

THE EBRO DELTA

“THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE WETLANDS IN THE REST AND FEEDING OF MIGRATORY BIRDS IS OF MAJOR IMPORTANCE IN THE CASE OF THE EBRO DELTA”.



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The seaboard of Catalonia is orientated in an approximately NE-80 direction, just the same direction as that in which the migrations of European birds circulate in the spring and autumn, when they use this coast as a guide line. The contingent of migrants which pass through this territory is also important quantitatively, among other reasons because the orographic barrier which the Pyrenees are for the migrants, can be more easily negotiated in its Catalan part, where the passes of lower altitude are situated. This migratory route was marked out traditionally by a series of wetlands; estuaries, enclosed coastal bays, littoral lagoons, etc, which served as feeding- and resting-grounds for the travellers. Many of these wetlands are today completely dried up, or greatly deteriorated, because of the intense human activity which our seaboard has experienced. There still exist today some very important ones which, in spite of their legal status as natural parks, do not escape the serious dangers of partial disappearance or rapid transformation which threaten them. Even though all these wetzones are of international importance because of their role in migration, one of them stands out from the others in importance: the Ebro Delta.

Covering approximately 320 square kilometres, the Ebro Delta is hydrologically conditioned by the cultivation of

rice, which occupies half its surface, and which by its action on the waters, regulates the life of a large part of the community of wild organisms there. The 9,300 hectares of horticulture and fruit growing are increasing progressively, in contrast to the natural resources, which, situated on the coastal fringe, occupy 7,500 hectares of land and 5,100 hectares of coastal bays. Although there are some coastal lagoons, the bulk of the natural resources is made up of salt-water surroundings: beaches, spits, salt-mines, salt-marshes, etc. The reedbeds also take up a not very large part, and the rest is occupied by small areas of landscape such as dunes, river branches, and the large lake formed by the mouth of the Ebro. Two large, shallow and enclosed bays of great biological activity close the delta on the north and south, giving it a peculiar appearance. These bays also play an important role in supplying food for many organisms there, especially birds and fish. The result is surprising because, despite the reduced extension of its natural zones in comparison with others in Europe, here the delta possesses a wide variety of landscapes and supports a high animal density, which is maintained largely because of rice cultivation and the presence of these productive coastal bays.

From the international point of view, apart from the value of diversity in a

reduced area, its importance must be argued chiefly on the basis of ictiological and especially ornithological wealth. For instance, the fish community of the continental waters is rich and varied, being composed of 39 species. Of these, only 5 are of limnetic origin or are migratory (the eel), whereas the rest come from the sea and only enter those zones of brackish waters with a definite marine influence. Apart from the wide diversity of fish, the Ebro Delta is important because it possesses well conserved populations of *Aphanius iberus*, a ciprinodontid endemic to the Iberian peninsula which is in danger of extinction in a great many of its original locations.

The birds in the Ebro Delta, with more than 275 known species, of which 75 are nest-building, have here a location of major international importance. This is demonstrated by the fact that in all the conventions for the protection of wetlands of international importance, the delta appears catalogued in the first category, that is to say in urgent need of protection. This has been the case both in the MAR project (Camargue) in 1962, in the RAMSAR convention (Iran) in 1971, and more recently in the first symposium of Mediterranean seabirds held in Sardinia in 1985.

At the time of nest-building, the delta is important because of the presence of interesting Mediterranean breeders



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such as the pratincole (100 pairs), the black-winged stilt, the black tern, the red-crested pochard, the squacco heron (200 pairs), and the moustached warbler. The colonies of herons, terns and gulls, with 20 species, make up a total of approximately 9,000 pairs which are distributed evenly among the three groups. Also of major importance are the 650 pairs of little terns, the Bengalese tern which has here one of the very few enclaves of breeding in Europe, and the slender-billed gull.

During the rest of the year too, the Ebro Delta plays an important role in European bird fauna. For instance, the number of non-passerines wintering here is calculated at between 100,000 and 150,000 individuals, but in the case of severe cold weather in central and Northern Europe, this number can double. The wildfowl, with 50,000 to 90,000 birds from 15 to 20 species, make up the largest group, followed by the gulls with approximately half that number, and the waders with about 15,000.

Once again the diversity is remarkable, and there are many interesting species such as the black-tailed godwit, the avocet, the flamingo, the Mediterranean gull and the red-crested pochard. As a colophon, we may add that in a study made by the International Wildfowl Research Bureau on European localities of international quantitative importance for the wintering of wildfowl, the Ebro Delta was selected for two species: the wigeon and the shoveler. ●