

Spoon-billed sandpiper Recovery Team News Bulletin No. 4 (May 2010)



Spoon-billed Sandpiper released by local youth after captured by bird trappers the night before *Photo Rob Robinson/BTO*

Compiled by Christoph Zöckler on behalf of the Sbs Recovery Team

Update May 2010:

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Summary

The last half year has seen a lot of activities. Most importantly though, has been the confirmation that Myanmar and the Bay of Martaban in particular with more than 200 birds are hosting more than half of the global population and that the widespread trapping of birds is a major threat to the species that can be tackled with immediate effect. Enhanced monitoring efforts in Bangladesh show that this country still has vast suitable areas and is harboring at least 50 birds with potentially many more. The number of records from China has increased and there are indications that at least 10 birds are wintering regularly in Minjiang Delta and more along the southern coast.

Finally, the Action Plan has been launched and very importantly the EAAFP is welcoming the SBS RT as its species task force. With increasing international attention and support we are able to root our activities on broad support ranging from species support groups in the UK, Germany and the US.

All these new observations and increased activities are a very positive sign and encouraging to all those involved in the species conservation and there is hope that with coordinated effort we are still able to turn the plight and rescue the species from extinction.

1) SBS Action Plan launched

At last, in February 2010 during the EAAFP partnership (see below) meeting the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan along with action plans for the Black-faced Spoonbill and the Chinese Crested Tern have been launched by BirdLife's Simba Chan. Printed copies can be ordered from the BirdLife Asia office.



Launch of the SBS action plan in Korea with Simba Chan, Jong-Won Choi & C. Zöckler Photo Chang-Yong Choi

2) SBS RT joining EAAFP

In February 2010 the East Asian Australasian Partnership (EAAFP) hold its 4th Meeting of Partners in Songdo, Korea. The SBS RT requested to become the species task force under the flyway partnership. EAAFP secretary Roger Jaensch confirmed that the SBS RT is very much welcome by the partnership and could become a species task force under the EAAFP in close consultation with CMS and the EAAFP Shorebird Working Group. An EAAFP task force is currently developing the general ToR for a species task force and these will be considered at EAAFP MoP5 later in December 2010; this task force includes two members of the SBS RT - Baz Hughes of WWT and Evgeny Syroechkovskiy from Birds Russia. The EAAFP secretariat also kindly hosted the 8th SBS RT meeting at the premises of the Secretariat and secretary Roger Jaensch and Aram Lee attended for large parts of the meeting.

3) First SBS Tour in Myanmar

2010 saw the first tourists arriving with ArcCona Travel and WATT our local travel partner in Myanmar to especially see SBS at Nan Thar. This is a very important step in demonstrating to the local people that a living SBS is providing a much better revenue than a trapped SBS. The tour included also a visit to the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Bagan and the ancient temples of Mrauk U, but 3 days were dedicated to Nan Thar, where up to 14 Sbs have been observed again. A quote from tour member Patrick Frew:

"I want to thank you for our excellent trip to Myanmar. The itinerary of our trip suited me ideally, with the combination of sightseeing and birding. It would be a pity to visit Myanmar without seeing Bagan; and Mrauk U combined well with the boat from Sittwe. Many bird trips pay no attention to the culture of the countries they visit. I would recommend your trip just as we did it. The fellow travellers were good fun, and Tony and Thiri excellent guides. You paced the birding at the right level for us all. I never planned to go to Myanmar till I met you at the Birdfair, but your combination of an exotic country and special birdlife was persuasive."

