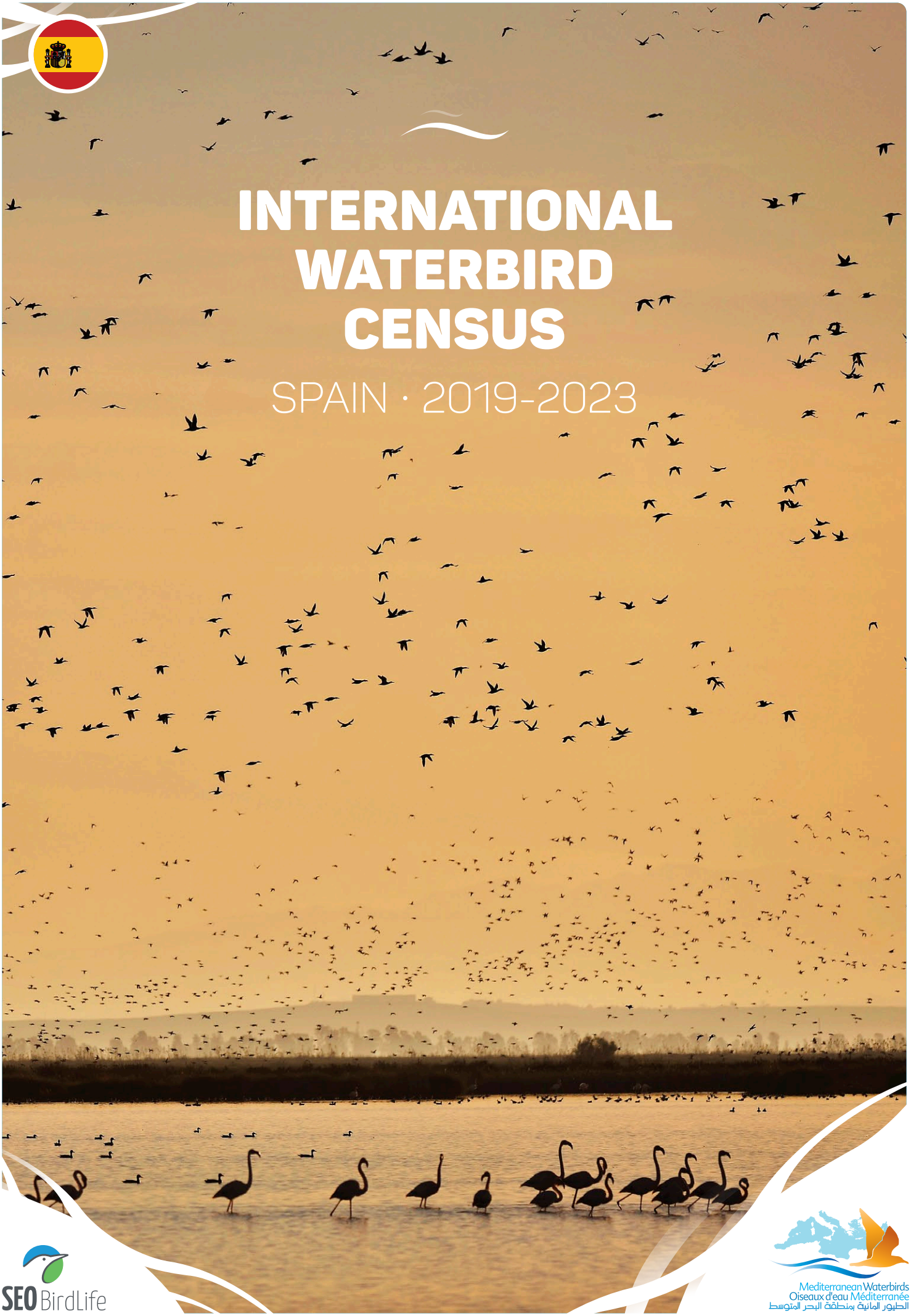
INTERNATIONAL WATERBIRD CENSUS

SPAIN · 2019-2023



SEO BirdLife

Mediterranean Waterbirds
Oiseaux d'eau Méditerranée
الطيور المائية بمنطقة البحر المتوسط

