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Shekha Jheel — India's 99th Ramsar Site and the Expanding Wetland Conservation Network

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Shekha Jheel — India's 99th Ramsar Site and the Expanding Wetland Conservation Network

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WHY IN NEWS

Shekha Jheel Bird Sanctuary in **Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh** has been designated as a **Ramsar site** — making it **India's 99th Ramsar wetland**. The freshwater monsoonal wetland is critical habitat for resident and migratory birds and represents India's continued commitment to wetland conservation under international frameworks.

THE RAMSAR CONVENTION — BASICS

What Is the Ramsar Convention?

The **Convention on Wetlands of International Importance** (commonly called the Ramsar Convention) is an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It was signed in **Ramsar, Iran, in 1971** and entered into force in **1975**.

FEATURE	DETAIL
Full name	Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat
Signed	February 2, 1971 (Ramsar, Iran)
In force	December 21, 1975
Secretariat	Gland, Switzerland
World Wetlands Day	February 2 (anniversary of Ramsar signing)
Contracting parties	172 countries
Total Ramsar sites globally	2,400+

What Qualifies as a Ramsar Site?

A wetland qualifies if it meets **any one** of the nine Ramsar criteria, including:

- Supports rare, vulnerable, or endangered species

- Regularly supports 20,000+ waterbirds
- Regularly supports 1%+ of the population of a waterbird species
- Provides fish spawning grounds or nursery habitat

INDIA'S RAMSAR JOURNEY

YEAR	MILESTONE
1971	Ramsar Convention signed
1982	India joined Ramsar as a contracting party
1981	First Indian Ramsar site: Chilika Lake (Odisha) + Keoladeo Ghana (Rajasthan)
2022	India added 19 new Ramsar sites in a single year (highest in one year)
2026	Shekha Jheel designated as India's 99th Ramsar site

India's Status:

- Total Ramsar sites: **99**
- Total Ramsar area: **~13.26 lakh hectares**
- Countries with most Ramsar sites: UK (175+), Mexico (~142), Spain (~76), India (99)

States with Most Ramsar Sites

STATE	NUMBER OF RAMSAR SITES
Tamil Nadu	20 (most in any state)
Uttar Pradesh	12
Jammu & Kashmir	9
Gujarat	7
Odisha	6

SHEKHA JHEEL BIRD SANCTUARY

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Location	Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh
Type	Freshwater monsoonal wetland
Ecological significance	Habitat for migratory and resident waterbirds
Status	State-designated bird sanctuary
Wetland type	Seasonal freshwater lake (Ramsar type: inland surface water)

Significance of Shekha Jheel:

- Located in the Gangetic Plain — a critical flyway for Central Asian migratory birds
- Supports a variety of waterfowl including ducks, cranes, storks, and waders during winter months
- Provides water recharge, flood regulation, and supports local agricultural communities

WETLANDS — WHY THEY MATTER (UPSC CONTEXT)

Ecosystem Services of Wetlands

SERVICE	FUNCTION
Carbon sink	Peatlands store 30% of Earth's soil carbon despite covering only 3% of land
Flood regulation	Absorb excess water during monsoon; reduce downstream flooding
Water purification	Filter pollutants, sediments, and nutrients
Biodiversity	Support 40% of world's species despite covering <1% of land
Climate regulation	Cooling effect; regulate local microclimates
Livelihood	Support fisheries, agriculture, and tourism

India's Wetland Policy Framework

INSTRUMENT	DETAIL
Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules 2017	Replaced 2010 rules; prohibits reclamation, pollution, and construction in notified wetlands
National Wetland Conservation Programme (NWCP)	MoEFCC centrally-sponsored scheme for identified wetlands
National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Eco-systems (NPCA)	Merged NWCP and NLCP; conservation of lakes and wetlands
Ramsar sites designation	Provides international recognition; no additional legal protection under Indian law

Threats to Indian Wetlands

- ① **Encroachment and reclamation** — for agriculture and real estate
- ② **Pollution** — industrial, agricultural runoff, and sewage discharge
- ③ **Invasive species** — *Eichhornia crassipes* (water hyacinth) choking water bodies
- ④ **Climate change** — altered rainfall patterns, increased evaporation
- ⑤ **Siltation** — from upstream deforestation and poor land use

KEY RAMSAR SITES TO REMEMBER FOR UPSC

SITE	STATE	SIGNIFICANCE
Chilika Lake	Odisha	Largest coastal lagoon in Asia; Irrawaddy dolphins
Keoladeo Ghana	Rajasthan	Migratory birds; UNESCO World Heritage Site
Wular Lake	J&K	Largest freshwater lake in India
Loktak Lake	Manipur	Largest freshwater lake in NE India; floating phumdis
Sundarbans	West Bengal	World's largest mangrove; Royal Bengal Tiger
Kolleru Lake	Andhra Pradesh	Between Krishna and Godavari rivers
Deepor Beel	Assam	Elephant habitat; near Guwahati
Bhitarkanika	Odisha	Saltwater crocodiles; mangroves
Nalsarovar	Gujarat	Important bird sanctuary
Point Calimere	Tamil Nadu	Flamingo habitat

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims Angle

- India's 99th Ramsar site: Shekha Jheel, Aligarh, UP
- First Ramsar sites in India: Chilika Lake + Keoladeo Ghana (1981)
- Ramsar Convention: 1971, Ramsar (Iran); in force 1975
- Ramsar Secretariat: Gland, Switzerland
- World Wetlands Day: February 2
- Tamil Nadu has the highest number of Ramsar sites among Indian states (20); UP has 12

Mains Angle

- Wetlands' role in climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Conflict between wetland conservation and development pressure
- Effectiveness of Ramsar designation in the absence of additional legal protection

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
India's 99th Ramsar site	Shekha Jheel, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh
First Indian Ramsar sites	Chilika Lake (Odisha) + Keoladeo Ghana (Rajasthan) — 1981
Ramsar signed	1971, Ramsar, Iran
Ramsar in force	1975
Ramsar Secretariat	Gland, Switzerland
World Wetlands Day	February 2
India's Ramsar area	~13.26 lakh hectares
India's total Ramsar sites	99
Most Ramsar sites (state)	Tamil Nadu (20); UP has 12
Wetlands cover globally	~6% of Earth's surface

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