

## Spoon-billed sandpiper Recovery Team News Bulletin No. 2 (Mai 2009)



Photo Axel Bräunlich

Compiled by Christoph Zöckler on behalf of the Sbs Recovery Team

Update May 2009:

- 1) CMS Action Plan approved
- 2) Autumn surveys
- 3) Winter surveys update (Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh)
- 4) Database work and Remote sensing
- 5) Summer plans
- 6) Sbs RT present at the next British BirdFair in August 2009!!

Its been a year since the last report and after lots and lots of exciting news in the winter 2008-2009 spring migration is on the move and we thought it might be useful to provide a brief summary of the events around the activities. As this will likely not be complete please provide us with update and corrections from your end.

The CMS Action Plan on the species has been approved. Three separate expeditions into the wintering areas took place with very different results. The situation in Korea is still devastating after the closure of Saemangeum.

But all the news in sequence

### 1) **CMS Action Plan**

At the last CMS CoP in Rome early December 2008 the Action Plan for the Spoon-billed sandpiper has been approved along with two other species plans

for Black-faced Spoonbill and Chinese Crested Tern. The latest version of the action plan is available on the web site [www.arconna.com](http://www.arconna.com) CMS is planning to publish the reports and we are awaiting further details from BirdLife Asia Office in Tokyo. But we are not waiting for the implementation and started, where possible, as present projects illustrate in Russia, Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

## 2) **Autumn migration**

Very little reports have been coming in from the autumn. From Korea we heard about another severe drop in numbers. The Three –year Monitoring Report 2006-2008 stated a 30% decline for the species over this period (See Moores et al. 2008 for more details. Very little information has been received from other areas. No data arrived from China and Taiwan. Minoru Kashiwagi compiles data from Japan. No more ringed birds have been recovered. This is partly understandable as we stopped flagging adult birds since 2007 and only ringed less than 12 juvenile/ per season.



Yubu Island, Korea 20/08/2008 - Ju Yung Ki

## 3) **Thailand**

A conservation project partly funded by the RSPB on the winter feeding ecology of the species is still running. First results indicate higher usage of intertidal mudflats. More details area in preparation and will be reported on in next issues. Other conservation projects focus in the Inner Gulf area on public awareness for the species and better observation facilities. Local NGOs promote the protection and local tourism for the species and other globally threatened waders. Last winter around 10-13 birds have been observed at the usual sites. Further details by Phil Round.

## 4) **Vietnam**

Due to the good networking of Minoru Kashiwagi we managed to establish the funding for the winter expedition in Vietnam. Sponsor was again Kei Den

Ran, who sponsored already previous expeditions and also enabled a few members from Russia to participate in this expedition:  
The survey focussed on the Red River Delta, but no Sbs were found. Details from Elena Lappo:

#### PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER SURVEY IN THE RED RIVER DELTA, VIETNAM, JANUARY, 2009.

The survey was a part of long-term effort of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS) Recovery Team aiming to discover key non-breeding grounds of the species and develop urgent conservation measures to save the species from extinction. It was organized in cooperation with BirdLife Indochina Program and supported by Japan Wetlands Action Network and funded by Kei Dan Ren Nature Conservation Fund. Six expedition members from Russia, Japan and Vietnam had surveyed on January 9-18, 2009 three key locations (Quan Lan, Thai Thuy and Xuan Thuy) where SBS was observed before.



Photo: E. Lappo

In spite of intensive effort no SBS were seen. Over 5700 shorebirds were counted and most of them were identified to the species level. There is still a chance that some SBS are staying in the area as not the whole coast was covered and due to the fact that 2 SBS were seen in Quan Lan on Dec. 26, 2008 by John Pilgrim. We may have missed some individuals but not any serious numbers.

The Workshop focused on the species conservation was organized on January 19, 2009. It had initiated very productive discussion with involvement of local NGOs, governmental officials and representatives from coastal protected areas including

Xuan Thuy National Park, which used to be the key wintering SBS area in Vietnam. Implementation measures for SBS Action Plan were discussed.