A small excerpt of the tour report allows some insight into the tour

Day 7 11 January

A very early start means to leave the tents still in complete darkness. A crescent moon has just risen in the East. A morning excursion by small boats should allow access to the further shores of the island. Again we split into two teams, but both teams get stuck soon as the tide does not rise as high as hoped, possibly due to the strong and rather cold northern wind. Almost 500 Bar-headed Geese take off at the end of the island flying to the fields. We abandon the boat and continue on foot. Soon we come along a group of waders that contain at least 3 Spoon-billed sandpipers. As the water is receding we come closer to the mudflats and find in total at least 10 -14 Spoon-billed Sandpiper, some of them very close. In addition we find another five Nordmann's Greenshanks. The other team saw at least 1 SBS very close, so everybody is very happy and ready for a lunch break. The heat of mid-day is best spent in the shade of the boat or swimming in the nearby sea. Yien and our local islanders come to the tents to bring us some melon as a present. An immature Long-legged Buzzard flies as a surprise past the island. A short walk to the outer sand does not reveal much more, but Ruddy Shelducks and a Greater Crested Tern can be added to the species list of Nan Thar. More than 75 Pallas' Gulls are roosting on a sandy island off the coast, joined by at least 3 Caspian Terns. No signs of Turtles other than a freshly washed corpse that has been occupied by the red fiddler crabs. Another delightful meal on board of the board and another starry night camping in the dunes.

More details on the tour and plans for 2011 under <http://www.arcona.com/conservationtravel.html> or <http://www.wild-myanmar.com/Birdwatching.htm>



Breakfast 'in style' at the river bank near Sarus Crane displaying

4) Third SBS expedition to Myanmar 2010

Between January 18th and February 3rd 2010 the third Spoon-billed Sandpiper survey in Myanmar and the fifth in the Bay of Bengal was conducted by ArcCona and BANCA (BirdLife partner) on behalf of BirdLife International with support of its Species Champion Programme. A total of 16 ornithologists consisting of 8 international and 8 local ornithologists participated in that survey. For the last two days the Martaban group was supported by two American scientists. The team was divided into three groups; two teams surveyed the Gulf of Martaban and one team operated on the islands off the Irrawaddy Delta. It was a continuation of the surveys of 2008 and 2009. This year the minimum number of Spoon-billed Sandpiper recorded was 75: 3 in the southern part of the Gulf of Martaban at the Salween River mouth, one on the islands in the Irrawaddy Delta and at least 71 in the upper Bay of Martaban near Kyaihto, corresponding with sites of high counts in 2008 and 2009. Together with 14 Spoon-billed Sandpiper observed two weeks prior in Nan Thar Island the total of birds in Myanmar is at least 89! The Bay of Martaban is likely hosting 200 birds and thus could host 50% of the global population. Two colour-marked birds have been found, one bird ringed as juvenile and one individually marked adult at least 9 years old, both from South Chukotka. It is not possible to conclude any trend information, as the upper estuary of the Bay of Martaban is very difficult to survey completely. However, all along the survey route we encountered evidence of significant hunting and trapping pressure that includes high numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpiper. In fact one bird was just caught while our team was present and could be colour-marked and released by local children (see photo below). Urgent action is required to safeguard the species and to collaborate with the local communities to establish alternative forms of income. With support from the CMS BANCA became active already and initiated the first large scale survey and interviews of local people and subsequent negotiations to mitigate the damage on trapping SBS. The full report can be downloaded http://www.arconacona.com/download/SBS_Report_%20Myanmar_2010.pdf

A special paper has been published summarising the hunting threat in Myanmar <http://www.shorebird-network.net/PDFs/Sbs-WSG-article.pdf>

CHRISTOPH ZÖCKLER (ArcCona)
TONY HTIN HLA (BANCA)
NIGEL CLARK (BTO)
VLADIMIR MOROZOV (Birds Russia)



Spoon-billed Sandpiper released by local youth after captured by bird trappers the night before *Photo Rob Robinson/BTO*

5) Expedition report: Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper surveys in March 2010

