TWELFTH MEETING OF PARTNERS OF THE EAST ASIAN – AUSTRALASIAN FLYWAY PARTNERSHIP
Cebu, Philippines, 8-14 November 2025

Decision 11

Strengthening the Functioning and Operations of EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces

Submitted by Technical Sub-Committee

Summary

The Working Groups and Task Forces are a fundamental part of the EAAFP and are responsible for implementation of actions for groups of birds, single species or thematic issues. The Working Groups and Task Forces have been established by the Partnership and have Terms of Reference developed against guidance that has not been updated since MOP2 and MOP5 respectively. Some of the TORs have been developed prior to the EAAFP Strategic Plan 2019-2028 and therefore do not reference this and fully address current priorities. The TSc and the Secretariat, in their work in reviewing the current status and operations of EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces, have identified a range of issues that need to be addressed to strengthen the operation and actions of the Working Groups and Task Forces and to support their work. The Management Committee has reviewed and endorsed the proposed draft decision at Annex 1 for consideration at MOP12. The intent is to prioritise continued consultation with Working Groups and Task Forces to review, update, and finalise their TORs for adoption at MOP13.

This draft decision also includes, for Partners' approval, the draft Terms of Reference and the 2025–2027 work plan for the Masked Finfoot Task Force, prepared by BirdLife International as requested by MOP11 Decision 12.

Partners are invited to review and adopt the Draft Decision provided in Annex 1.

Background

1. At the time of the establishment of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP), three Working Groups (Shorebirds, Cranes and Anatidae) were brought forward from the Asia – Pacific Migratory Conservation Strategy to the EAAF Partnership.

2. Thereafter, through guidelines of Terms of Reference (TORs) adopted in MOP2 and MOP5 a total of eight Working Groups (WGs) and 11 Task Forces (TFs) have been established by the Partnership.

3. The Working Groups and Task Forces have operated on a voluntary basis and have been important mechanisms to engage with subject experts, enthusiasts, NGOs and government staff from across the EAAF and to undertake a range of research, conservation, awareness raising work, capacity building activities, organisation of meetings and workshops and related activities, all of which have helped to enhance the value of the Partnership.

4. The work of the Working Groups and Task Forces has been organised by the groups themselves and have been supported by the Secretariat and Technical Sub-committee (TSc).

5. As the Working Groups and Task Forces have been established over time and their TORs were adopted prior to adoption of the Partnership's Strategic Plan 2019-2028 and the establishment of the TSc, the TORs have not been updated to include reference to and reflect current priorities of the Partnership and other administrative changes of the Partnership, such as the relationship to the TSc.

6. The EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces, Technical Sub-committee and the Secretariat have worked together to undertaken to review the current status and operations of Working Groups and Task Forces in 2024-2025 (TSc 2023-2025 Work Plan High priority Task G1). The results of this review (*refer to Doc.8 Report of the Technical Sub-committee*) were discussed at a first joint TSc/WG/TF meeting, in Beijing in October 2024.

7. Based on the review, the TSc has recognised that there is a need to review the current TORs of Working Groups and Task Forces to ensure that they are best suited for the current priorities and *modus operandi* of the Partnership.

Decision:

- That Partners approve the Draft Decision to strengthen the functioning and operations of Working Groups and Task Forces including through reviewing and updating of their Terms of Reference (TORs), and approve the Terms of Reference and work plan for the Masked Finfoot Task Force.

Annex 1

Decision 11

Strengthening the Functioning and Operations of EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces

Submitted by the Technical Sub-Committee

Recognising the importance to the implementation of the EAAFP of networks of waterbird and wetland experts;

Also recognising that since its establishment the EAAFP has, through MOP decisions, established eight Working Groups (WGs) and 11 Task Forces (TFs), with guidelines of Terms of Reference (TORs) adopted by MOP 2 (Working Groups) and MOP5 (Task Forces) to support and enhance the different aspects of advice and implementation of priorities of the Partnership, but *Noting* that these TORs were adopted prior to the adoption of the Partnership's Strategic Plan 2019-2028 and so may not reflect the current priorities of the Partnership;

Thanking the Technical Sub-committee (TSc) and the Secretariat for their work in reviewing the current status and operations of EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces (TSc 2023-2025 Work Plan High Priority Task G1) provided in Document 8 Appendix 4); and a*lso thanking* Working Groups and Task Forces for providing information in 2024 on their current structure and operations;