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

SEO/BirdLife continues to coordinate and carry out wintering waterbird censuses in several regions with the support of volunteers, ensuring broad coverage and compiling waterbird data throughout Spain. After validation, these data are sent to Wetlands International. Although the process is slower than society's demand for immediacy, efforts are underway to accelerate it. Wintering waterbird censuses are Spain's oldest coordinated monitoring program. SEO/BirdLife has launched these censuses with the participation of volunteers since the 1960s. In recent years, the Ministry of the Environment has coordinated the program nationally, while regional governments conduct counts within their territories. Nevertheless, SEO/BirdLife continues to collect and consolidate these data annually in a central database, contributing to the Global Wintering Waterbird Compilation managed by Wetlands International. We thank the many local SEO/BirdLife groups, organizations, and regional governments for their collaboration and contribution to high-quality census coverage across wetlands. Every winter, several thousand people dedicate their efforts to counting waterbirds in January.

SOME NOTEWORTHY PARTICIPANTS INCLUDE:

EBD-CSIC (Doñana's Singular Scientific-Technical Infrastructure-ICTS-RBD) especially Manuel Máñez, Parc Natural del Delta de l'Ebre especially Antoni Curcó and Frances Vidal and Parque Natural de L'Albufera, and also AMAYA (Agente de Medio Ambiente y Agua), Ángel Pérez Mechero, ANSE, Antonio Fernández-Caro Gómez /ANSE, Coordinadora Ornitológica de Asturias, David García, David Miguélez, Eloy Fernández de Montoya, Enrique Gómez Crespo, Enrique Pelayo Zueco, Esteban Cardona, Felipe González, Francisco Hernández, Fundación Patrimonio Natural de Castilla y León, GIA-León, GIA-Torquilla, GOB (Baleares), Gorosti, Grupo Naumanni, Héctor González, IAN, Ihobe, Inmaculada Santos, Javier Prieta, Javier Sampietro Latorre, Javier Sanz Sánchez, Jaume Adrover, Jesús Mari Lekuona, Jesús Palacios, José Ángel Nuevo, José Luis Rivas González, José María Fernández García, José Rafael Garrido López, Juan Jiménez Pérez, Juan Pablo Castaño, Juan Picazo Talavera, Luis Fernando Estefano, Luis Lopo (La Rioja), Manuel Suárez, Marcelino Cardalliaguet, Mariano Rodríguez, Mario Jiménez, Mavea, Nicolás López, Oliver Martínez, Pablo Vera, Parque Nacional de las Tablas de Daimiel, Parque Natural de L´Albufera, Pere Vicens, Ricard Gutiérrez, SEO-Aranjuez, SEO-Asturias, SEO-Ávila, SEO-Cáceres, SEO-Cantabria, SEO-Castro, SEO-Córdoba, SEO-Málaga, SEO-Monticola, SEO-Salamanca, SEO-Sierra de Guadarrama, SEO-Sierra Norte, SEO-Soria, SEO-Vanellus, Serafín González Prieto, Teresa Sánchez Corominas, Tomás Velasco, Víctor Salvador and Xavier Méndez.

General report (2009-2018)

Spain report (2009-2018)

Bibliographic reference: Blas M. 2025. *International waterbird census. Spain report (2019-2023).* Medwaterbirds Network, Tour du Valat, 12 p.

Cover image (and photo p.2): Spain's wetlands are a key location in the Mediterranean for both wintering waterfowl and migration to wintering grounds in Africa. © JMPAS / **Cartography:** Marta Lago, Khalil Baddour
Translation and proofreading: Charles La Via / **With the contribution of** Marta Lago, Khalil Baddour, Laura Dami
Graphic design and layout: Atelier Guillaume Baldini

MOBILIZED **NATIONAL OBSERVERS**

The number of collaborators and volunteers varies widely each winter, but exceeds 2,000 people, and in many cases, information on participants is unavailable in some autonomous communities, where many rangers and technicians from each community are involved. In general, autonomous communities carry out the censuses, except in the Doñana Marshes. In some communities, they are carried out by SEO/BirdLife volunteers, or it is a joint effort.