Alexander Lees

The largest recorded flocks (c.200 individuals) of this species are from Bangladesh in 1989, but with no repetition of these numbers since, focus has shifted to the Arctic breeding grounds and wintering habitat in Myanmar in recent years. Thus the vast delta of the Lower Meghna remains only partially explored. In an effort to ascertain the current importance of Bangladesh as a wintering area for Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS) and to explore the potential threats to the species there, a month-long survey was initiated in March 2010. A team from the UK — Jez Bird, Alexander Lees and Rob Martin worked with Bangladeshi ornithologists Sayam Chowdhury and Enam Ul Haque of Bangladesh Bird Club who have extensive survey experience in the region. This survey targeted sites known to hold the species in previous years during mid-winter counts, in addition to surveying new potentially important sites identified using satellite images. We found SBS at three sites; all of which had previously hosted the species. Totalled together, the minimum counts of 25 at Sonadia, 23 at Dama Char and 1 at Teknaf represent the highest annual count in Bangladesh for over two decades.



SBS at Sonadia February 2010

Photo Sayam Chowdhury

We were able to gather data on habitat preferences, foraging ecology and community composition to relate to the remainder of the sites visited where we did not find any of the target species. In addition to looking for SBS we also expended considerable effort in looking for other rare or declining Asian waders resulting in record totals of c.500 Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*), 39 Nordmann's Greenshanks *Tringa guttifer* and 34 Asiatic Dowitchers *Limnodromus semipalmatus*. In addition we also recorded a number of other threatened and Near-Threatened species including Black-headed Ibises *Threskiornis melanocephalus*, Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga*, and Indian Skimmers *Rynchops albicollis* in addition to multiple encounters with two threatened delphinids: Ganges River Dolphin *Platanista gangetica* and Irrawaddy Dolphins *Orcaella brevirostris*. These surveys

suggest that Bangladesh remains a key wintering area for SBS and other threatened shorebirds, but problems prevented us from reaching more poorly surveyed peripheral sites that may hold larger concentrations of many of these species. We initiated a campaign of semi-structured interviews with local people involved or with knowledge of local hunting practices. Our preliminary data indicates that hunting remains a potential threat to wader populations, although campaigns by local conservation NGOs and the latent threat of zoonoses have had an ameliorating influence on such activities. Surveying Spoon-billed Sandpipers in Bangladesh is relatively cheap and represents an extremely cost-effective method of monitoring population trends. Future surveys, in addition to carrying out repeat surveys at known hotspots, should again attempt to target these more remote mudflat outposts, although this would be better achieved in midwinter when sea conditions permit easier travel. Furthermore a highly structured interview and outreach campaign with local people could effectively evaluate and tackle the threat of subsistence hunting. Dealing with less tractable threats – such as global warming and large-scale habitat conversion is likely to be much more difficult to address.

AL, JB and RM would like to thank the Oriental Bird Club, the Lincolnshire Bird Club, Birdguides, Ecology Consultants and the Severnoaks RSPB Members Group for providing funding for the expedition. We are extremely grateful for the support and counsel of Enam UI Haque, Paul Thompson, Dr Ronald Halder, Indranil Kishor, Farhad A. Pavel, M. Abu Yousuf and members of Bangladesh Bird Club during our time in Bangladesh.

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More info can be download from the team's diary

<http://www.birdguides.com/webzine/article.asp?a=2029>

<http://www.birdguides.com/webzine/article.asp?a=2066>

The threat of the Deep Sea Port at Sonadia where the team has now seen at least 25 birds is becoming more serious with the prospect of Chinese co-funding more likely

<http://www.gulf->

[times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=352586&version=1&template_id=44&parent_id=24](http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=352586&version=1&template_id=44&parent_id=24)

6)

SBS wintering in Thailand

Philip Round

The Wetland Trust/BCST

Every October we suffer slight trepidation until the first of our small Thai Spoon-billed Sandpiper wintering population, appears. How many (or how few) will return? This year, due to the alarming news from the breeding grounds that trepidation was extreme. As usual the first bird was noted at Khok Kham, Samut Sakhon Province, by local watcher Suchart Daengphayon (“Mr Tii”)—this year on 13 October. Two different individuals were eventually found at Khok Kham, our longest-known regular site, during the winter (see below). One other bird was also seen at another former locality, Samut Maneerat, 11 km to the west.

