

Myanmar's Irrawaddy River under threat: New survey by Fauna & Flora International reveals drastic decline of waterbirds

Over the last 14 years, waterbirds declined by 60% to 90% depending on the species. FFI is calling for immediate action to protect at least the most important river section between Myitkyina and Mandalay.

Scientists working for Fauna & Flora International and Manfred-Hermesen-Stiftung have repeated an ornithology survey of the Myitkyina to Mandalay stretch of the Irrawaddy River last carried out in 2003¹. They found that many waterbirds have declined sharply due to habitat loss, gold panning and poaching.

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.

Table 1: Waterbird decline from 2003 – 2017 (Myitkyina to Sinbo Irrawaddy River Section)

Species	scientific name	2003²	2017	change in %
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

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."

"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."

According to conservation charity Fauna & Flora International, 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 Fauna & Flora International’s Myanmar Country Director Frank Momberg.