Recognising that this review has identified a number of gaps and inconsistencies in the documentation and operations of Working Groups and Task Forces, including *inter alia* up-to-date Terms of Reference (ToRs), lists of WG/TF members, and work plans/action plans;

Aware that some MOP-approved EAAFP Working Groups and Task Forces, such as the Amur-Heilong Basin TF, are currently inactive; and that some others are now under development or re-development (Avian Diseases WG, Monitoring Waterbirds & Sites TF and Masked Finfoot TF);

Recalling MOP11 Decision 12 which requested BirdLife International to coordinate work to develop and implement work on the Masked Finfoot, and to consider developing a proposal for the formation of a Masked Finfoot Task Force and prioritised workplan for consideration at MOP12; and

Aware that MOP12 Draft Decision 8 proposes amendments to the guidelines for establishing Single Species Task Forces and developing Single Species Action Plans;

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of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership

1. *Request*s the Secretariat to disseminate widely to Partners and potential donors the 2024 overview of the WGs & TFs operations to promote greater awareness of the role and functions of WG/TFs;

2. *Requests* the leads of Working Groups and Task Forces, with the support and advice of the Secretariat and the Technical Advisory Group, to review, and as necessary to update, their Terms of Reference (TORs) and work plans;

3. *Further requests* the leads of Working Groups and Task Forces to report on the outcomes of these reviews and to submit updated TORs and work plans for consideration by Partners at MOP13;

4. *Thanks* BirdLife International for preparing the draft Terms of Reference and work plan for the Masked Finfoot Task Force, provided as Appendices 1 and 2 to this Decision; and

5. *Approves* the establishment of the Masked Finfoot Task Force, with its Terms of Reference and Work Plan as in Appendices 1 and 2.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference for the Masked Finfoot Task Force

Background

The 11th Meeting of Partners of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership was made aware of the Critically Endangered status of the Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personatus* (estimated global population 160-460) and the urgent need for conservation research and management throughout its range in South and South-East Asia. Once widespread from the Sundarbans in Bangladesh eastward through mainland Southeast Asia to the Thai-Malay Peninsula, the Masked Finfoot is now mostly confined to just two areas: the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, where systematic surveys have been conducted, and the forested wetlands of northern Cambodia. The EAAFP Strategic Plan 2019-2028 under objective 5 recognises the need to develop flyway-wide approaches for priority species and KRA 5.3 calls for the development and implementation of regional action plans. Decision 12 at MOP11 acknowledged that conservation management activities are urgently required for the species and requested BirdLife International to develop a proposal for the formation of a Masked Finfoot Task Force and prioritized workplan for consideration at MOP12.

Goal

To restore the Masked Finfoot to a favourable conservation status and down-list it from CR to EN or lower threat category on the IUCN Red List of threatened species.

Role

The role of the EAAFP Masked Finfoot Task Force is to:

1. Coordinate and catalyse the development and implementation of the International Single Species Action Plan (SSAP) for the conservation of Masked Finfoot across all range states in Asia;
2. Stimulate and support range states in South and South-East Asia in the implementation of the SSAP; and
3. Monitor and report on the implementation and the effectiveness of the ISSAP.

Remit

The EAAFP Masked Finfoot Task Force will:

1. Develop an International Single Species Action Plan for the Masked Finfoot, in accordance with the EAAFP Action Planning Guidelines (*adopted at the 5th Meeting of Partners, Siem Reap, December 2010: agenda 3.5.1*). The plan will be produced under the framework and branding of the EAAFP depending on the available of resources;
2. Set priorities actions in consultation with stakeholders especially range states, implement them and coordinate efforts and associated activities in each range state;
3. Work with stakeholders to raise funds for development and implementation of the action plan;

4. Support range states in implementing SSAP;
5. Ensure the Task Force attempts to include the governmental and expert members from all key Range States and non-government organisation partners;
6. Facilitate regular monitoring of species population size and trends and evaluate the SSAP's effectiveness;
7. Stimulate and support scientific research to guide conservation actions for the species' recovery;
8. Promote the protection of critical sites by assisting range states and non-government partners to identity and designate of new Flyway Network Sites or protected areas, and improve the management of existing protected areas important for the species
9. Facilitate communication and exchange of scientific, technical, and legal information with specialists and stakeholders;
10. Provide information to assist in determining the IUCN Red List status and population trends and distribution of the species;
11. Regularly report on the implementation of the SSAP to the EAAFP Meetings of the Partners;

Membership

The lead organization for the EAAFP Masked Finfoot Task Force is BirdLife International. The proposed Chairperson and Coordinator are Dr Sayam U. Chowdhury (University of Cambridge), and Dr Ding Li Yong (BirdLife International) respectively. National Focal Points will be appointed from the Task Force members.