By early November we had also counted a further five, probably six individuals at, the salt-pan expanse in Phetchaburi, the western Inner Gulf, that extends between Pak Thale (our principal site) and Laem Pak Bia 10 km to the south. And visiting birder Justin Jansen recorded a single Spoon-billed Sandpiper at Khao Sam Roi Yot, Prachuap Khiri Khan Province some 200 km further south (“the southern gulf”). Khao Sam Roi Yot is another occasional SBS site, holding one or two birds from time to time, that in recent years has been scarcely monitored.

No SBS were seen this winter at three other Inner Gulf sites that have previously held SBS at least occasionally. This means that we had a total of nine birds in the Inner Gulf, in addition to the Khao Sam Roi Yot bird. This is approximately the same as the 2008-2009 total, but significantly fewer than the 14 birds that were found in the Inner Gulf during 2007-2008, when the Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST-BirdLife Thailand) undertook a season-long, more detailed monitoring of numbers. For data during the past winter were largely reliant on birdwatchers’ reports. None of this winter’s birds was reliably identified as a juvenile or first-winter.

Although our wintering population is small, and the Inner Gulf well-watched compared with other sites in the wintering range, even here there are probably a few more individuals to be found than realised. This was illustrated when a single (adult) Spoon-billed Sandpiper was caught in a cannon-net catch along with other small waders, at Khok Kham, on 27 February 2010, and leg-flagged with Thai colours, black above green. Within one week a second (unflagged) individual, the presence of which had not been previously suspected, had been seen. There were therefore two birds present at a site where previously only one was thought present. (This was a repeat of the same scenario that occurred when we mist-netted and flagged Thailand’s only other SBS four years previously). The 2010 flagged bird was last seen on 29 March and no records were received for April.

All our birds are found either on salt-pans (principally those of lower-middle salinity) or on other shallow, but tidally-influenced ponds immediately behind the shoreline. We still have no clear idea where SBS feed when the tide drops (although there are now about three sightings of single SBS on firmer mixed mud and sand-flats at Laem Phak Bia.) Difficulty of locating birds away from the salt-pan habitats occupied at high tide is due partly to the

limited accessibility of the great expanse of mudflats, exacerbated by the idiosyncratic Inner Gulf tidal pattern, where for most of the winter the tide remains high during daylight hours, so that most mud is exposed during night-time.

The international Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan was translated into Thai language by the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMC)., In May 2010 DMCR and BCST will jointly hold a national meeting so as to draft a national action plan. It is essential that more is done to raise awareness in Thailand, not least because of the continued degradation of coastal habitat due to loss of traditional salt pans to intensive aquaculture ponds. Also, most onshore roosting habitat is privately owned, with little in the way of legislation to safeguard it from possible future development. At least in the short term, the best hope for onshore habitat protection lies by securing informal agreement with local communities. The salt-farming cooperative at Khok Kham is a prime example of how concerned locals have banded together to form a conservation club to protect their lifestyle and successfully fight off inappropriate development in the salt-pan area. At Pak Thale, however, where most SBS are found, the community is less close-knit, and threat of development is real. BCST has been engaging the Pak Thale villagers this past two years to promote awareness and there are some hopeful signs, not least because local appreciate seeing the many foreign birdwatchers who visit the site.

Renowned US bird artist, identification guru, and wader enthusiast David Sibley visited Thailand in February 2010, spending the best part of a week glued to his telescope at Pak Thale, during that time taking some unique video of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper feeding with a shovel-like action of pushing mud and weed with its bill www.sibleyguides.com. He has also expressed a firm desire to promote greater awareness of Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation among North American birders.



7)

Observing Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Thailand

David Sibley

The quirky and mysterious Spoon-billed Sandpiper has always held a special fascination for me, and with the recent alarming declines in the world's population I felt a sense of urgency to make my way to Asia and try to see some.

