

## Samara Wetlands (IQ052)

Salah Ad-Din - 34.1925°N 43.852222°E

KBA Criteria: **V and Ia**

IBA Criteria: **A2**

Area: **4470 ha** - Altitude: **68-74 m**  
 Ecoregion: **Arabian Desert and East  
 Sahero-Arabian Xeric Shrublands  
 (PA1303)**  
 Status: **Unprotected**



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**Site Description:** Samara Wetlands were listed originally as an Important Bird Area (IBA008) by Evans (1994). They are formed by the Samara Barrage, which was built in 1955 on the Tigris River, near the town of Al-Dure north of Samara City. The barrage regulates the water flow to Tharthar Lake (IQ051) through the Samara (Tharthar) Canal, which extends from Al-Dhloe'a town to the southeast edge of Tharthar Lake. The main purpose of the barrage was to divert floodwaters to Tharthar but it also provides irrigation water and has a hydro-electric station. Sedimentation build up behind the barrage has helped to create the habitat of dense reed beds and submerged aquatic vegetation that are the main features of the site. This in turn attracts a significant number of migratory waterfowl and raptors.

No botanical survey was conducted here but there are beds of reeds, reedmace and carex with some terrestrial species such as Tamarix, Poplar and Eucalyptus bordering the marsh. Part of the site extends northwest along the main highway towards Tikrit, and is characterized by the same wetland habitat as the eastern side. Further to the west it transitions to arid steppe, covered with scattered xerophytic vegetation and a few fields of wheat, corn, and date palms. The side closer to Tikrit features dense reed beds that continue along the riverbank, in addition to scattered shrubs and thickets. Archeological ruins from the Abbasid dynasty have been found close by, including Malewat, the ancient Samara mosque, and the Al-Ashiq palace to the west.

Key Biodiversity Area Criteria	Notes	
<b>V. Vulnerability Criteria: Presence of Critically Endangered and Endangered species – presence of a single individual or Vulnerable species– 30 individuals or 10 pairs.</b>		
<i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>	Euphrates Softshell Turtle was observed in Samarra Wetlands	
<b>Ia. Irreplaceability Sub-criterion: Restricted-range species based on global range</b>		
<i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>	See above	
<b>Important Bird Area Criteria</b>	<b>Observations made 2009-2010</b>	
<b>A2. Restricted-range species</b>	<b>Breeding</b>	<b>Wintering/ Passage</b>
Iraq Babbler <i>Turdoides altirostris</i> (Resident)	25 pairs (2009)	3 (count 2010)

**Additional Important Bird Observations:** In total, 70 bird species were seen. Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* (Vulnerable), Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* (Near Threatened), and European Roller *Coracias garrulus* (Near Threatened) were observed in the breeding season and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* (Near Threatened) on passage. The site also held four breeding Sahara-Sindian Desert biome-restricted species but these did not trigger inclusion under A3 criterion.

**Other Important Fauna:** One Otter specimen was killed near the barrage by a farmer and delivered to the Iraqi Natural History Museum in Baghdad. It was examined and identified as Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* (Near Threatened) by the author (Al-Sheikhly, 2012; Al-Sheikhly & Nader, 2013).

**Fish:** Data were collected in winter of 2009 using a fisheries frame survey method but at the time of the team visit fishing was officially not allowed for security reasons. However, that

winter one person was seen using an electro-fishing device and he showed the survey team his catch of five species in the following catch ratios: *Carassius auratus* (25%), *Cyprinus carpio* (10%, Vulnerable), *Liza abu* (50%), *Mesopotamichthys sharpeyi* (5%, Vulnerable), and *Silurus triostegus* (10%). Though not in his catch, the fishermen indicated that two others (*Luciobarbus esocinus* and *L. xanthopterus*, both Vulnerable species) were also present at the site.

**Conservation Issues:** This site is under strict military supervision due to the presence of the barrage. Political and military activities in this region may have led to its environmental preservation due to reduced civilian uses of the wetlands, particularly with regard to bird populations. However, significant environmental impacts were observed. Although hunting and fishing are prohibited around the dam, the presence of electro-fishing equipment in the winter of 2009 seems to indicate otherwise. The local people of Samarra also hunt game birds and waterfowl in the eastern part of the wetlands after getting permission letters from Iraqi authorities. Such activities are primarily practiced during the winter, targeting wintering and migrant birds. There is also increased

construction especially the expansion of Samarra city as well as the movement of military vehicles and troop training exercises. Solid wastes and garbage were observed in a few scattered locations, but a very high threat comes from the Baiji Oil and Gas Field upstream where oil spills often reach Samarra and are redirected into Tharthar Lake (IQ051). Agriculture activities and cultivated areas were observed in places on the western edge of the wetlands. Agricultural practices in the Samarra area in general, especially for seasonal vegetables and crops like wheat, corn and sunflower were considered a high threat.

**Recommendations:** A detailed survey and water quality study are highly recommended, as well as increased communication with officials and site authorities for greater access in future. The site needs active management and more research, in particular to estimate the capacity to support sustainable fishing and other hunting activities. It is likely that the Ministry of Water Resources will dredge the area above the barrage and enlarge the barrage itself in the future. If so, it is important that the Ministry of Environment be involved in this process to try to minimize impacts to the wetlands. Additionally, improved methods for swiftly handling oil spills

are a critical need and enforcement of the hunting law is also essential. Further environmental management planning should guide agricultural expansion or human use of the site, especially as security and access to the site improve.