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS:

OVER **2,000** OBSERVERS INVOLVED

AVERAGE NUMBER OF WETLANDS VISITED:

1,283 WETLANDS MONITORED AT LEAST ONCE (2019-2023)

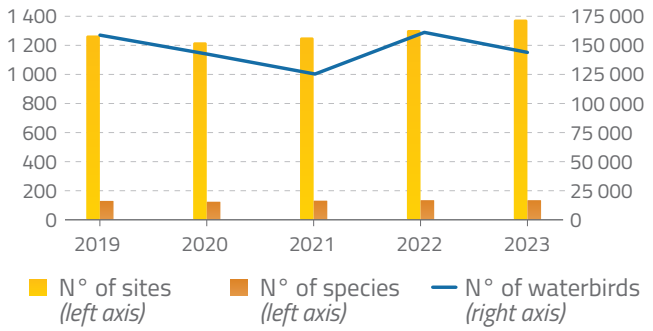
AVERAGE NUMBER OF SPECIES OBSERVED:

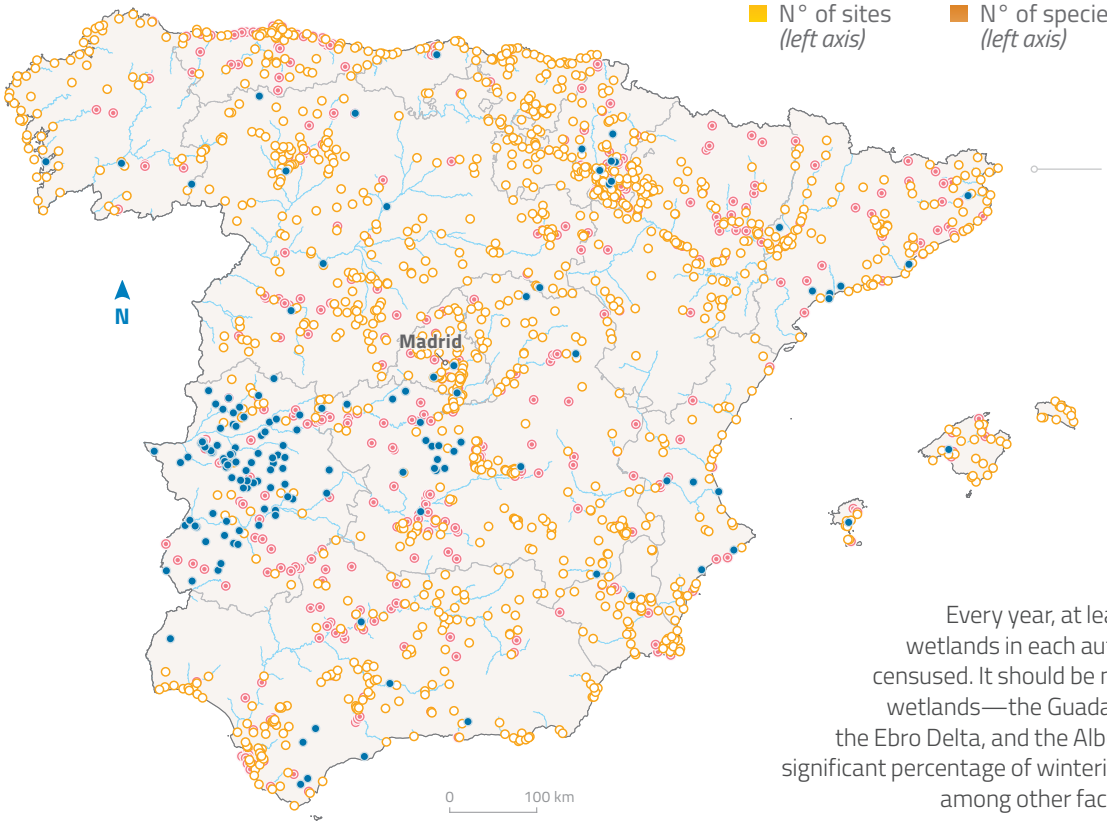
131 SPECIES OBSERVED IN SPAIN (2019-2023)

The number of waterbirds for 2019-2023 averaged **1.5 million individuals**, half a million of which are ducks and coots.

On average **1,200 wetlands** are censused every year, but in general, the most important are always monitored. Some more are not censused every year, because they are generally of little importance. In each region or province, there are a few wetlands that host a high percentage of waterbirds.

EVOLUTION IN THE NUMBER OF SITES VISITED,
counted species and waterbirds (2019-2023)





SITES MONITORED
in Spain (2009-2023)

- Regularly visited sites *(at least 7 times during 2009-2023)*
- Newly visited sites *(visited only during 2019-2023)*
- Earlier sites *(visited only during 2009-2018)*
- Rivers

Every year, at least all the most important wetlands in each autonomous community are censused. It should be noted that the three major wetlands—the Guadalquivir (Doñana) marshes, the Ebro Delta, and the Albufera de Valencia—host a significant percentage of wintering waterbirds, depending, among other factors, on their flood status.