In February 2010 I flew to Thailand and spent eight days in the wintering habitat watching at least seven Spoon-billed Sandpipers. This species surely has one of the most striking and unusual bill shapes of any bird, but the function of the odd bill has never been determined, and I was particularly interested in watching the birds in Thailand for any clues that might help solve this mystery.

I assumed it would be something obvious (but if it was obvious I suppose someone would have discovered it long ago). On seeing them it was clear that the movements of foraging Spoon-billed Sandpipers are very similar to any other small sandpiper.

Only at the very end of my eight days of observation did I notice that while their bills were in the water the Spoon-billed Sandpipers were often pushing lumps of mud and algae ahead of them, essentially using their bills as shovels to move mud around. They always look a bit "husky" and thick-necked, which comes in part from this habit of pushing their bill forward through the mud, as they use their body for leverage and push with their legs. It's not unusual to see one of their feet suddenly slip backwards under the effort of pushing.

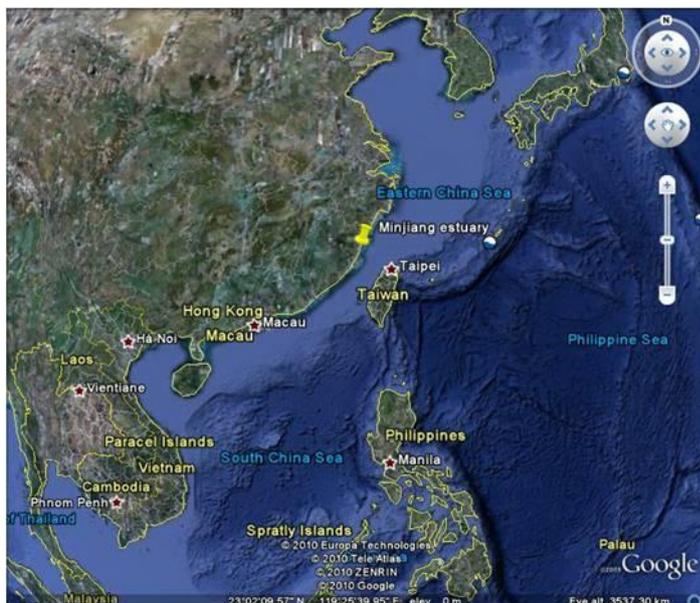
Once some mud or algae has been lifted the bird very quickly works the bill tip around underneath it, presumably grabbing any invertebrates in the slurry of muddy water, then moves on. This is just speculation, and there may be other ways the spoon-shaped bill is used in other places, but it seems like a plausible hypothesis. You can read more and see video clips at my website www.sibleyguides.com.

As always, watching carefully and finding some answers also brings up more questions, and there is a great deal still unknown about Spoon-billed Sandpipers. The few birds that I saw in Thailand could represent 3% of the world's population, and one of the most critical questions still to answer about Spoon-billed Sandpiper is "What is the primary cause of their decline?". (And what can be done to reverse it.) Christof Zockler and his many co-workers of the SBS Recovery Team from Russia and other flyway countries, BirdLife International, and many scientists from the UK, Germany and US are working feverishly to try to figure that out.

8) Minjiang Estuary, Fujian, China – northern boundary of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's wintering range

Yat-tung Yu (YYT)
Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS)

The critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper has a shrinking wintering range in Southeast and South Asia regions over the last decade. Myanmar is now known as the most important wintering area and other coastal areas in SE Asia only hold smaller numbers of wintering individuals (BirdLife International 2009, Zöckler et al 2010). Away from Myanmar, other wintering areas of this species receive fewer attentions. This species is also known wintering in southern China coast. La Touche (1931-34) found this species at Foochow (i.e. Fuzhou) in both winter and passage time, further north from all other sites in Southern Asia (Map 1). Bird watching activities have only been developed in China recently and the lack of observations of this small shorebird in the past few decades contributes to the virtually unknown wintering status of this species in China.



Map 1. Location of Minjiang estuary, Fujian, China.

