

Hakata Bay – a threatened Japanese wetland

BIRDS RESTING during their annual migratory journey at Auckland's sister city in Japan, may no longer find a sister's welcome.

The city of Fukuoka is strategically situated on the northern tip of Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, at the closest point to Korea and the Asian mainland, making its Hakata Bay wetlands an important recuperation spot for exhausted birds.

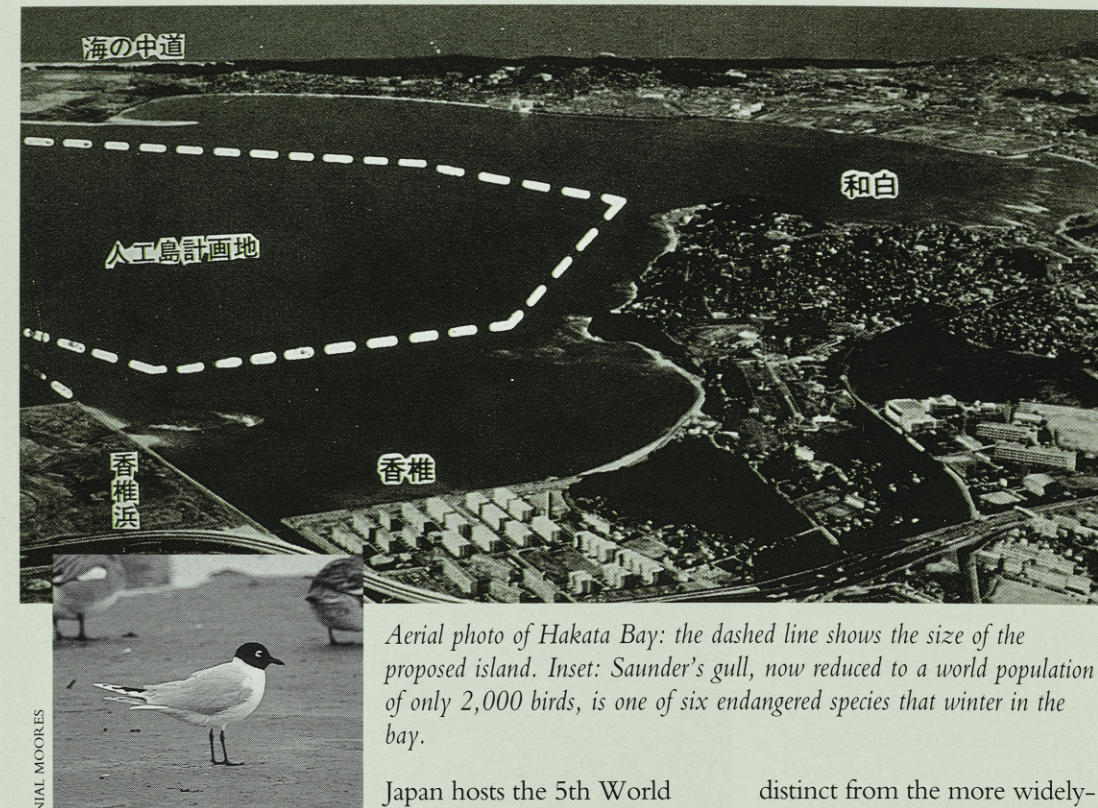
But Fukuoka is an expanding city and is now pressing ahead with construction plans for the bay area, which will consume and drastically disturb avian habitats.

The case is not an isolated one but it is all the more important because the problem recurs everywhere in Japan; at present the country has only four sites (none of which are tidal) that are protected under Ramsar, the international wetlands convention. The Japan Wetlands Action Network, formed in 1991 to link local groups struggling to protect patches of natural environment, chose Hakata as one of only four areas for priority protection.

Reclamation of land at Hakata Bay has been ongoing for over a century, but it is only since 1959 that major plans were put forward for the infilling of most of the bay. The current plan is to construct a huge artificial island with port facilities directly above the shellfish banks which sustain the birds.

This is the shallowest part of the bay and holds tens of thousands of birds each year including six internationally endangered species: the black-faced spoonbill, Saunders's gull, the Asiatic dowitcher, Nordmann's greenshank, spoonbilled sandpiper and Swinhoe's egret. These are not Fukuoka's birds, not Japan's – they are the world's.

Hakata Bay is currently designated a "Wildlife Protec-



Aerial photo of Hakata Bay: the dashed line shows the size of the proposed island. Inset: Saunders's gull, now reduced to a world population of only 2,000 birds, is one of six endangered species that winter in the bay.

tion Area" – a title with no practical meaning. In spring the tidal flats are thronging with people searching for shellfish and the birds are continually disturbed. An Environmental Impact Assessment for the scheme is being conducted by a company which is under the umbrella of the city government, the proponent of the construction. EIAs in Japan are notorious for their findings that wildlife can always find somewhere else to go.

Residents' opposition has taken the form of environmental study days, clean-ups, picnics and a "birdathon" – a bird-watching day in which 113 species were noted within five kilometres of the bay. The Hakata port authorities have responded by proposing a "bird park" and artificial tidal flat on the island.

The scheme is widely seen as a product of pride and greed. The present docks are only working at 30 percent of capacity. Neighbouring Kita-Kyushu is only 50 kilometres away and is also a port town in the race to expand and to become the "gateway to Asia". The proposed cost for the whole scheme is \$NZ4-6 billion.

Ironically, construction is set to start in mid-1993 just as

Japan hosts the 5th World Ramsar Conference, at Kushiro in the north. Although Auckland City Council has written to Fukuoka City expressing concern for the wetland, New Zealand is unlikely to formally criticise what is seen as a Japanese internal matter. Opposition, however, remains strong and the people of Fukuoka believe that international opinion can save the city's life-giving wetland from destruction.

Please help by writing to either the Japanese Embassy in Wellington or the Consulate in Auckland asking that Japan set an environmentally responsible example and save this important wetland.

Sarah Lowe

New species of owl

A NEW SPECIES of Scops owl has been discovered on the island of Anjouan in the Comoros, a group of four islands between Africa and Madagascar.

The discovery was the culmination of a search, initiated by a mystery call, that involved ornithologist Roger Safford, supported by ICBP, in three visits to the island over two years. Safford traced the call to a Scops owl. The call and close examination of the individuals confirm that it is a species quite

distinct from the more widely-distributed Madagascan Scops owl.

The Anjouan Scops Owl is about 25 cm long, mainly cork brown in colour, and has both a whistle and a screech call, the whistle being completely unlike any other Scops Owl species. It lives in primary forest above 800 metres, nesting in large tree cavities, and is thought to be insectivorous.

The people and wildlife on Anjouan are facing a crisis. Both depend on the forest; human population density is very high, and the extent of primary forest is declining extremely fast (from 8,260 ha in 1972 to 1,109 ha in 1987). Although a thorough population estimate of the owl was not made, it is thought that there are probably not more than 100 pairs left.

Other species dependant on Anjouan's dwindling forest are the mongoose lemur, one of the most endangered lemurs in the world, and Livingstone fruit bat, one of the world's most endangered, and largest, bats. Conservation action is urgently needed.

Source: International Council for Bird Preservation



Forest and Bird is a member of the International Council for Bird Preservation and is the ICBP's delegate in the South Pacific.