© SEO/BirdLife Spain, Tour du Valat - Sources: SEO/BirdLife Spain, OSM, HydroSHEDS, UN-FAO and EuroGeographics

MAIN TRENDS (2019-2023) IN WATERBIRD POPULATIONS

DECLINING SPECIES, DURING THE ASSESSMENT PERIOD (2019-2023)

SPECIES		VALUES			
English name	Scientific name	Average nb. of birds	Nb. sites	Magn.*	±ES**
Common Goldeneye	*Bucephala clangula*	2	8	-0,50	0,25
Black-necked Grebe	*Podiceps nigricollis*	9 268	173	-0,25	0,05
Western Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	1 192	111	-0,14	0,05

* **Magn.:** Magnitude / ** **±SE:** Standard error. The trends shown in the tables are at least significant at an alpha risk of 5%.

For both positive and negative trends, we did not consider significant results for seabirds, since the International Waterbird Census does not provide comprehensive monitoring for these species. Therefore, positive or negative trends for seabirds may not be ecologically meaningful. Spain is the southern limit for some species from central and northern Europe, and every year a very rare and variable species is present depending on the conditions further north. Such is the case for the Common Eider and the Common Goldeneye.

Greylag Goose landing on water
© D. Maw

The Western Swamphen shows a declining population trend, with the Guadalquivir marshes serving as its primary breeding habitat.
© E. Van Uchelen

FOCUS

As this report only considers the last five years of IWC data, many trends may not be visible or statistically significant over such a short period. One species whose trend is not obvious in the past five years, but for which long-term analyses clearly indicate a decrease, is the **Greylag Goose**, for which the number of individuals has decreased every winter. From the present study, based on five years of monitoring, a negative trend is shown for the **Western Swamphen**: this species has been declining since the beginning of the century, both in breeding and wintering populations. This trend was already recorded in the recently published Third Atlas of Breeding Birds (SEO/BirdLife et al., 2022). In the last study on the wintering population in Spain, the trend was not analyzed because it is a species that is difficult to census due to the habitat it occupies, which includes marshy areas with high vegetation density and other artificial environments such as rice paddies. These conditions make it a difficult species to count and determine the number of individuals in any given wetland. The distribution of both the breeding and wintering populations is very similar, with the most important populations in the three Iberian wetlands most notable for wintering waterbirds: the Guadalquivir Marshes (Doñana), the Ebro Delta, and the Albufera de Valencia. However, it is unevenly distributed throughout the interior of the peninsula and along the entire Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of Andalusia.

HIGHLIGHTS

The negative trend appears to be due to the sharp decline in populations in the Doñana Marshes, which is the key wetland for the species. In this wetland, several thousand **Western Swamphen** were once recorded, but have now been reduced to just over 100. This trend characterizes most populations in general, although more mildly. It is a species highly persecuted by humans as it is considered harmful to rice crops, but the factors that may be affecting its population and causing this decline are not well understood.

INCREASING SPECIES,
DURING THE ASSESSMENT PERIOD (2019-2023)

SPECIES		VALUES			
English name	Scientific name	Average nb. of birds	Nb. sites	Magn.*	±ES**
Red Phalarope	*Phalaropus fulicarius*	13	10	2,15	0,94
Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*	37 145	77	1,16	0,18
Marbled Teal	*Marmaronetta angustirostris*	140	18	1,10	0,29
Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*	147	15	0,81	0,40
Pied Avocet	*Recurvirostra avosetta*	14 441	68	0,51	0,08
Little Stint	*Calidris minuta*	9 668	75	0,51	0,12
Garganey	*Spatula querquedula*	23	14	0,37	0,13

SPECIES		VALUES			
English name	Scientific name	Average nb. of birds	Nb. sites	Magn.*	±ES**
Temminck's Stint	*Calidris temminckii*	25	12	0,32	0,16
Eurasian Golden Plover	*Pluvialis apricaria*	10 564	138	0,26	0,07
Common Little Bittern	*Ixobrychus minutus*	119	49	0,20	0,08
Eurasian Thick-knee	*Burhinus oedicnemus*	610	40	0,19	0,09
Common Redshank	*Tringa totanus*	7 057	108	0,14	0,04
Common Crane	*Grus grus*	65 831	189	0,14	0,05
Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	9 140	235	0,11	0,05

* **Magn.:** Magnitude / ** **±SE:** Standard error. The trends shown in the tables are at least significant at an alpha risk of 5%.