Task Force members will include:

1. EAAFP Governmental Partners from key range states including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.
2. Representatives of additional key range states such as Lao PDR.
3. National experts and conservation organisations from range states.
4. Other international experts (not necessarily from the EAA Flyway countries).

Meetings

The EAAFP Masked Finfoot Task Force will conduct face-to-face meetings at least once every three years. In between these meetings, business will be managed electronically through an appropriate Task Force website and list server.

Reporting

At each EAAFP MOP, the Task Force Coordinator will present a report on the development and implementation of the Masked Finfoot International Single Species Action Plan, summarizing progress, lessons learned, challenges, and any adjustments needed.

Financing

Funding for the operations of the EAAFP Masked Finfoot Task Force will be primarily sought primarily by the Lead Organisation, the Task Force members and the organizations they represent.

Appendix 2

Masked Finfoot Task Force Work Plan 2025–2027

Background

The Masked Finfoot (*Heliopais personatus*) is among Asia's most poorly known waterbirds, with both long-distance migratory and sedentary populations across tropical Asia. The species is now listed as Critically Endangered due to an extremely small and rapidly declining population, driven by the ongoing loss and degradation of wetlands – particularly riverine lowland forest in tropical Asia (Chowdhury et al. 2020). The species was uplisted to Critically Endangered in 2022 on the IUCN Red List. Finfoots represent a small, unique family of pantropical waterbirds (Heliornithidae), with *H. personatus* being the only representative in Asia.

Once widespread from the Sundarbans in Bangladesh eastward through mainland Southeast Asia and the Thai-Malay Peninsula, the Masked Finfoot is now mostly confined to just two areas: the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, where systematic surveys have been conducted, and the forested wetlands of northern Cambodia. By contrast, the species has become exceedingly rare in Thailand and Malaysia – countries where it was once more frequently observed as a migrant (in the non-breeding season), indicating a sharp and recent population collapse. In Myanmar, there has been no records for several years, in large part due to political instability preventing the key wetland sites in Kachin State from being surveyed. In Vietnam and Indonesia, its status appears even more dire, with no confirmed records in over a decade, where targeted field surveys are required to confirm its presence or absence.

Few studies have addressed the ecological requirements of the species, but available evidence indicates that it typically inhabits little-disturbed, lowland forested waterways such as rivers, oxbow lakes, ponds, and mangrove-lined tidal creeks (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, BirdLife International 2001, Chowdhury *et al.* 2017). Field data suggest seasonal dispersive movements; for example, records in Cambodia's Tonle Sap region peak during the wet season and decline thereafter, pointing to possible wet-season breeding migrations.

As one of the region's rarest waterbirds, the conservation needs of the Masked Finfoot are urgent. The species also serves as a charismatic flagship for Southeast Asia's disappearing freshwater wetlands and a sensitive indicator of ecosystem degradation. If successfully conserved, efforts aimed at safeguarding the Masked Finfoot will also support the livelihoods of rural communities that depend on these same forested wetlands for fishing, water, and flood protection.

At the 11th Meeting of Partners (MOP) of the East Asian–Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP), the dire status of the Masked Finfoot was highlighted to Partners. Decision 12 of MOP11 was successfully adopted then and called for immediate and concerted conservation and research actions and requested BirdLife International to develop a proposal for a Masked Finfoot Task Force and prioritised workplan, for consideration at MOP12.

Problem statement

As a species largely reliant on undisturbed, lowland freshwater systems including slow-flowing forest creeks and oxbow lakes on the plains and lowlands – the Masked Finfoot is highly vulnerable to a suite of

anthropogenic threats. Throughout tropical Asia, such habitats are increasingly fragmented or degraded by human activities including intensive fishing, sand mining, river transport, and pollution. In both Bangladesh and Southeast Asia, the indiscriminate use of fishing gear such as monofilament gillnets has led to accidental (bycatch) mortality.