The situation began to improve a few years ago, when bird watching and photographing became popular in some coastal cities in China. Photos of Spoon-billed Sandpiper have also been published in some printed materials and on the internet, demonstrating that the Spoon-billed Sandpipers may still winter in southern China coast, that is particularly interesting to me. I have started to collect this information and communicate to bird watchers and photographers who have found the Spoon-billed Sandpipers. My collected information shows that Minjiang estuary in Fujian province holds most of the records of the Spoon-billed Sandpipers and Mr. Chen Lin, a bird photographer based at Fuzhou – capital city of Fujian province, is very keen to take pictures of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and familiarized to the site. He has suggested that twenty birds could be present in the area but only a photo of two birds (in winter months) was taken and no other information could

support more than ten birds at the site to me. Therefore, I decided to briefly visit the site from 28 to 30 December 2009 to better understand the situation.

Field visit by YYT

During my visit of the site, I firstly went alone and found approximately 400 roosting small-sized shorebirds, mostly being Dunlins and Kentish Plovers during high tide on 28 December, but failed to find any Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The next time Chen accompanied me at my the next day. It was still unsuccessful to find the bird in the high-tide roosting flock on the same place. Then, Chen suggested to wait until the shorebirds would return firstly to feed with the falling tide. When the mudflats were just exposed and the first flock of feeding shorebirds came to this area, the first Spoon-billed Sandpiper appeared feeding alongside with Dunlins. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper fed in very shallow water in depth below its ankle. More and more shorebirds arrived to the area and the second and third Spoon-billed Sandpipers were found subsequently, and all of them were not close to each other and kept some distance (about 10-20m). Later, I found three other birds on the other side of the mudflat and so I immediately checked the first group which was still feeding in the same area. Therefore, I concluded that at least six birds were present in the area and I also made a count of Dunlins in 1,460 individuals. No more visits were arranged on 30 December because of unfavourable condition of the tide.



Figure 3. Spoon-billed Sandpiper at Minjiang estuary, Fujian. Photo taken by Chen Lin.

From my observation, doing the count in this site is not that straightforward because the numbers of feeding shorebirds in the mudflat during falling tide is higher than those in the high-tide roost site and so it is clearly that there still have some undiscovered high-tide shorebird roost sites. Chen is very keen on bird photographing and knows where the Spoon-billed Sandpiper would go to feed, but he still has not become interested to find the unknown high-tide roost sites. Birds are more mobile during feeding period and surveying the birds in this period would have higher chance to overestimate their numbers, especially

for only one surveyor. Also during the feeding period, the bird could only be seen in a short window of time in one area that increases difficulty of finding the birds.

Concluding remarks

After reporting this visit to Christoph Zöckler, he provided more information, including that Paul Holt also recorded a high figure of ten Spoon-billed Sandpipers in this site earlier in November and six to eight birds were still reported in mid-December. An additional visit on 15 January 2010 from Cheung Ho-fai, chairman of HKBWS brought a figure of five Spoon-billed Sandpipers in this site (Table 1). All these sightings indicate some birds could winter in the area but fluctuations of the numbers might also involve passage birds.

Table 1. Some records of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Minjiang estuary, Fujian, China

Date	Number of SBS	Season	Observer(s)
28 Oct 2004	2	Autumn	Fujian BWS
5 Nov 2006	1	Autumn	From China Bird Report
31 Mar 2007	1	Spring	Zhang Yu (Shanghai BWS)
13 Nov 2007	8	Autumn	Chen Lin and NGH
21 Nov 2007	13	Autumn	Chen Lin via Paul Holt
31 Oct 2008	5	Autumn	Paul Holt, Wang Qingyu and Zhang Lin
2 Nov 2008	10	Autumn	Paul Holt, Wang Qingyu and Zhang Lin
16 Dec 2009	6	Winter	Mark Andrews
21 Dec 2009	8	Winter	Paul Holt
29 Dec 2009	6	Winter	Yu Yat-tung (HKBWS)
15 Jan 2010	5	Winter	Cheung Ho-fai (HKBWS)
17 Apr 2010	2	Spring	Tongmenxiu, Fujian Birdwatching Society
1 May 2010	1	Spring	Tongmenxiu, Fujian Birdwatching Society

