



# Ramsar Sites Information Service

## Annotated List of Wetlands of International Importance

# Iraq

4 Ramsar Site(s) covering 537,900 ha

### Central Marshes

Site number: 2,241 | Country: Iraq | Administrative region: Shared between three Governorates - Maysan, Thi-Qar and Basrah

Area: 219,700 ha | Coordinates: 31°10'34"N 46°59'E | Designation dates: 07-04-2014

[View Site details in RSIS](#)

The Central Marshes are one of the three areas (along with Hammar Marsh, Ramsar Site no. 2242, and Hawizeh Marsh, Site no. 1718) that make up the once extensive and biodiverse Mesopotamian marshlands in southern Iraq. All three have now been designated as Ramsar Sites and so are under international conservation management. The Site is a staging and wintering area for a number of globally threatened species such as the endangered Basra reed warbler (*Acrocephalus griseldis*) and the vulnerable greater spotted eagle (*Aquila clanga*) that migrate between their breeding grounds in western Siberia and their winter quarters in eastern and southern Africa. Other globally threatened species include the endangered Euphrates soft-shelled turtle (*Rafetus euphraticus*) and the vulnerable smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*). The Site provides a range of important regulating services such as flood control, water storage and purification, and climate regulation. The marshlands, before their drainage in the 1990s, were populated by Marsh Arabs who built floating islands and reed houses, developing entire villages linked by networks of main and minor channels. Thus, the marshes are also of extraordinary historical and cultural values. However, these services were either disrupted or degraded due to the extensive draining that took place in the 1990s due to war and land reclamation. In the 2000s, re-flooding and restoration projects brought back water and some of the biodiversity.

### Hammar Marsh

Site number: 2,242 | Country: Iraq | Administrative region: Al-Nasyriah Province

Area: 180,000 ha | Coordinates: 30°48'22"N 47°01'01"E | Designation dates: 07-04-2014

[View Site details in RSIS](#)

Hammar Marsh is one of the three marshes (along with Central Marshes, Ramsar Site no. 2241, and Hawizeh Marsh, Site no. 1718) that make up the once extensive and biodiverse Mesopotamian marshlands in southern Iraq. All three have now been designated as Ramsar Sites and so are under international conservation management. Historically, Hammar Marsh extended up to 4,500 square kilometres during periods of seasonal floods. However, draining in the early 1990s and the building of several roads, canals and embankments dried and altered the natural environment. In the 2000s, re-flooding and restoration projects brought back water and some of the biodiversity. The Site provides regionally important regulating services such as flood control, water storage and purification, and climate regulation. It supports globally threatened species such as the endangered Basra reed warbler (*Acrocephalus griseldis*) and the marbled duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*). It also hosts the globally vulnerable Mesopotamichthys sharpeyi and the Euphrates softshell turtle (*Rafetus euphraticus*). The dominant fish is Redbelly tilapia (*Tilapia zillii*), an invasive non-native species. The area is of historical and cultural value with the local Marsh Arab community relying on the marsh environment and resources for the construction of their unique floating buildings, as well as their traditional way of living. The main economic activities are agriculture, hunting and fishing. In recent decades, oil exploration has begun around the marshlands.

## Hawizeh Marsh

Site number: 1,718 | Country: Iraq | Administrative region: Basra

Area: 137,700 ha | Coordinates: 31°25'N 47°37'59"E | Designation dates: 17-10-2007

[View Site details in RSIS](#)

Hawizeh Marsh (Haur Al-Hawizeh). 17/10/07; Basra, Amara; 137,700 ha; 31°25'29N 47°38'44E. A transboundary wetland, part of the Mesopotamian marshlands complex centered at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the marshes are ca.75-80% located in Iraq with the remaining area extending into the Islamic Republic of Iran. The only significant area to have survived drainage in the 1990s and the most intact part of the original Mesopotamian system, the site is a biodiversity reservoir of priority importance for conservation, home to threatened species such as the endangered Basrah Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*, the endangered Euphrates Softshell Turtle *Rafetus euphraticus* and the vulnerable Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*. The site is also important for avifauna, with over 40 summer breeding species and over 90 wintering species, and is a recovery and feeding area for passage migrants on their way between Western Siberia/Central Asia and eastern and southern Africa. The effects of extensive drainage in the 1990s and warfare destruction, as well as dam-building activities upstream in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, are seen as the chief potential threats to the site. Following the re-flooding efforts from 2003 to 2008, the water levels and the related marsh ecosystems and wildlife had improved. However, two years of drought (2008 and 2009) and the completion of a dike along the Iran-Iraq border have halted this improvement. Currently the area of the marshes is only 50% of their extent in 2008, and the site was placed on the Montreux Record in April 2010. New oil developments planned for the near future in surrounding areas also threaten to affect the natural environment and hamper the restoration of the marshes. Ramsar site no. 1718. Most recent RIS information: 2012

## Sawa Lake

Site number: 2,240 | Country: Iraq | Administrative region: Muthanna Governorate

Area: 500 ha | Coordinates: 31°18'46"N 45°00'22"E | Designation dates: 03-03-2014

[View Site details in RSIS](#)

Sawa Lake is a permanent lake located in the western field of the Mesopotamian Plains, near the border with the Western Desert. The lake is unique for the biogeographic region because it is a closed water body in an area of sabkha (salt flat) with no inlet or outlet. It is normally only fed by groundwater that originates from the higher western desert areas, though it can also be temporarily fed by local wadis when heavy rain in the desert area causes flash floods. The lake is formed over limestone rock and is isolated by gypsum barriers surrounding the lake; its water chemistry is unique. The Site is home to several globally vulnerable species, namely eastern imperial eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) and marbled duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*). As Sawa Lake is the only water body nearby Samawa City it is a popular picnic and excursion area. However, these recreational activities threaten to lead to accumulation of solid waste, and disturb the wildlife including the nesting and migrating birds because of the poor vegetation cover in the surrounding zones.