Concurrently, deforestation along major riverine corridors for agriculture and settlement continues unabated. In several range states, river damming (e.g. along the tributaries of the Mekong, Xe Pian River, Lao PDR) alters natural hydrology, possibly disrupting seasonal water levels critical for feeding and breeding. The use of poisons and nets in riparian fishing also threatens the species directly. Given its tight dependence on undisturbed riparian ecosystems, the Masked Finfoot serves as both a flagship and a bioindicator species for these rapidly collapsing and unsustainably used riverine landscapes across Southeast Asia.

Current estimates suggest that no more than 300 mature individuals survive across the species' entire range and possibly fewer. Following its initial uplisting to Endangered in 2009, the species was uplisted again in 2022 to Critically Endangered, primarily due to a collapse of breeding populations, especially in Myanmar, Malaysia, and Thailand, and ongoing habitat degradation.

Despite these trends, the Masked Finfoot has received little targeted conservation investment. This contrasts starkly with other large waterbird species in Asia, such as the Sarus Crane (*Antigone antigone*), White-winged Duck (*Asarcornis scutulata*), and Giant and White-shouldered Ibises, which have benefitted from national action plans, on-site conservation projects and considerable international funding.

The EDGE of Existence Programme ranks the Masked Finfoot among its top 50 most evolutionarily distinct and globally endangered species. Despite this, conservation efforts remain minimal.

Goal

The goal is to restore the Masked Finfoot to a favourable conservation status by downlisting it from Critically Endangered (CR) to Endangered (EN) or lower, on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Objectives

Objective (1): *Reduce direct threats to the species and its nesting habitats at priority sites through local engagement and improved habitat management to prevent further declines*

Objective (2): *Undertake targeted field surveys across range states to clarify the current breeding and non-breeding distribution, and population status of the species*

Objective (3): *Strengthen international coordination and cooperation to conserve the Masked Finfoot including capacity building for ecological research and long-term monitoring to inform and implement evidence-based conservation*

Objective (4): *Build public, political and institutional support for the conservation of the Masked Finfoot and the protection of its wetland ecosystems*

Objective (5): *Assess the feasibility and potential role of ex-situ conservation or captive breeding as a safeguard for the species*

Masked Finfoot Conservation Workplan 2025–2027:

CHALLENGES	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS	PROPOSED ACTIVITY	TIME FRAME	AGENCIES / ORGANISATIONS
Objective 1: Reduce direct threats to the species and its nesting habitats at priority sites through local engagement and improved habitat management to prevent further declines				
Ongoing disturbance and encroachment at breeding sites	- Strengthen legal protection and patrolling at key breeding sites - Improve on-ground presence and monitoring during breeding season	- Demarcate and regulate key breeding areas within existing protected areas - Implement nest protection and patrolling initiatives during June-September breeding season - Engage local leaders in patrol and enforcement	2025–2027	National Protected Area Authorities, Forest Departments, IUCN SSC, BirdLife Partners, Local NGOs, Community Committees, Local Government
Egg poaching and chick collection in local communities	- Engage communities and local forest department staff in nest monitoring - Provide incentives for community rangers	- Establish community guardian programs at key sites - Strengthen local forest department's capacity to patrol nesting locations - Launch local stewardship campaigns in nearby villages	2025–2027	BirdLife Partners, Local NGOs, Village Conservation Committees, Education & Outreach Teams
Fishing gear entanglement	- Promote wildlife-safe fishing practices - Remove abandoned fishing gear from areas where Masked Finfoots are present	- Introduce and demonstrate alternative fishing gear - Provide training workshops for local fishers to teach them how to use the alternative gear - Conduct clean-up sessions to remove abandoned fishing gear or encourage local communities to remove any abandoned fishing gear they see - Continue to encourage fishermen to hand over entangled Masked Finfoots they find	2025–2027	Fisher Associations, Local NGOs, BirdLife Partners, Conservation Agencies
Nest disturbance by humans	- Implement seasonal access restrictions in their breeding range	- Enforce no-go buffer zones during nesting period	2025–2027	Protected Area Staff, Community Guards
Degradation of riparian vegetation at breeding sites	- Restore riverbanks and mangrove habitats - Prevent further vegetation clearance	- Implement small-scale riparian reforestation pilot programs - Promote natural regeneration with community participation	2025–2030	Forestry Departments, Local NGOs, BirdLife Partners
Objective 2: Undertake targeted field surveys across range states to clarify the current breeding and non-breeding distribution, and population status of the species				

