

Location



Introduction

The Russian Caspian Sea coast, approximately 695 km long, is situated in the north northwest of the Caspian sea. It is bordered by Kazakhstan to the northeast and Azerbaijan and Georgia to the south, with the sea occupying most of the east coast of the country.

The Caspian Sea is the world's largest inland waterbody and is brackish in nature. Due to its low salinity and long isolation from other world seas and oceans, the Caspian Sea has evolved into a unique marine ecosystem.

Its northern reaches are characterised by a dry, cold temperate continental climate; however, winter weather may be harsh. The Volga, Terek and Sulak River Deltas flow into the Caspian creating extensive wetlands, with sandy beaches and some rocky shores in areas further from the deltas.

Although Russia is a signatory to the Tehran Convention, it views the petroleum resources under the sea as shared equally between Member States, a contested position.

Regional Seas and Biogeography

Caspian Sea

Habitats

Much of the Russian Caspian coastline is characterised by rich wetlands, especially along the deltas of the Volga, Terek and Sulak Rivers. There are numerous islands throughout the sea, mainly along the coast.

Islands in the Russian Caspian are generally sandy, desert-like with occasional reedbeds or more extensive wetlands.

-> **Central Asian steppes** (grassland plains): Found along the some of the northeast coast.

-> **Seagrasses**: Found along the Russian Caspian Sea coastline.

Biodiversity Hotspots

In this section, acronyms and abbreviations are used for some of the most common types of hotspots: Ramsar Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar), Important Bird Area (IBA), IMMA (Important Marine Mammal Area).

-> Ramsar sites:

The *Volga River Delta* is the only Ramsar site in the Russian Caspian. Much of the site is located in the designated *Astrakhan Biosphere Reserve* covering three sections of the delta: the *Obzhorovski* in the east, the *Trekhizbinski* in the central region, and the *Damchikski* in the west. The site (also an IBA) encompasses much of the same territory and other areas are protected as Strict Nature Reserves and Wildlife Refuges. This area hosts up to 750,000 waterbirds in mild winters, approximately 400,000 moulting ducks, as well as thousands of pairs of wetland breeding birds in summer. It also serves as a staging area for many species of waterbird, raptor and songbird species on migration.

-> Parks and Reserves:

The Russian Caspian also hosts several Specially Protected Natural Territories such as the Northwestern Caspian Sea and the *Daghestankyi State Natural Reserve*, the latter sited on the migration route between the *Astrakhan Reserve* and the *Azerbaijani Kzyl-Agach*.

There are a number of other protected sites (natural parks, natural reserves, sanctuaries) along the Russian Caspian, however little detail regarding species and seasonality is available.

-> IBA:

The *Tyuleniy Island Archipelago* hosts breeding ducks, waders and seabirds.

There are a number of other IBAs listed for the Russian Caspian, often overlapping with other protected sites, however little detail regarding species and seasonality is available.

-> IMMAs:

The *Caspian Seal Transitory Migration and Feeding Area* is a very shallow primary feeding area and migration corridor of the Caspian seal. It connects areas used for haul-out and moulting in the northeastern Caspian and the winter breeding area.

The *Caspian Seal Breeding Area* is a winter ice field in the northeast Caspian which extends from Russia to Kazakhstan. Is it the only breeding site for the entire population of the Caspian seal.

The *Caspian Seal Moulting and Haul Out Areas* are coastal areas used by Caspian seals around *Maly Zhemchuzhniy Island* in the northwest, supporting thousands of Caspian seals, mainly breeding adults, during the spring moult immediately following the ice melt in March.

At risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (VU), Endangered (EN) or Critically Endangered (CR). A more complete list of IUCN listed species is found in Appendix 1.

→ At risk birds

The Caspian Sea sits on the Black Sea-Mediterranean Flyway, and the East Asia-East Africa Flyway. Millions of birds travel these flyways each year, many of them stopping in the Caspian on their journey. In summer large numbers of ducks, geese and other waterbirds breed and nest, particularly in the Volga Delta.

