Local Conservation Action leads to Breeding Success for Critically Endangered BAER’S POCHARD at Hengshui Hu.

Thursday, 31 May 2018

A female BAER’S POCHARD (Aythya baeri) with ducklings, Hengshui Hu, 28 May 2018. Photo by Li Feng.

Summary

At 1748 local time on 28 May 2018, Li Feng, a researcher and bird surveyor from Hengshui University found, photographed and videoed a female BAER’S POCHARD (Aythya baeri) with ducklings at Hengshui Hu National Nature Reserve in Hebei Province, China. This is the first confirmed breeding of the “Critically Endangered” diving duck anywhere in the world in 2018 and is almost certainly a direct result of conservation efforts by the local government and nature reserve staff, supported by the Sino-German Hengshui Lake Conservation and Management Project, following the first international workshop of the Baer’s Pochard Task Force at Hengshui Hu in March 2018.
Baer’s Pochard (*Aythya baeri*) is a poorly known migratory diving duck that was formerly widespread in eastern Asia. Since the 1980s it has suffered a precipitous decline, estimated to be >90%, throughout its range and fewer than 1,000 birds now survive in the wild, making it rarer than the Giant Panda. Since 2012 it has been classified by the IUCN as “Critically Endangered”, meaning it is just one step away from extinction in the wild. In the last five years it has become clear that Hengshui Hu in Hebei Province is the most important known site in the world for this species with more than 300 recorded during spring migration, several wintering and a few pairs spending the summer. However, due to a combination of fluctuating water levels during the breeding season, illegal egg collection and disturbance by electro-fishermen and tourist boats, there has been no evidence of breeding in recent years.

Since 2017 regular monitoring of the site for Baer’s Pochard and targeted conservation actions have been initiated through the Sino-German Hengshui Hu Conservation and Protection Project and, on 19-20 March 2018, delegates from ten countries gathered at Hengshui Hu National Nature Reserve, in Hebei Province, for the first international workshop on the conservation of the Baer’s Pochard organised by the East-Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP)’s Baer’s Pochard Task Force (BPTF). Delegates from Bangladesh, China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, India, Japan, Mongolia, Myanmar, Republic of Korea, Russia and Thailand heard from senior Chinese local and national government officials, academics and international experts, discussed urgent conservation priorities and agreed the “Hengshui Declaration”. Highlights from the declaration include:

“Delegates:

• *Warmly welcome* the State Forestry Administration’s recommendation that Baer’s Pochard be added to the list of species given first class protection in China;

• *Encourage* all range states to strengthen the protection of all sites supporting Baer’s Pochard as a matter of urgency;

• *Recognise* the importance of Hengshui Hu for breeding, migrating and wintering Baer’s Pochard, suggest that the site is *nominated as a wetland of international significance under the Ramsar Convention*, and hereby nominate Hengshui Hu as the “Home of Baer’s Pochard”.

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1. *The Baer’s Pochard Task Force is convened by the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP), a network of partners within the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The EAAFP aims to protect migratory waterbirds, their habitat and the livelihoods of people dependent upon them. See URL: [http://eaaflyway.net/](http://eaaflyway.net/)*

2. *For the full text of the Hengshui Declaration, see URL: [https://birdingbeijing.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/hengshui-declaration.pdf](https://birdingbeijing.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/hengshui-declaration.pdf)*
Following the workshop, the local government, Hengshui Nature Reserve and Hengshui University, supported by the Sino-German Hengshui Lake Conservation and Management Project, co-financed by the German Development Bank KfW, the UK’s Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and the EAAFP, immediately implemented a series of conservation efforts to protect Baer’s Pochard, including declaring the key breeding area as a seasonal fully protected zone, compensating fishermen who could no longer fish in the protected zone, clamping down on illegal activity including illegal fishing and egg collection, stabilising the water level during the breeding season to avoid nests being flooded, and beginning a public information campaign to raise awareness about the global importance of Hengshui Hu for Baer’s Pochard.

These actions have undoubtedly created the conditions for successful breeding in 2018 and demonstrate that local conservation actions can deliver results.

Mr Yuan Bo, Director of Hengshui Lake National Nature Reserve, said: ‘Hengshui Lake is the most important known site for Baer’s Pochard in the world. With that great honour comes a great responsibility. With the support of the local government and national and international partners, we have implemented a series of conservation actions aimed at reversing the decline of this “Critically Endangered” diving duck and we are delighted that our efforts have been rewarded so quickly. Our aim now is to build on this success to ensure successful breeding becomes an annual event.’

