



**BIODIVERSITY
CHALLENGE FUNDS**



Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus

Half Year Report

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 2-3 pages** in length.

If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2025

Please note all projects that were active before 1st October 2025 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

Submit to: BCF-Reports@niras.com including your project ref in the subject line.

Project reference	DARCC057
Project title	Scaling up capacity to mainstream wetland conservation in Southern Africa
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Zambia, Zimbabwe
Lead Organisation	BirdLife International
Partner(s)	BirdWatch Zambia, BirdLife Zimbabwe
Project Leader	Megan Eldred
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – September) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end of September).

Although we are not looking for specific reporting against your indicators, please use this opportunity to consider the appropriateness of your monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems (are your indicators still relevant, can you report against any Standard Indicators, do your assumptions still hold true?). The guidance can be found on the resources page of the relevant fund website.

The last 6 months has covered the culmination of much of the work of the project so far, with the delivery of a very successful Ramsar COP15 for the project.

Under Output 1, in Zambia, BirdWatch Zambia have continued to support the National Technical Committee on Biodiversity in Zambia through the NBSAP review process, as well as providing technical expertise during discussions on OECMS and the identification of potential OECMs. As part of this, they identified some wetlands to be considered for testing as OECMs. Ramsar COP15 also provided them with the opportunity to connect extensively with other organisations working nationally on wetlands and environmental advocacy, such as WWF and TNC.

In Zimbabwe, BirdLife Zimbabwe has been incredibly active supporting the Zimbabwe's Presidency of Ramsar until 2028. Prior to COP15 two stakeholder meetings were held (including youth and government, in both Harare and Bulawayo) to share information on NBSAPs and wetlands policy. They also met with the Permanent Secretary and Director of the Environment in Zimbabwe on 16 July to present and share policy and information briefs, including the formal domestication of the Ramsar Convention. Particularly innovatively since COP15, at a stakeholder meeting with the Ministry of Environment, Climate and Wildlife in September, the Government asked BLZ to lead the development of a draft policy workplan based on approved resolutions and needs identified. BirdLife Zimbabwe have also started development of a case study for Lake Chivero Ramsar Site Conservation.

Under Output 2, the project was particularly active in planning events and communications at Ramsar COP15, and in presenting national opportunities to strengthen wetland protection. A high-level side event was held in partnership with the Zimbabwean Government on mobilising innovative finance for wetlands. The Minister of Environment for Zimbabwe provided the opening remarks, while the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention and the CBD also both provided remarks, followed by best practice case studies from Africa, Latin America and Asia, further strengthening the reach of this project. Other side events on strengthening youth participation in wetlands conservation and policy development and biodiversity conservation in Zimbabwe were also well attended.

Following the presentations at the Ramsar Strategic Plan Working Group in an earlier stage of this project, the project leader was asked to advise on the development of an indicator framework for SP5, and was appointed to the Ramsar Convention's Science and Technical Review Panel to further provide this expertise to the Convention.

Output 3, was particularly successful as the Community of Practice met in person prior to COP15 to conduct a 2-day policy and advocacy workshop, focused on tools, skills and objectives for advocating for wetlands at the local, national, regional and international level. This was preceded by 2 webinars to prepare for the COP itself and develop understanding on the links between Ramsar and the CBD processes. At the in-person workshop, sessions were co-led between BirdLife International and national partners (members of the community of practice). These included:

- Using Ramsar COP15 to advance national priorities and plans: raising the profile of wetlands to influence national policies, legislations and plans through engaging government ahead of Ramsar COP15
- Emergency Site Casework: Leveraging the Power of Many to secure Africa's wetlands,
- Effective storytelling in communication: what makes a compelling story
- A workshop on wetlands as nature-based solutions to support future financing of critical wetland sites.

Many of these best practices and case studies were shared further through side events at COP15. A highlight was the African Wetland Policy Dialogue: Strengthening wetland protection within a challenging context, which was held by BirdLife Zimbabwe, with support from the partners to share experiences of how wetlands are protected in various countries, highlighting opportunities for enhancing wetland management elsewhere, as well as providing guidance on applying tools such as KBAs. Related to this we published [KBAs for inland waters guidance](#) to further support parties. BirdWatch Zambia also participated in several meetings and knowledge sharing sessions were held in the margins of COP15, including on the importance of waterbird monitoring of wetland sites to assess international importance for biodiversity (Ramsar Criteria 6) and engagement in the Africa policy day.

Project development meetings to extend the legacy of this project were also held with both national governments and the new Southern Africa Ramsar Regional Initiative (supported by the French Biodiversity Agency), with support from BirdLife International. A focus for the remainder of the project, in response to feedback from partners and governments is to continue to develop the tools and advocacy opportunities around mobilising finance for wetlands, in the context of the delivery of the NBSAP.

Our chosen standard indicators remain the most appropriate for the project. As noted in the previous Annual Report, for a policy and advocacy focused project, there are challenges with accurately capturing progress through standard indicators, and as the Darwin Initiative reviewer noted, many of the critical outcomes, including the strengthening of national and regional civil society capacity will only be realised beyond the lifecycle of the project. As the project has evolved, we really welcome the guidance on Group B of the standard indicators, which focuses on policies, practices and governance and is particularly relevant to the successful updates of NBSAPs this project has provided. We are currently considering how to include Standard Indicators DI-B01, DI-B05 and BI-B07 into our second annual report.

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Some challenges with the change in leadership in the Zambian partner are continuing to be worked through. Time in person as part of COP15 attendance has helped to review the stakeholder mapping and build stronger relationships with those stakeholders identified. BirdWatch Zambia reflected this in attending COP as part of their government delegation. In Zimbabwe, BirdLife Zimbabwe's extensive support to the Government as part of this Darwin project has significantly strengthened their relationship with their national government as a key deliver partner and expert in wetlands, which has been a really positive lesson learnt. As a project team we are continuing to support the Zimbabwean government champion wetlands in other multilateral processes, notably through the African Ministerial Environment Network, and in preparations for UNFCCC COP30. None of these issues should have an impact on the delivery of project activities.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS:	No
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Formal Change Request submitted:	No
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Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No
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Change Request reference if known: *If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome*

Guidance for Section 4: The information you provide in this section will be used by Defra to review the financial status of projects. This review will identify projects at random for spot checks on financial management and will include requests for evidence of the actual spend information provided below. Please ensure the figures you provide are as accurate as possible and that you have the evidence to support it. You do not need to provide it now.

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)

Actual spend: XXXXXXXXXX

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2026)?

Yes ☐ No ☒ Estimated underspend: £

4c. If you expect an underspend, then you should consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible, and not later than 31st December. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes to your project if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCFs management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Suspensions or allegations related to fraud and error concerns should be reported to fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk

No

6. Project risk management

6a. If your project has an Overseas Security and Justice assessment, please provide an update on any related risks, and any special conditions in your award paperwork if relevant for your project.

N/A

7. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent Annual Report. As a reminder, all projects that were scored as 'Not Yet Sensitive' in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessment of their latest Annual Report should demonstrate how they are meeting the minimum GESI-Sensitive standard.

Checklist for submission

Have you responded to feedback from your latest Annual Report Review ? You should respond in section 6, and annexe other requested materials as appropriate.	X
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project ?	X
Have you clearly highlighted any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website?	X
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	X
Submit to BCF-Reports@niras.com	X
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	