



**Nordre Øyeren Fuglestation**

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## **New water regulations for the Norwegian Ramsar wetland Nordre Øyeren threaten the wader spring migration**

Nordre Øyeren is a Ramsar wetland (site no. 307) that comprises the northern part of the lake Øyeren, Norway. Here, the three rivers Leira, Nitelva and Glomma—Norway's largest river—form a delta that is the largest inland delta in Northern Europe. A hydropower dam in the southern end of the lake has regulated the water level in Øyeren since 1860. The operating company that governs the dam is *Glommen og Laagens brukseierforening* (GLB), owned by several hydroelectric power companies. The regulation of the lake has greatly reduced the natural variations in water levels throughout the year: The flooding level is significantly lowered, and the average water level in winter is raised several meters. Still, Nordre Øyeren is yet one of Norway's most important sites for the inland migration of waterbirds, both during spring and fall. However, new regulations issued this summer threaten the natural ecology of Øyeren, specifically the bird ecology.



Svellet, 12 May 2010: A flock of Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola* getting ready for a few days of intense mud fest together with hundreds of other waders. © Ketil Knudsen.

Many waterbirds, especially waders and dabbling ducks, are greatly dependent on the “correct” water level to access food in the feeding areas. Between 1994 and 2000 studies were conducted on the impact of the water level on different groups of plants and animals in Øyeren. The conclusion from these studies with regard to water level and birds were very clear: There is a strong and significant inverse correlation between the water level and the number of waterbirds in the area. Low water levels were shown to be extremely productive for many waders and dabbling ducks, including key species such as Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (NT [Norway]), Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (VU [Norway]) and Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (NT).

Today’s regulations governing the water level of Øyeren was given by royal decree on 29 June 1934, and revised in 1981. In 2003 GLB applied for a new set of regulations for Øyeren. The application was based on experience gathered during a 5-year trial period from 1996 to 2001. The provisional regulations from 1996 were then extended until the new set of rules could be resolved. The new regulations were finally issued on 20 June 2014, (<http://tinyurl.com/pu4neuc>; Norwegian only). Not much was changed except one important part: As from next year, the water level in Øyeren is “if possible, to be raised to contour 101.14 (4.60 m local height) within mid-May [our translation]”. This change is introduced to allow leisure boats to access the delta earlier than the annual, natural flood. The former water regulations instead said that in the spring, Øyeren was allowed to fill up following what has been termed the “nature curve”, i.e. so that the influx and efflux of water would resemble the unregulated state.



Svellet, 4 May 2012: Some of the more than 500 Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola* and 200 Common Greenshanks *Tringa nebularia* present that day. 30 Eurasian oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, 29 Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus*, 20 Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax* (VU), 20 Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* (NT [Norway]), 13 Whimbrels *Numenius phaeopus*, 10 Curlews *Numenius arquata* (NT), 8 Common Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula*, 5 Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius* (NT [Norway]), and a Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* completed the tally. © Simon Rix.

The signing organisations oppose all changes in the management of Øyeren that reduce the key ecological qualities for which these wetlands are protected. We are surprised by the way this latest change to the regulations is being motivated. The arguments for prioritising leisure boats over birds can be read on GLBs homepage (<http://glb.no>; Norwegian only). Interestingly, this contrasts with the main message from the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, which states in their press release no. 036/14: “(Øyeren’s) biological values and status as a Ramsar site is emphasized in the new regulations, also when in conflict with other interests. (Øyeren’s) Ramsar status gives Norway international obligations concerning management of the area. The new regulations will not reduce the biological values, but if possible, improve the ecological status in Øyeren [our translation]” (<http://government.no/oed>).

In our view, the Ministry of Petroleum presents no important ecological values of Øyeren's ecosystem that are improved by filling up the water body to contour 101.14 within mid-May. On the contrary, the Ministry concludes in their reflections to the new regulations (<http://tinyurl.com/nscn8df>; Norwegian only) that contour 101.04 seems to be a kind of limit, where the number of birds is reduced substantially whenever Øyeren is raised above this level.

Furthermore, several species of water plants will be affected negatively, but this is ignored when the Ministry present the conclusion. Only two fish species, Pike and Asp, are mentioned as beneficiaries. Pike is abundant in Norway and regional, and the not red-listed Asp is in good condition in Øyeren with the current water regulation regime. The marginal benefits for these two fish species (and leisure boats) do not at all outweigh the serious damage the new water regulation will do to the very special bird migration qualities.

For the dabbling ducks and waders that migrate early in the season (i.e. Lapwing and Eurasian Curlew) most of the migration is finished by the second week of May. Changes in water levels in mid-May will therefore most likely not affect these birds significantly. However, large numbers of *Tringa* waders have been recorded when water levels remain low after 5th May, due to slow melting of snow in the uplands. Up to 750 Wood Sandpiper



The northern part of Nordre Øyeren, including the Svellet bay.

*Tringa glareola* (average max no. 2010-2014: 504<sup>1</sup>) and 1200 Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* (average max no. 2010-2014: 740<sup>1</sup>) have been observed. Such numbers are unprecedented in Norway and to our knowledge also in Scandinavia. Hence, Nordre Øyeren is a key site for migrating waterbirds in a wide region. The waders concentrate in the shallow bay called Svellet in the northern part of Nordre Øyeren when the water level is below 4.60 m. When water levels reach summer height (4.80 m), all of Svellet is covered by water and therefore not accessible as a staging ground for waders. Strangely, the concurrence of slow melting and late migration has been an almost annual event after the environmental studies was conducted (1994-2000), and so this phenomenon is unfortunately not discussed in the final report (<http://tinyurl.com/okwda4r>; Norwegian only).

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<sup>1</sup> 2011 has been excluded from the statistics due to early flooding and water levels above 4.80 m from 22nd of April.

We strongly urge the Ramsar secretariat to address the change in water management in Nordre Øyeren. We find it unacceptable that the value of a Ramsar site is diminished to benefit users of leisure boats. We hope that the Ramsar secretariat will investigate and convince Norwegian authorities not to go ahead with the introduced changes of water management. This will help keeping a natural phenomenon that is unique on the Scandinavian Peninsula.

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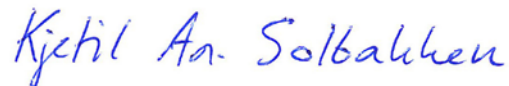
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