Professor Ding Changqing, from Beijing Forestry University and Chair of the Baer’s Pochard Task Force said: “The Baer’s Pochard is a jewel in the crown of East Asia’s natural heritage. With a distribution concentrated in China and a population lower than the Giant Panda, we have a unique responsibility to ensure its survival in the wild. The breeding success at Hengshui Hu shows how local conservation efforts, supported by national and international partners, can make a difference.”

Professor Tian Guang, President of Hengshui University added: “Hengshui University is delighted to be part of the team working to protect the Critically Endangered Baer’s Pochard. Our team, led by Dr Wu Dayong and Li Feng, has been monitoring the waterbirds at Hengshui Hu weekly since March 2017 and, in response to this success, we have arranged for a team of more than 40 volunteers to monitor the breeding progress in 2018.”

Mr Richard Hearn, Head of Monitoring at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and Coordinator of the Baer’s Pochard Task Force, said: “The incredible early success of the conservation efforts at Hengshui Hu is as a direct result of the priority measures implemented by the local government and nature reserve and clearly demonstrate that targeted conservation action works. The presence of ducklings, and knowledge that we can make positive changes that directly benefit Baer’s Pochard, gives us all hope that the decline in the population of this critically rare diving duck can be reversed.”

Dr Guido Kuchelmeister, Team Leader of the Sino-German project said: “The sight of Baer’s Pochard ducklings at Hengshui Hu is reward for the magnificent efforts of the local government and nature reserve staff and shows how bringing together international expertise with local efforts can make a difference. We think the Hengshui lake protected area will become a 21st century showcase about how targeted conservation of rare, endangered and highly threatened species can be consistent with the growing demand of an urbanized society for recreation and other needs.”

Ms Hyeseon Do, Programme Officer of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership said: “Baer’s Pochard is one of the priority species for the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership and this success shows that, by working together through the Baer’s Pochard Task Force, governments, international organisations and other partners can achieve remarkable conservation results.”
BAER’S POCHARD TASK FORCE

Background about Baer’s Pochard (*Aythya baeri*)

Baer’s Pochard (*Aythya baeri*) is a poorly known migratory diving duck that was formerly widespread in eastern Asia. Since the 1980s it has suffered a precipitous decline throughout its range and fewer than 1,000 birds now survive in the wild. The causes of this are largely unknown. Following up-listing to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List in 2012, an International Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP) was prepared in 2014 and adopted by the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) in 2015 and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) in 2017. Based on the knowledge at the time, this emergency plan identified two key threats as having likely had the largest impact on Baer’s Pochard, particularly at breeding sites; (i) habitat loss and degradation; (ii) unsustainable harvesting as a result of poisoning, trapping and egg collection. Other potential threats identified were: (i) inadequate site protection and management; (ii) human disturbance and recreation; (iii) by-catch in fishing nets; (iv) lack of awareness; (v) policy obstacles. Possible threats include: (i) potential for hybridisation now Baer’s Pochard numbers are so low; (ii) excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers.
Activities focused on Baer’s Pochard conservation have recently been carried out in six range states. This has included targeted surveys of breeding and wintering habitat in Russia (breeding), Myanmar (wintering) and China (both seasons). Efforts to improve management of key sites and engagement of local communities have also been conducted in Russia, China and Myanmar. General wetland monitoring and management activities in many other countries have also enhanced knowledge and conservation. Focused awareness raising has also been carried out in a number of countries and as a result the status of Baer’s Pochard and the need for its conservation is now much more widely understood. These efforts have been greatest in China, the most important country for this species, and significant new information is now available on its status, ecology and threats. However, continued targeted action remains necessary in the next few years if the status of this critically rare species is to be improved.

Background about the Sino-German Hengshui Lake Conservation and Management Project

The Sino-German Hengshui Lake Conservation and Management Project is part of the "Biodiversity and Natural Resources Programme", co-financed by the German Government through KfW, the German Development Bank. The project objective is to sustainably conserve and manage the ecosystems of Hengshui Lake National Nature Reserve. The project objective will be achieved by inter-related expected results (outputs): (i) Elaboration of participatory Protected Lake Area Management Plans (ii) Improvement of lake water management (iii) wetland biodiversity and habitat management; (iv) development of an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) component (v) Development and use of an integrated lake and protected area monitoring; (vi) Lake shorelines area development complying with international standards for social safe guarding, nature conservation, and (vii) capacity building of project partners. The German Financial Contribution is Euro 12,205,143 (Euro 12 million soft loan and Euro 205,142 grant).

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