FOCUS

As this report only considers the last five years of IWC data, many trends may not be visible or statistically significant over such a short period. One species whose trend is not obvious in the past five years, but for which long-term analyses clearly indicate an increase, is the **White-headed Shelduck**. In contrast, these analyses highlight the continuous increase of the **Glossy Ibis**.Two species are noteworthy this time: first, the **Black-winged Stilt**, which continues to show a positive trend. This trend was already recorded in previous studies, and from being a very rare species in winter in the last century, its numbers are increasing mainly in the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula. Its numbers are concentrated in the Doñana marshes and coastal wetlands along the Mediterranean.

The other species showing a positive trend is the **Pied Avocet**, although this species has a more restricted distribution and its populations winter in wetlands in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula. It prefers brackish environments, and its wintering may also be determined by the level of flooding in the Doñana marshes There are two other important wintering areas: marshes in the Bay of Cadiz and the Ebro Delta.

The Ebro Delta and the Guadalquivir marshes are key wintering wetlands for the Little Stint. © V. Lacovoni

HIGHLIGHTS

The most endangered waterbird populations continue to be four species targeted by conservation programs: the **Marbled Teal**, **Red-knobbed Coot**, **White-headed Duck**, and the **Ferruginous Duck.** It is important to continue this work and conduct further research to understand the main causes of their sharp decline and work to reverse the process. Many factors are at play, and some of these populations are distributed across several Mediterranean countries. Significant resources are being invested, but the results are not entirely satisfactory: only a very small population remains.

Ferruginous duck (*Aythia nyroca*) is a very scarce species whose populations seem to be improving slightly in recent years.
© M. Mecnarowski

28 WETLANDS MAY BE DESIGNATED AS AREAS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Applying the 1% numerical threshold (criterion 6) would affect 28 wetlands, with only 7 also meeting criterion 5 (20,000 or more waterbirds). An additional 18 wetlands not designated as Ramsar sites would meet criterion 6. The results are similar to the previous report, although it is possible that applying criterion 6 is influenced by the generally poor conservation status of Ramsar wetlands.

INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE SITE	*Designated Ramsar site*	> 20 000 waterbirds	Eurasian Teal	Mallard	Common Pochard	Ferruginous Duck	Western Cattle Egret	Dunlin	Little Stint	Kentish Plover	White Stork	Black Stork	Little Egret	Common Crane	Black-winged Stilt	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Mediterranean Gull	Gadwall	Marbled Duck	Red-crested Pochard	White-headed Duck	Greater Flamingo	Eurasian Spoonbill	Glossy Ibis	Black-necked Grebe	Northern Shoveler	Common Shelduck
Number of sites			1	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	1	1	2	4	1	1	2	1	1	5	15	5	3	3	2	6	1
Albufera de Adra (AL)	R																				O						
Albufera de Valencia (V)	R	O											O							O		O		O		O	
Arrozales de Dos Reinos (NA)														O													
Balsa de Lebrija "Don Melendo" (SE)	R																			O						O	
Balsares-Carabassi-Clot de Galvany (A)							O														O						
Delta del Ebro (T)	R	O	O	O				O	O	O							O	O		O		O		O		O	
Depuradora de Cartagena (MU)																					O						
Desembocadura de la Rambla de Morales (AL)																					O						
Doñana (H-SE-CA)	R	O			O					O	O	O	O		O				O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Embalse de Alcollarín (CC)																										O	
Embalse de Santomera y ramblas adyacentes (MU)																					O						
Laguna de El Salobralejo (AB)																					O						
Laguna de Fuente de Piedra (MA)	R	O														O											
Laguna de Gallocanta (Z)	R	O												O													
Laguna de Medina (CA)																					O						
Laguna de Navaseca (CR)																					O						
Laguna de Ontalafia (AB)																					O						
Laguna del Cañizar (TE)														O													
Laguna Dulce de Campillos (MA)	R																				O						
Marismas del Odiel (H)	R	O																				O	O		O		
Marismas del P.N. Bahía de Cádiz (CA)	R	O								O												O	O				
Parque Natural de El Hondo (A)	R																			O	O					O	
Puerto de Cambrils (T)																	O										
Río Ebro: tramo Logroño-Alfaro (LO)						O																					
Saladar de los Canos (AL)																					O						
Salinas de Cerrillos (AL)																					O						
Salinas de Guardias Viejas (AL)																					O						
Tablas de Daimiel (CR)	R					O								O													

WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE FOR WATERBIRDS
Identification based on mid-January (2019-2023) count data for Ramsar Criteria 5 and 6.
Empty cells in the "Ramsar site" column identify sites not included in the Ramsar network.

