



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# The Ramsar Convention

## *Wetlands of International Importance*



*Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, Florida, coastal wetland and adjacent uplands, established as the first Refuge in the Nation in 1903 to protect bird rookeries from feather hunters.*

### What is Ramsar?

Ramsar refers to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat. The Convention promotes wetland conservation throughout the world. Ramsar is the name of the town in Iran where the Convention was signed by its first members in 1971.

### Wetlands and Migratory Birds

Wetlands are one of the most important ecosystems on the planet. Their ecological importance is second only to tropical rainforests. We depend on them for clean water, food, transportation, flood control, and shoreline protection. Many forms of recreation are linked to wetlands. Wetlands also provide essential habitat for a large number of plants and animal species, many of which are rare or endangered.

Wetlands abound with wildlife, and can be very rich in biodiversity. Numerous bird groups, including shorebirds, waterfowl, colonial waterbirds, wading birds, and seabirds, need healthy wetlands for their survival. Most of these species are migratory, flying from one wetland to another on their annual migrations. The journey can cover more than 15,000 miles, from northern Canada to the southern tip of South America, and include numerous stops along the way. The future of international migrants, such as the Semipalmated Plover, depends on the cooperative efforts of many countries to conserve wetlands.

### Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Fostering worldwide wetland conservation is the primary goal of the Ramsar Convention on wetlands. Human uses, both cultural and economic, along with habitat and water

**Any nation may participate in the Convention by becoming a member. Each member nation agrees to designate at least one site for the List of Wetlands of International Importance that meets one or more of the following criteria:**

- 1) contains a representative, rare, or unique example of a natural or near-natural wetland type found within the appropriate biogeographic region;
- 2) supports vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities.
- 3) supports populations of plant and/or animal species important for maintaining the biological diversity of a particular biogeographic region;
- 4) supports plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions;
- 5) regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds;
- 6) regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird;
- 7) supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and/or populations that are representative of wetland benefits and/or values and thereby contributes to global biological diversity; and
- 8) is an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and/or migration path on which fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere, depend.

conservation values are all part of this conservation effort. Participation in the Convention allows nations to work together in a group effort to improve wetland management, and helps local communities maintain these habitats for the benefit of people and wildlife. Currently, 133 nations have joined in adopting Ramsar's objectives to stem the loss of wetlands and to ensure their conservation.

**Ramsar encourages the wise use of wetlands - - uses that do not upset the biological, hydrological, and physical relationships which maintain the site.**

#### How Ramsar Works

The Ramsar Convention is the only global environmental treaty that deals with a specific ecosystem. Wetlands have a broad definition under the Convention, including all aquatic habitats from shallow marine systems to inland waterways. The goal is to stem the loss of these vital habitats and maintain their value for future generations.

#### Site Nomination

In addition to meeting one or more of the above biological criteria, a site nomination needs to include: a completed *Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands* (obtainable from: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org)) and letters of support from all landowners, the state wildlife or natural resources agency, and a member of Congress for the State in which the site is located.

The United States currently has 18 sites on the list. There is no minimum size for a proposed site. The current international list includes sites ranging from less than an acre to about 17 million acres. Anyone may nominate a site.

#### U.S. Participation in Ramsar

The United States joined the Ramsar Convention in 1986. The

#### U.S. LISTED WETLANDS

1. Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and State Game Area, Alaska. <http://izembek.fws.gov>
2. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey. <http://forsythe.fws.gov>
3. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Georgia and Florida. <http://okefenokee.fws.gov>
4. Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Nevada. <http://desertcomplex.fws.gov/ashmeadows>
5. Everglades National Park, Florida.
6. Chesapeake Bay Estuarine Complex, Maryland and Virginia. <http://blackwater.fws.gov>
7. Cheyenne Bottoms State Game Area, Kansas.
8. Cache-Lower White Rivers Joint Venture Area, Arkansas. <http://cacheriver.fws.gov>
9. Horicon Marsh, Wisconsin Refuge, New Jersey. <http://midwest.fws.gov/horicon>
10. Catahoula Lake, Louisiana. <http://catahoula.fws.gov>
11. Delaware Bay Estuary, Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.
12. Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, Florida. <http://pelicanisland.fws.gov>
13. Caddo Lake, Texas.
14. Connecticut River Estuary and Tidal Wetlands Complex, Connecticut.
15. Cache River-Cypress Creek Wetlands, Illinois.
16. Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge, South Dakota. <http://sandlake.fws.gov>
17. Bolinas Lagoon, California.
18. Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Kansas. <http://quivira.fws.gov>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of State are responsible for implementation of the Convention. They work with a variety of organizations and government agencies at all levels to assist sites and promote wetland conservation. Any wetland, whether publicly or privately owned, may become a Ramsar site if it meets the criteria. For more information about U.S. sites or for guidance on listing a site, contact:

Division of International Conservation  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 730  
Arlington, VA 22203

#### Frequently Asked Questions:

##### Is Ramsar affiliated with the United Nations?

No. However, UNESCO does safeguard official Ramsar documents.

##### Is Ramsar regulatory?

No. Each nation manages its listed sites within its own guidelines.

##### What are the benefits of listing a site?

Once accepted on the List, a Ramsar site receives global recognition for its value as an important habitat. Migratory species benefit because Ramsar conserves wetlands at an international level, with the possibility of connecting the entire pathway of a migrant and linking participating countries in a coordinated conservation effort. At the local level, communities enjoy enhanced tourist visitation to well-publicized sites, and property values have increased due to their proximity to a Ramsar site. In addition, small grant funds are available for Ramsar sites.

Learn more about Ramsar, visit:  
<http://international.fws.gov> or  
<http://www.ramsar.org>

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD  
<http://www.fws.gov>  
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