The following preliminary conclusions are made based on the result of our survey and vast consultations with local experts:

- 1) SBS had declined a lot in the northern Vietnam. 27+ birds were recorded in the area in mid 1990s and not found in 2009 in spite of special efforts by experienced team;
- 2) The species is still not included to the National Red List of Vietnam and there is lack of concern on the seriousness of the situation of the species being on the brink of extinction;
- 3) Enormous pressure on the intertidal areas was observed in many locations of Red River Delta and it is likely that local habitat transformation and illegal bird trapping were one of the main reason for the species decline in the earlier years;
- 4) It is still unclear though, which reasons are responsible for the decline in last 10 years as the birds may have been also influenced on migratory stopovers. It is unlikely the major influence of Seamanguem Reclamation projects as it looks like the decline of the species population started before the completion of the dyke;
- 5) The analyses of migration phenology of SBS in the northern Vietnam had shown that the birds arrive as early as late October and may stay up to April. It means that in spring they have to fly straight to the last pre-breeding stopovers around Yellow Sea. The migration branch of the species is likely different to the branch of migration of birds from Myanmar and Bangladesh and should be probably treated as different management unit for the practical implications for species conservation.
- 6) The species may soon disappear in Vietnam and urgent surveys, monitoring and conservation measures are needed.
- 7) They survey had confirmed the general declining trend observed for the species everywhere both on the breeding and non-breeding grounds.

The Workshop had made the following recommendations:

- 1) The species should be included to the RDB of Vietnam at the nearest convenient occasion;
- 2) The work on evaluation of the species Action Plan should be implemented in Vietnam;
- 3) The priority for the northern Vietnam is to organize regular monitoring of wader concentrations in Xuan Thuy NP. SBS will be hopefully rediscovered there and may become another flagship species for wetland conservation together with Black-faced Spoonbill. Additional conservation measures for shorebirds in intertidal areas could be developed then;
- 4) Though illegal trapping of shorebirds in Xuan Thuy NP had decreased in last years it is still a very serious threat in Vietnam and should be studied and addressed. Though no concrete measures were proposed by local experts and authorities;

- 5) Continuation of SBS surveys are recommended for Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam, islands in the north of Vietnam, close to the boarder with China and in the coastal areas of Cambodia.

E.Syroechkovskiy, M.Kashiwagi, E. Lappo, Hung Le, A.Maximov & M.Morozov

## 5) Myanmar

For the second time large sections of coastal ecosystems in Myanmar had been surveyed with support from BirdLife International and the RSPB.

### **Spoon-billed Sandpiper Expedition Myanmar 2009 Summary**

In January 2009 a second expedition was convened in search of Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Between Jan 11 and 26 an international team of German, British, Russian, Canadian and Burmese scientists under the lead of BANCA and ArcCona, Cambridge, and under the auspices of BirdLife International surveyed critical areas of the Myanmar coast for the globally threatened Spoon-billed Sandpiper (*Calidris pygmeus*). In total of 63 birds were found by two teams, operating in the Rakhine (Arakan) coast and in the Bay of Martaban. Despite stable numbers around 48 in the Bay of Martaban, the species is continuing to decline sharply. In fact, the number at the island of Nan Thar near the Bangladeshi border dropped from 35 in 2008 to only 14. This largely corresponds with the decline observed in the regularly monitored breeding sites in Chukotka, where the number also halved over the past two years. Additionally numbers dropped to almost zero in North Vietnam and only 8 or 12 birds were found in Bangladesh this year, where simultaneous counts were conducted.



One of 14 Sbs at Nan Thar island (Rakhine, Myanmar) – Axel Bräunlich

A new site along the Rakhine coast was found with hosting at least one Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the coast of the Bay of Bengal appears to host a few more sites with Spoon-billed sandpiper. The Gulf of Martaban, close to Thailand is the most important wintering site as the survey results confirm. At least 48 birds were located

in the vast mud flat area. This number is estimated to be a minimum and well below the total number that winter in the estuary a result of three factors:

- 1) Despite increased efforts this year's survey only covered 25-40% of the suitable habitat
- 2) Most of the survey was conducted during neap tides, when it was not possible to visit many areas, due to large amounts of deposited sediments and low water levels across the intertidal area.
- 3) Flocks of waders were difficult to get close to, making it difficult to check all flocks for Spoon-billed sandpiper.

Taking all this into consideration it is likely that this site holds more than 100 Spoon-billed sandpiper, making it by far the most important wintering site at present. However it has no protected status at present, putting the site at risk for development. The team also counted more than 78,000 waterbirds, of which 65,000 were waders, and considering the coverage more than 100,000 waders are estimated to winter in the area, raising the site into the league of the 25 top global sites for waders. Among the waders the survey team found at least 7 globally endangered Nordmann's Greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*) and a new wintering site of 42 previously unrecorded Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*), usually wintering in South America only. The Bay and its mudflats are extremely difficult to survey, due to its high dynamics in the tidal system. Especially at spring tide the area is prone to a one meter high tidal bore, which can be very dangerous for operating boats and people. The waders utilise the vast mudflats according to the constantly changing conditions, which are determined by the tidal dynamics, leaving parts drying out for over a week. This means that some prime feeding areas on spring tides are unavailable to waders on neap tides. This results in considerable local movements within the Bay to utilise nutritious sediments, freshly deposited elsewhere in the mudflats.