→ At risk reptiles

There are no sea turtles in the Caspian Sea, however, some snakes have been reported in coastal waters

→ At risk mammals

The only marine mammal found in the Caspian Sea is the Caspian seal (EN). In winter the seals concentrate in the northern sea, at the edge of the ice cover. In summer many migrate to the southern and middle Caspian, however a part of the population remains in the north.

The Least weasel and Eurasian otter may forage along the coast.

Past experience with oil spill and potential risks

There have not been any serious oil spills in the Caspian, although in 2021, an explosion off the Azerbaijan coast resulted in a massive fireball which is under investigation, with initial reports suggesting a mud volcano rather than an oil and gas field explosion.

The Caspian Sea has a high probability for oil spills due to the area's complex geography and water movement. Russia has a number of oil fields offshore and is involved in development of a joint oil field in an area shared with Kazakhstan. In the north Caspian, severe storms and ice conditions increase the risk of accidents at drilling platforms. The port of Astrakhan is a major shipping point and houses bulk oil terminals.

International and Regional Treaties and Agreements

→ Oil spill and HNS Response

d CLC Convention 69

CLC Protocol 76

CLC Protocol 92

FUND Protocol 76

FUND Protocol 92

- FUND Protocol 2003
- LLMC Convention 76
- LLMC Protocol 96
- OPRC Convention 90
- HNS Convention 96
- HNS PROT 2010
- OPRC_HNS 2000
- BUNKERS CONVENTION 01

→ **Marine Biodiversity Protection**

- Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea (Tehran Convention)
- Protocol Concerning Regional Preparedness, Response and Co-operation in Combating Oil Pollution Incidents (Aktau Protocol) under the Tehran Convention
- Protocol for the Conservation of Biological Diversity (Ashgabat Protocol) under the Tehran Convention
- Protocol on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context under the Tehran Convention
- Oil Spill Preparedness Regional Initiative for the Caspian-Black Sea-Central Asia (OSPRI)

Oil Spill Response and HNS Spill Response

→ **National Contingency Plan?**

The Russian Federal Contingency Plan for Oil Spill Prevention and Response at Sea was adopted by the Ministry of Transport (MT), the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergency Situations and Liquidation of Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM) in 2003 and was updated in 2014.

The Russian Federation has developed oil spill contingency plans for all of their regions, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, NW Pacific, the Caspian Sea and the Arctic. The oil spill response can be activated at the local, regional and federal level.

→ **Role of Competent National Authorities**

Under the 2014 update of the plan, EMERCOM, the Federal Marine and River Transport Agency, the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Natural Resource (FSSSNR) of the MNR, as well as relevant authorities for the region where the spill occurred, are notified.

The competent national authority for oil spill management and clean-up is the State Marine Pollution Control, Salvage and Rescue Administration (SMPCRSA), within the MT. It utilises the State Maritime Search and Rescue Coordination Centre (SMRRC) in Moscow and eight Maritime Search and Rescue substations (MRRCs) serving as national and international contact points for marine pollution emergencies.

EMERCOM is responsible for shoreline clean-up, in cooperation with local authorities. The FSSSNR has responsibility for oiled wildlife response. Relevant federal, regional and municipal bodies may also be involved. Working groups with relevant agencies and authorities may be convened in the case of federal or transboundary spills.

Oiled Wildlife Preparedness and Response

→ **Formal guidelines?**

Russian (Caspian Sea) does not have an oiled wildlife contingency plan; however very basic guidelines have been addressed in the national oil spill contingency plan.

→ Response objectives and strategy

There is no predefined oiled wildlife response strategy, however in this region of Russia, the Administration of the Protected Areas (APA) of the Astrakhan region has equipment for deterring birds, which would likely be the first effort, and further equipment and facilities for a capture and rehabilitate response.

→ Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

The authorities will allow rehabilitation of oiled animals and euthanasia may be permitted on humane grounds.

→ Impact assessment

Dead animals are collected for counting before being disposed of by the authorities, however pre-or post-spill impact studies have not been done.