- **Criterion 5:** A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly* supports 20,000 or more waterbirds.
- **Criterion 6:** A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly* supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbirds.

* **To define the notion of "regularly,"** we have applied the following rule (currently under review by COP15 RAMSAR, 2025): A wetland is considered to regularly support a population of waterbirds of a given size if either of the following conditions is met:

1. The average of the annual maxima recorded over a period of at least five years reaches or exceeds the required threshold; or
2. The required number of birds is recorded in at least two-thirds of the years for which adequate data are available, provided that data are available for at least three years in total.

Albufera de Valencia (rice fields) © Pablesku

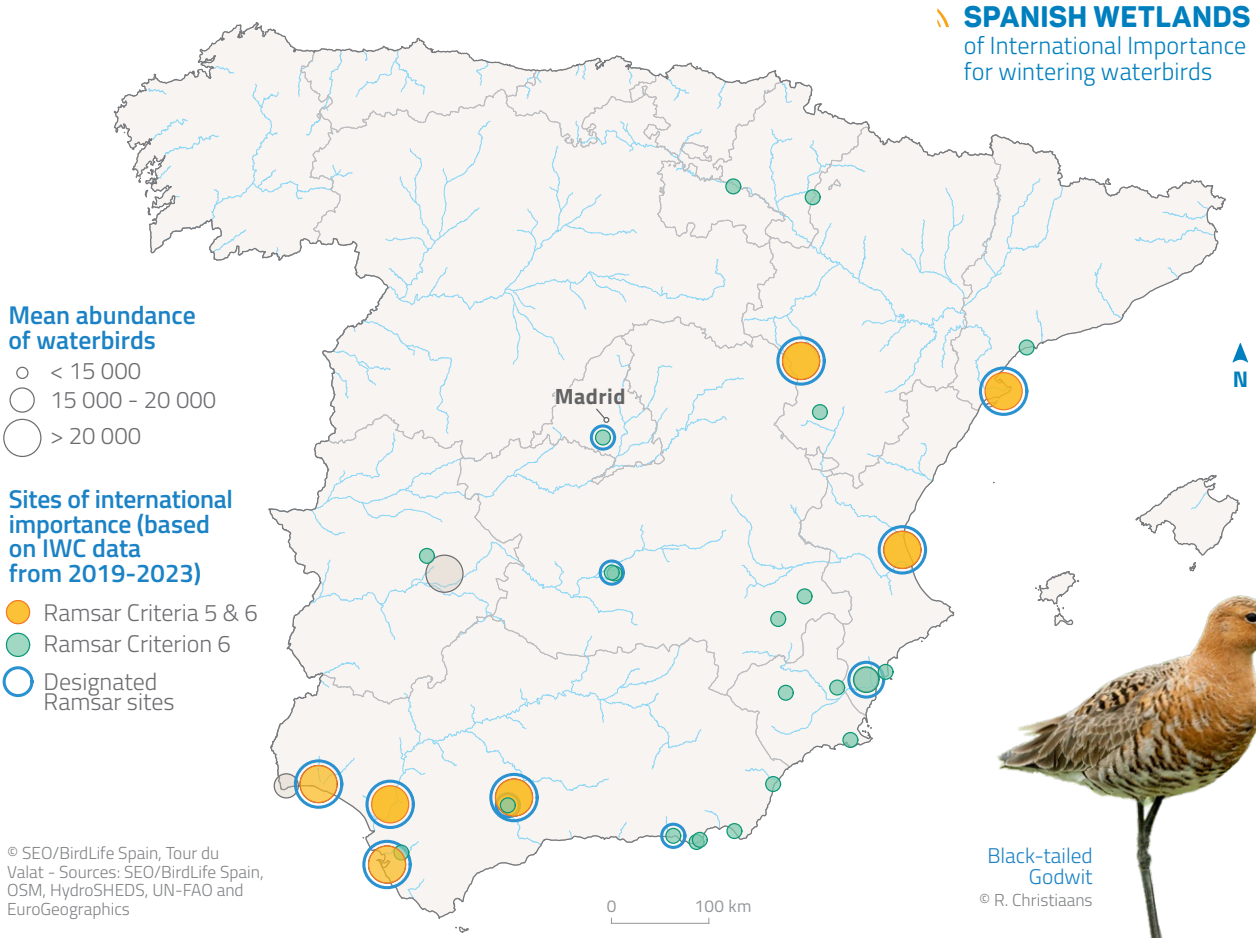
HIGHLIGHTS

An assessment by the authorities and long-term monitoring of these wetlands are essential. In 2018, SEO/BirdLife evaluated the conservation status of Ramsar wetlands in Spain and found a discouraging situation. These wetlands continue to face threats that prevent them from meeting the conservation and environmental objectives set by the EU. Available information is insufficient to fully assess their condition, but 80% of Spanish wetlands are in decline due to overexploitation of water, drought, and other factors. The three most important Ramsar wetlands — notable for meeting both criteria and supporting large numbers of waterbirds — continue to suffer significant negative impacts and multiple threats. These pressures act alongside climate change, which reduces rainfall. This is particularly evident in the Guadalquivir marshes (Doñana), where poor water management and declining rainfall are progressively degrading one of the Mediterranean's most important wetlands.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

