

Japan Uses Ramsar to Protect Migrant Birds



An autumn spectacle: migratory birds on a harbour near Auckland gather for their return journey to the northern hemisphere. These birds travel along the Asia/Pacific Flyway where wetland habitat to rest and feed is vital for their journey.

As the southern hemisphere summer draws to a close, tens of thousands of migratory wading birds from the harbours and estuaries of New Zealand are preparing to make the long journey back to their breeding grounds in Siberia and Alaska. To make the journey successfully, they will need to stop over in Asian countries to rest and feed en route.

The route the birds fly is known as the Asia-Pacific flyway, and it forms a living

link from New Zealand, through Australia and coastal Asia, to the Arctic. Reclamation and development of coastal wetlands along this flyway is still a growing problem in many Asian countries, but Japan seems to be bucking the trend. Late last year, Japan announced the designation of two new 'Wetlands of International Importance', or Ramsar sites: the tidal flats of Fujimae-Higata and the freshwater lake of Miyajima-numa.

Of the two new sites, the Fujimae-Higata tidal flat is of particular interest to the Asia-Pacific flyway. It lies at the mouths of the Shonai, Shinkawa, and Nikko rivers as they flow into the port city of Nagoya. Fujimae-Higata has some of the highest bird counts in Japan and is considered a symbol of wetland conservation there. The decision to recognize the site as being of international significance replaces previous proposals to reclaim the entire

intertidal area as a rubbish dump.

The other site is Miyajima-numa, a shallow freshwater lake left by the nearby Ishikari river. The lake is an important site for migratory swans, geese and ducks that winter in Japan. The site is government-owned and is currently used as an agricultural reservoir for surrounding farmlands.

Japan's move to create two new Ramsar sites, and particularly its recognition of the Fujimae-Higata coastal wetland, contrasts sharply with the situation a few years ago. At that time Forest and Bird, led by a former northern field officer Jacqui Barrington, had joined Japanese conservationists in opposing the development of migratory bird habitat in Hakata Bay in Fukuoka City. That move failed.

Now, Forest and Bird would like to see New Zealand following Japan's example by designating the Kaipara Harbour north of Auckland as a Wetland of International Importance, visited by migratory birds.

New Zealand has only designated five Ramsar sites, despite many more areas meeting the criteria for 'wetlands of international significance'. In contrast Japan has designated 13 Ramsar wetlands, Australia 57, China 21 and Thailand 10.

There have been no new sites created in New Zealand under the Ramsar Convention for over a decade. The most recent is at Miranda on the Firth of Thames where a joint application was made by Forest and Bird and the Department of Conservation.

— SARAH GIBBS northern field officer, Forest and Bird, Auckland.



Bar-tailed godwit migrate between New Zealand and the subarctic.