In case of an incident, several organisations could provide advice on wildlife impact assessment, including Russian Bird Conservation Union (RBCU), the All-Russian Research Institute for Nature Protection and the Marine Mammal Council.

In the past, the Darwin Initiative's Caspian Seal Conservation Network (CSCN) member, the International Oceanographic Institute (IOI) of the University of Astrakhan, conducted more extensive post-mortem examinations on this endangered species, however, the Darwin Initiative CSCN project has ended and it is not clear whether the IOI will continue this work.

→ Notification and early response

In case of an oiled wildlife incident, the MT would notify the FSSSNR. It is likely that Roszapovedtsentr (the Russian Nature Reserve Center) within that ministry would notify relevant parties involved in the operation of the oiled wildlife response centre opened in 2019 (see under permanent facilities below).

→ Wildlife responders

Staff and volunteers at the newly created oiled wildlife centre (see below) have been trained on oiled wildlife response, however in the event of a major spill, international assistance would be needed.

→ Cooperation between stakeholders

Cooperation in oiled wildlife response between stakeholders and the authorities is conducted under the framework of the Government Commission on Preventing and Eliminating Emergency Situations and Ensuring Fire Safety.

The APA works with government authorities, local businesses and WWF-Russia on preserving the biodiversity of the Volga region and Northwestern Caspian.

The Oil Spill Preparedness Regional Initiative for the Caspian-Black Sea-Central Asia's (OSPRI) works cooperatively with governments, including the Russian Federation, to promote spill response capability in the region.

→ Permanent facilities

The Nizhnevolzhsk Lukoil company, in partnership with the APA of Astrakhan Region, has created a rehabilitation center for animals affected by oil spills and also has portable equipment which can be transported to other areas, such as the remote islands of the North Caspian.

The center, run under the guidance of the Administration of the Protected Areas and its ornithologists and veterinarians, has capacity for 100-200 birds, with plans to increase that capacity.

→ Current processes

The new wildlife rehabilitation centre is providing ongoing training for volunteers.

Documentation and references

- ITOPF Country Profile (2013): <https://www.itopf.org/knowledge-resources/countries-territories-regions/countries/russian-federation/>
- Sea Alarm Country Wildlife Response Profile: <https://www.sea-alarm.org/publications/country-wildlife-response-profiles/>
- IMO (2021): <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/StatusOfConventions.aspx>
- OSPRI: <https://www.ospri.online/>

- Ramsar Country Profile: <https://www.ramsar.org/wetland/russian-federation>
- Birdlife Data Zone: European Russia: <http://datazone.birdlife.org/country/russia-european>
- Important Marine Mammals Areas: <https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/imma-eatlas/>
- World Atlas: Caspian Sea: <https://www.worldatlas.com/lakes/caspian-sea.html>
- North Caspian opens unique centre for rescuing birds from oil spills: <https://wwf.ru/en/resources/news/neft-i-gaz/na-severnom-kaspii-otkryli-unikalnyy-tsentr-po-spaseniyu-ptits-v-sluchae-nefterazlivov/>

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Appendix 1

→ At risk birds

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Sociable lapwing / *Vanellus gregarius* / CR / Migratory (spring/autumn) / Non-breeding nor wintering (passage)

White-headed duck / *Oxyura leucocephala* / EN / Migratory / Breeding/nesting (May to July)

Red-breasted goose / *Branta ruficollis* / VU / Migratory (spring/autumn) / Wintering (autumn/winter)

Lesser white-fronted goose / *Anser erythropus* / VU / Migratory (spring/autumn) / Wintering (end summer/winter)

Marbled teal / *Marmaronetta angustirostris* / VU / Migratory / Breeding/nesting (summer)

Common pochard / *Aythya ferina* / VU / Resident / Breeding/nesting (summer)

Horned grebe / *Podiceps auritus* / VU / Resident / Breeding/nesting (summer)

→ At risk reptiles

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

→ At risk mammals

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Caspian seal / *Pusa capsica* / EN / Resident (may migrates throughout the Sea from spring through autumn) /

Breeding (December to April on ice fields) / Pupping (January-February only on iced areas)