

BirdLife International Monitoring Important Bird Areas

Background

Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are sites of international importance for the conservation of birds, identified against a set of globally standardised scientific criteria.

BirdLife International initiated the identification of Important Bird Areas in 1981, with a study funded by the European Commission of selected Member States of the European Union. Since then, the BirdLife IBA programme has become a worldwide initiative, aimed at identifying and protecting a network of critical sites for the conservation of the world's birds and making a major contribution to global biodiversity conservation.

The BirdLife Partnership, present in 105 countries, with 65 autonomous Partner organisations and a global membership exceeding 1.8 million, have adopted strategies to comprehensively document all the world's Important Bird Areas, and set a series of targets for their conservation. The IBA programme has therefore evolved from, initially, identifying Important Bird Areas to a comprehensive initiative encompassing site orientated research, action, monitoring, education, advocacy and national and international legal protection.

The value of monitoring biodiversity

Better environmental, and particularly biodiversity, indicators need to be developed to permit regular reporting of the state of biodiversity, the pressures it faces and the appropriate responses. A prerequisite for producing indicator statistics is the availability of good quality, time-series data on biodiversity. To ensure that key data on biodiversity are repeatedly collected over time monitoring schemes need to be established and developed.

There is great merit in the use of ornithological data to indicate the effects of environmental change on biodiversity. The wealth and quality of data on birds, relative to other taxa, may be used to develop the thinking and lead the way in the development and application of biodiversity indicators at local, national and regional levels. Established networks of volunteers have proved a cost effective source of such data. How effectively we are conserving birds is a means of assessing how successful we are in conserving ecosystem functions and biodiversity as a whole.

Monitoring of IBAs

Vast networks of ornithologists, birdwatchers and conservation experts are involved in the collation of data on IBAs. The BirdLife Partnership is at the core of this network, coordinating much of the work nationally and with substantial collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations and experts. Many Partners have an IBA coordinator (or team), responsible for delivering this programme within the country concerned. Importantly networks of local contacts (Site Support Groups and IBA Caretakers) form the foundation of community based networks active in the protection, management and monitoring of IBAs in several countries.

In 2000 the second Pan-European inventory was published, documenting 3,619 IBAs across 51 countries/autonomous regions. IBAs for the Middle East were published in 1994 and over 1,200 IBAs in Africa have been identified (to be published in 2001). IBA programmes are also active in Asia and the Americas regions. Through the BirdLife World Bird Database storage and analysis of data ensures that these data can be interpreted and communicated effectively. The database includes information on bird populations at IBAs (for Europe alone >100,000 records), habitat type and extent at IBAs (>12,000), threats (>12,000), protection status and management plans.

Developing biodiversity indicators using IBA data

BirdLife plans to build on existing data gathering and monitoring efforts to develop and implement a comprehensive IBA monitoring programme. For example in Europe a model is currently being developed which includes 6 core indicators that are easily measured, understood, communicated and are scientifically sound (summarised in brief below). They

have been chosen carefully to allow monitoring of the state of IBAs and their key bird species, pressures acting upon them and responses taken to conserve them.

| Indicator type | Indicator |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| State | Site boundary and area |
| | Habitat |
| | Key bird populations |
| | Land-use |
| Pressure | Threats |
| Response | Protection status |
| | Management plan |

IBA monitoring and Biosphere Reserve Integrated Monitoring (BRIM)

Many of the 393 Biosphere Reserves will also be Important Bird Areas. An initial analysis of the BirdLife World Bird Database for Europe and Africa indicates that 121 IBAs in Europe are designated Biosphere Reserves (overlap with 86 Biosphere Reserves) and 44 designated in Africa. Table 1 shows the relationship between these areas.

A substantive amount of data is being gathered and will continue to be monitored through the IBA programme on Biosphere Reserves. Similarly the BRIM programme will generate key information relevant to the conservation of IBAs. BirdLife would therefore welcome exploring collaboration on monitoring biodiversity between the two programmes. Links and integration of socio-economic indicators developed through the BRIM work and their relations to IBAs would also be an interesting area to explore.