Not only at Martaban but also on Nan Thar island there was evidence of hunting and trapping of birds. Targeting mainly larger birds, the trapping techniques though catch and often kill also smaller waders that strangle themselves in the net. According to one local hunter, who appeared to be very knowledgeable on waders and geese, about 30 Spoon-billed Sandpiper are caught on Nan Thar during one catching season from November to April. He estimated that 2/3 of the small waders die before they were released. Increasingly younger hunters also kill smaller birds, reflecting the increasing pressure of an increasing coastal population on the natural resources.

Realising the devastating effect immediate action was taken and with the support of a member of a local environmentalist group a trapping stop for hunters from two villages catching birds on the island was negotiated with immediate effect in return for a small compensation. In the longer term the local environmentalist group is encouraged to develop an economic and ecological sound alternative for the local communities, of which community based eco tourism seems a likely alternative.

The scale of hunting and trapping in the Bay of Martaban is still largely unknown but vital in the conservation of the species and there is urgent need to conduct a survey of the local communities to establish the extent of trapping. The knowledge gained about the Martaban area will enable a detailed waterbird/ Spoon-billed sandpiper survey to be designed, which takes into account the constantly changing conditions in a high energy system.

Taking into account the continued sharp decline also observed in the wintering sites immediate action needs to be taken. As major threats to the wintering birds have been identified it is possible to address these immediately and effectively with only little resources required.

Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona Consulting Cambridge, Tony Thin Hla, BANCA

In addition to this expedition summary we can report on the successful application of a small grant from the German Lighthouse Foundation for active conservation work on the island of Nan Thar, where our local focal point Ren Nou Sou from the Sittwe Environmental Decorators is developing economic alternatives for the local people on the island.

## **6) Bangladesh and India**

A mid winter survey along the Eastern coastal lead in the usual manner by our friend Enam Ul Haque and Zahuril Islam. There were two reports from 8 and later 12 Sbs on the island Sonadia.



No other survey reports are available and we are not aware of any sightings elsewhere in the delta or at Sodem Mukar near Teknaf. We also are intrigued to hear if last years observation in April have been repeated. Bangladesh remains a very important wintering site, but news on further developments and also bird trapping on Sonadia are worrying. Zahuril Islam is currently conducting a hunting survey and public awareness campaign.

For the first time since 2004 we have a record from the Indian East coast in January.  
Avian additions at Kolleru Lake

G.V. Ramana Rao

Detailed surveys could identify more species in the area

VIJAYAWADA: A team of ornithologists from the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (BSAP) has made two additions to the avifauna list of Kolleru Lake after a three-day field trip to the wildlife sanctuary made at the request of the Forest Department.

A four-member BSAP team recorded the presence of the Spoonbilled Sandpiper and the Watercock for the first time in the area. The team sighted 117 species of birds in three days.

A report sent to the Forest Department said the spotting of the Spoonbilled Sandpiper was the first on record in the region. It said the sighting of this "critically endangered and coastal species" in the sanctuary significantly increased the need for further protection of the area.

More details Mike Crosby.

## **7) Database work**

Gillian with support from Minoru for Japan is updating the species database with now almost 1000 observations included. But we have not received most data from the last autumn. Please send information from China, Taiwan and Korea to [gb@arccona.com](mailto:gb@arccona.com). We also have not received any observation from this spring from Hongkong or other parts in China or Korea!

Please send in your observations details or corrections in case you have not (preferred excel table).

## **8) Summer expeditions**

This summer 2009 an international expedition funded by the HP Foundation through BirdLife International will visit the most southern breeding sites in North Kamchatka from June to early July. At the same time Russian fieldworkers will check on the core breeding area in Meinopylgino and possibly also visit the most northern sites near Vankarem on the Chuckchi Sea coast.

## **9) British Birdfair 2009**



This is a new and exciting opportunity for the SBS RT. After last year's success of the Birdfair that featured Spoon-billed Sandpiper the SBS RT and ArcCona have been offered the opportunity to be present at a stand at this year's Birdfair in Rutland Water on August 21-23. This is a great opportunity and several members of the SBS RT, like Evgeny and Lena from Russia, Tony and Thiri from Myanmar and Minoru from Japan have already shown their interest and are prepared to come and meet with us. I propose we will have our next SBS RT meeting in Rutland and I hope many of you can come and make it to England in summer (can be nice in summer!)

Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona Cambridge