CHALLENGES	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS	PROPOSED ACTIVITY	TIME FRAME	AGENCIES / ORGANISATIONS
Lack of updated data on population distribution	- Conduct systematic field surveys during peak activity seasons in countries where Masked Finfoots were regularly spotted in - Use local ecological knowledge to prioritise survey locations	- Organize field surveys using cutting edge methods such as eDNA in priority wetland areas - Coordinate regional surveys - Interview local communities and fishers - Collaborate with birdwatching tours in Bangladesh and Cambodia to collect incidental data on sightings of Masked Finfoots - Manage and compile sightings in a central database	2025–2027	National Research Institutions, Universities, BirdLife Partners, Local NGOs, Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), birding tour companies
Inconsistent survey protocols	- Develop and standardize monitoring methods based on habitat type	- Disseminate standardised survey protocols across range states	2025	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), IUCN SSC Waterbird Group, National Wildlife Agencies, Universities
Objective 3: Strengthen international coordination and cooperation to conserve the Masked Finfoot including capacity building for ecological research and long-term monitoring to inform and implement evidence-based conservation				
Lack of a unified, range-wide conservation strategy	- Form a Task Force - Develop an international single-species action plan under the EAAFP	- Coordinate consultations with stakeholders and governments across range states to gain political support - Convene and form a Masked Finfoot Task Force - Draft and publish a Masked Finfoot Conservation Action Plan under the EAAFP framework	2025–2027	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), EAAFP Secretariat, BirdLife International, IUCN SSC, Government Agencies
Poor understanding of the species' breeding ecology, habitat use, and indirect threats	- Conduct field research on species ecology and broader landscape-level threats	- Initiate ecological field studies focused on breeding behaviour, habitat use, diet, and nesting success - Investigate indirect or landscape-level threats (e.g., hydrological changes, pollution, disturbance from tourism)	2025–2027	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), University research teams, BirdLife Partners, IUCN SSC, National Wildlife Research Institution
Limited capacity for species tracking	- Assess and introduce scalable tracking technologies	- Pilot GPS and telemetry studies - Build research capacity for migration ecology studies for research stakeholders - Explore the option of ringing/placing trackers on Masked Finfoots to track their movements	2025–2027	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), Research Institutions, Technical Experts, Wildlife NGOs
Objective 4: Build public, political, and institutional support for the conservation of the Masked Finfoot and the protection of its wetland ecosystems				

CHALLENGES	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS	PROPOSED ACTIVITY	TIME FRAME	AGENCIES / ORGANISATIONS
Low awareness of species status	- Develop and distribute outreach materials	- Design innovative campaign materials (e.g. bucket for fishermen in the Sundarbans), and short videos in regional languages - Make Masked Finfoot a symbol of Sundarbans/wetlands/deterioration of wetland habitats to increase awareness of their existence and plight - Highlight the species in presentations (e.g. presentations in schools) or in social media outreach materials to increase knowledge of the species	2025–2027	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), BirdLife Partners, Communications NGOs, Conservation Educators
Lack of policy integration	- Mainstream species conservation into wetland and biodiversity policies	- Advocate inclusion in Ramsar sites, national biodiversity plans	2025–2028	Policy Advocates, Environment Ministries, EAAFP Secretariat
Insufficient donor interest	- Develop long-term fundraising strategy	- Identify and approach regional and global donors	2025–2027	BirdLife International, BirdLife Partners, Donor Liaisons, International NGOs
Objective 5: Assess the feasibility and potential role of ex-situ conservation or captive breeding as a safeguard for the species				
No prior ex-situ experience with the species; unknown breeding biology in captivity	- Conduct feasibility assessment with avian conservation breeding specialists	- Organise expert workshops to evaluate captive breeding potential - Review husbandry requirements and breeding records of closely related species - Develop a contingency ex-situ conservation strategy if viable	2025–2027	Masked Finfoot Task Force (EAAFP), BirdLife International, Avian Captive Breeding Specialist Groups, Regional Zoos

Masked Finfoot female | Sundarbans, Bangladesh | January 2025