Wetland conservation in Spain remains a significant challenge, requiring stronger commitments to address the causes of loss and reverse degradation. Preserving wetlands that have survived desiccation is not enough; it is also essential to gradually restore those that can still recover their ecological structure and functions impacted by human activity. Public authorities responsible for managing these areas must ensure proper monitoring of their conservation status and better assess trends over time.

SPANISH WETLANDS
of International Importance for wintering waterbirds



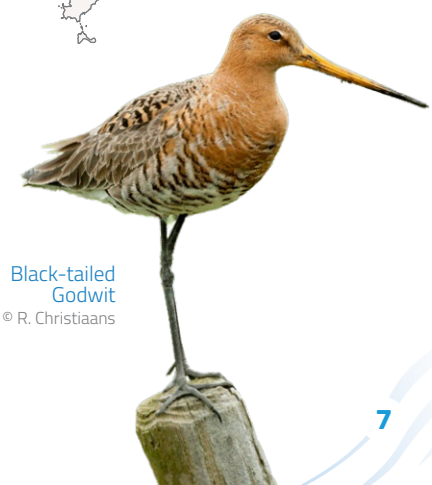
Mean abundance of waterbirds

- < 15 000
- 15 000 - 20 000
- > 20 000

Sites of international importance (based on IWC data from 2019-2023)

- Ramsar Criteria 5 & 6
- Ramsar Criterion 6
- Designated Ramsar sites

© SEO/BirdLife Spain, Tour du Valat - Sources: SEO/BirdLife Spain, OSM, HydroSHEDS, UN-FAO and EuroGeographics



Black-tailed Godwit
© R. Christiaans

FOCUS ON A COUNTRY'S FLAGSHIP SPECIES: THE RED-KNOBBED COOT (*FULICA CRISTATA*)

Spain and Morocco are home to the only population of Red-knobbed Coot in the Mediterranean and the entire Palearctic. This species is critically endangered in Spain, with fewer than 100 individuals remaining. Both countries have a major responsibility for the conservation of this species.

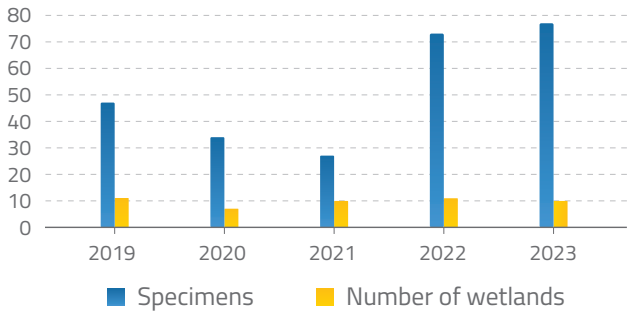
The winter distribution of the Red-knobbed Coot coincides largely with the breeding season and depends on the wetlands where it is present maintaining adequate ecological conditions for its year-round presence. Non-breeding individuals, or those that use temporary wetlands that dry up during the summer, disperse, moving to other wetlands that act as shelters.

