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- Notably, the new “Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017” has made matters worse as it denounces manmade water bodies as wetlands.
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- The previous rules had stated that manmade water bodies like tanks and salt pans are also wetlands (these do support bird populations in reality).
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## How does the future look?

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- The census clearly indicates that several water bird populations in the Central Asian flyway (comprising migratory routes) are declining.
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- Urgent national and regional action is needed to reverse this trend and hundreds of wetlands in India are in need of identification and notification.
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- India was an active participant in the 2017 Conference of the Parties to the “Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals”.
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- It even offered to initiate consultations for the creation of a “Central Asian Flyway Action Plan” to Conserve Migratory Waterbirds and their Habitats.
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- The vision of the action plan is to reduce threats to waterfowl and conserve wetlands while also tackling threats such as power lines and windmills.
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### Source: The Hindu

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