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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Saving the Godwit — Why Migratory Species Need Borders to Disappear

DOWN TO EARTH

24 March 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED

ENVIRONMENT

GS PAPERS

GS3

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Saving the Godwit — Why Migratory Species Need Borders to Disappear

Down to Earth 24 March 2026 GS3

DTE Down to Earth | MAINS RELEVANCE: GS Paper 3 |

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Migratory species cross dozens of borders, but conservation is still national. How do we build effective transboundary conservation frameworks?"

Saving the Godwit — Why Migratory Species Need Borders to Disappear

> *Down to Earth editorial examines the CMS proposal to list 42 migratory species for enhanced protection, using the Hudsonian Godwit's 95% population crash as a case study for why national conservation frameworks fail species that traverse dozens of countries during their annual migrations.*

THE GODWIT'S IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY

The Hudsonian Godwit (Limosa haemastica) undertakes a **30,000 km annual migration** — from the Canadian Arctic to Patagonia and back — making it one of the longest-distance migrants on Earth.

The Migration Route

STAGE	LOCATION	DURATION	THREAT
Breeding	Arctic Canada/Alaska	May-July	Climate change (early thaw)
Southbound stopover	Great Plains, USA	Aug-Sep	Agricultural habitat loss
Non-stop flight	Over Atlantic Ocean	5-7 days	Exhaustion, storms
Wintering	Patagonia, Argentina	Oct-Mar	Coastal development
Northbound stopover	Amazon delta, Brazil	Apr-May	Deforestation, shrimp farms

A bird that breeds in Canada, stops in the USA, flies over the Caribbean, winters in Argentina, and refuels in Brazil is only as safe as the **weakest link in its chain**.

THE 95% COLLAPSE

The Hudsonian Godwit population has crashed by **95% in four decades**. The editorial identifies three converging causes:

1. Stopover Habitat Destruction

Migratory birds cannot fly their entire route non-stop — they need refuelling stations (wetlands, mudflats, grasslands). These stopovers are being:

- **Drained** for agriculture
- **Paved** for urbanisation
- **Polluted** by agricultural runoff
- **Converted** to shrimp farms (particularly in Brazil)

2. Climate Mismatch

- Arctic warming causes earlier snow melt → earlier insect emergence
- But the birds' migration timing is triggered by day length (photoperiod), not temperature
- By the time birds arrive at breeding grounds, **peak insect abundance has passed**
- Result: Breeding failure — chicks starve

3. Cumulative Small Harms

No single country's actions would cause a 95% decline. It is the **accumulation of small harms across 8-10 countries** that produces catastrophic results. Each country can point to minimal local impact while the species collapses at the population level.

WHY CMS MATTERS

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species is the only international treaty designed for exactly this problem:

CMS Appendix System

- **Appendix I**: Endangered species — range states must provide strict protection
- **Appendix II**: Species requiring cooperative agreements among range states
- The 42 newly proposed species would gain Appendix listing, obligating their range states to collaborate

But CMS Has Weaknesses

- **No enforcement mechanism**: CMS relies on voluntary compliance
- **Major gaps in membership**: The USA is not a CMS party (crucial for many migratory routes)

- **Funding constraints**: CMS budget is tiny (~$7 million/year) compared to the challenge
- **Data gaps**: Many species lack basic population monitoring

INDIA'S ROLE — THE CENTRAL ASIAN FLYWAY

India is one of the world's most important countries for migratory birds:

- The **Central Asian Flyway (CAF)** passes through India
- **280+ waterbird species** use Indian wetlands as stopover or wintering grounds
- India launched the **Central Asian Flyway Action Plan** at CMS COP13 in Gandhinagar (2020)
- **80+ Ramsar sites** provide critical habitat

India's Success Stories

- **Amur Falcon conservation** in Nagaland — from mass hunting to community-led protection
- **Flamingo City** in Mumbai — urban wetland hosting 1 lakh+ flamingos
- **Chilika Lake** restoration — bird populations recovered after invasive species removal

India's Challenges

- Wetland loss continues — India lost **30% of natural wetlands** in 50 years
- Coastal development threatens mudflat habitats
- Wind energy turbines in flyway corridors cause bird strikes
- Pesticide use poisons insects that migratory birds depend on

THE EDITORIAL'S PRESCRIPTION

1. **Flyway-level governance**: Conservation plans must cover entire migration routes, not individual countries
2. **Stopover site networks**: Identify and protect critical refuelling sites through international agreement
3. **Climate-adaptive management**: Adjust conservation actions based on changing climate patterns
4. **USA must join CMS**: The largest flyway country's absence undermines the convention
5. **India should lead CAF implementation**: Use COP13 momentum to create a binding flyway agreement

UPSC RELEVANCE

CMS/Bonn Convention, Appendix I vs II, Central Asian Flyway, Ramsar sites, Amur Falcon, BNHS

MAINS GS-III:

Transboundary environmental governance, biodiversity conservation, wetland management, international environmental agreements

INTERVIEW:

Why do migratory species conservation efforts fail despite international treaties?

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

HUDSONIAN GODWIT:

Migration: ~30,000 km/year

Decline: 95% in 4 decades

IUCN: Near Threatened

Route: Arctic → Great Plains → Atlantic → Patagonia

CMS/BONN CONVENTION:

Adopted: 1979, Bonn; In force: 1983

Parties: 133 (India: 1982)

COP13: Gandhinagar (2020)

Budget: ~$7 million/year

USA: NOT a party

CENTRAL ASIAN FLYWAY:

Countries: 30

Waterbird species: 280+

Action Plan: Launched COP13, 2020, Gandhinagar

Key Indian wetlands: Chilika, Wular, Harike, Point Calimere

INDIA'S MIGRATORY SPECIES:

Amur Falcon: Nagaland congregation (world's largest)

Bar-headed Goose: Flies over Himalayas

Siberian Crane: Last seen at Keoladeo NP in 2002

Greater Flamingo: Winters at Mumbai, Kutch

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Ramsar sites in India: 80+ (as of 2025)

India lost 30% natural wetlands in 50 years

Bar-tailed Godwit: Longest non-stop flight record (13,560 km)

BirdLife International: Global bird conservation body

> BNHS: Bombay Natural History Society (est. 1883)

Sources: Down to Earth , CMS

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