Its winter distribution has not changed much in Spain, although its population has continued to decline, as has the number of wetlands in which it occurs: it is distributed throughout the wetlands of the lower Guadalquivir (Guadalquivir marshes, lagoons of Cádiz and Seville) in Andalusia, and along the coast in the Valencian Community (Valencia lagoon).

The Spanish population appears to be related to the Moroccan population, so it is quite possible that there are bird movements between wetlands in both countries, possibly responsible for the numerical fluctuations detected in Spain. A breeding and reintroduction program for this species has been in place since the end of the last century, but the results have not been very positive: new breeding sites have been recorded but have generally not been maintained.

NUMBER OF SPECIMENS

and number of wetlands with Red-knobbed Coot in wintering waterbird censuses (2019-2023)



According to censuses on wintering waterbird, the wintering population remained very low for 2019-2023, reaching a minimum of 27 birds in 2021 and a maximum of 77 in 2023, possibly increasing only due to releases of this species. The species was present in only 20 wetlands, and each year in a maximum of 11 sites. In 2020 it was present in only 7 wetlands. Wetlands are found mainly in the southern part of the peninsula and in a few wetlands on the Mediterranean coast. The species is threatened by habitat destruction, hunting, and the introduction of certain invasive alien species into wetlands that deplete their flora and fauna, such as the Red Swamp Crayfish (Procambarus clarkii) and the carp (Cyprinus carpio). Overgrazing is also reported in wetlands, as is the case in Doñana.

Morocco and Spain must collaborate to save the critically endangered Red-knobbed Coot population © EcoPrint

HIGHLIGHTS

Given the delicate situation of this species, it is important for Morocco and Spain to work together on its conservation, as the populations appear to be interconnected.

Delta del Ebro
© T. Duran

EXOTIC WATERBIRDS: A MAJOR PROBLEM

The introduction of invasive alien species by humans is one of the main threats facing natural ecosystems and biodiversity today. It is the leading cause of species extinction after habitat destruction. More than 60 species of exotic waterbirds have been recorded in Spain, but their potential effects and impacts are unknown. Some of them originate from other countries where they are already naturalized.

The **Egyptian Goose** is one of the exotic waterbird species that has experienced the greatest growth in Spain . It is a duck distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa and is considered an invasive exotic bird. There are established populations resulting from escaped captive birds in Central Europe. In Spain, the population appears to be growing with individuals arriving from European populations (Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands), but also from local escapees. It has spread mainly through the western Iberian Peninsula, where significant concentrations have been recorded in some reservoirs. Its expansion and growth have taken place in the present century, with the first recorded in 2001.

In a recent census conducted by SEO/BirdLife, more than 5,000 individuals were counted, and concentrations of up to 500 individuals were observed. It breeds across different types of wetlands, and although it breeds primarily in spring, it can breed throughout the year. In late summer and early autumn, it is concentrated mainly in reservoirs. Similarly, wintering waterbird censuses show continuous growth. The fraction of birds that could reach Spain in winter from the European population is unknown.

The effects on other waterbirds are unknown, but it has recently been identified as a potential threat to local ecosystems due to their competition with native birds and their territorial and aggressive behavior, including the usurpation of nests of local species.

The effects of these invasive species on Mediterranean wetlands should be assessed, as there are other species such as the **Mute Swan** or the **Greylag Goose**, where an established population exists, but whose origin is unknown. It is difficult to determine the population trend of a species when it may be of natural origin or introduced by humans.

The population of the Egyptian Goose (a non-native species) continues to grow, with unknown effects on other waterbird populations.© B. Molina

In Spain, three species of waterbirds are classified as invasive: the **Egyptian Goose**, the **Canada Goose**, the **Ruddy Duck**, and the **African Sacred Ibis**.

The arrival of the Ruddy Duck in Spain was already a problem due to its hybridization with the **White-headed Duck:** significant resources are required to address this problem that is putting an endangered species at risk.

Greylag Goose. Wintering population is declined, but breeding increase. © R. Guijt

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Some Pied Avocets wintering in Spain breed in central and northern Europe © Erni

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Northern Pintails (*Anas acuta*) flying over wetlands © R. Elosegui

Donaña Marsh © JMPAS

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Mediterranean Waterbirds
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