Minjiang estuary (or nearby area) has been known as a wintering area of the Spoon-billed Sandpipers from 80 years ago. It is interesting that this site is still being used nowadays even the population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper has been drastically declining in recent years. This site would support five (from the latest observation in January 2010) to twenty birds (from estimation of Chen Lin). These numbers become significant to the diminishing global population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Finding this little known wintering site gives a hint that there might be more wintering populations along the southern China coast. One Spoon-billed Sandpiper was found at Hainan Island, southern China recently (R.W. Lewthwaite pers.comm) and there are occasional mid-winter records in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2002) supporting this speculation. Hence, some systematic surveys in this region are needed to fill this information gap. Main threats of this site and also other coastal mudflats in southern China are habitat degradation and destruction from enormous economic development pressure in the area. Although the Minjiang estuary area will be designated as national nature reserve in near future, a proper management scheme of the site is still lacking. More resources are needed to safeguarding this important site.

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Figure 1 and 2. Minjiang estuary during high tide with roosting shorebirds and exposed at low tide with three Spoon-billed Sandpipers found feeding among other shorebirds in this area. (Photos Yat-tung Yu)

9) Can we use new technology to link breeding and wintering areas of Spoon-billed Sandpipers?

In recent years there have been great advances in the miniaturisation of satellite transmitters but these are still a quarter of the body weight of a Spoon-billed sandpiper and it will be many years before there is a chance of them getting to a weight that could be carried by a Spoon-billed Sandpiper. There are now other devices that can record a bird's location each day and the most promising of these are geolocators.

These accurately record the time of dawn and dusk each day giving a location with an accuracy of about 60km. By the autumn of 2009 geolocators were available at 1.1gm which would be small enough for a Spoon-billed Sandpiper to carry. The problem is how to attach them to a bird for a whole year until you can retrieve them and download the information. There are two possibilities, to attach to a leg ring or a leg loop harness. We consider that a 1.1gm weight on a Spoon-billed Sandpipers leg is too much for them to carry. Leg loop harnesses link around the top of the legs and the device sits on the lower back but we do not know if they will work on a long distant migrant wader.

The first thing to do to see if birds survive normally in populations where they are well studied.

Chris Kelly has been studying the Sanderling *Calidris alba* population wintering on the Wash, UK for a number of years and has a very detailed knowledge of their movements. This was the natural choice to trial the attachment of geolocators. On a cold winters morning last November the Wash Wader Ringing Group made a catch of 60 Sanderling. We selected seven previously ringed birds and fitted them with geolocators.



The 2010 winter was the coldest for 20 years in Britain so we were not able to observe them as much as we would have liked but we have made some observations of them behaving normally. The most important thing is to check that they migrate to the breeding grounds.

We are now eagerly waiting for the birds to return from the Arctic in July so that we can retrap them and recover the tags. This will tell us whether small sandpipers behave normally and go to the breeding grounds with these harnesses and will also enable us to identify the breeding areas of British wintering Sanderling, something that we still do not understand after 50 years of migration research. We will let you know the outcome in the autumn!

Nigel A Clark/BTO

10) Modelling the wintering and stop over sites of SBS

Using the extensive data base of over 1000 sightings in the non-breeding area we were able to model the potential of further sites that have not been. The work is in progress but two researchers have independently provided us with an initial first map based on the data available.

The first model has been provided by Prof. Falk Huettmann and co-workers at the University of Fairbanks, Alaska. The map below shows first preliminary results for modeling winter habitat of Spoon-billed Sandpipers, using TreeNet (boosting and bagging, Fig 11a) and Random Forest (Fig 11b). The models work quite well (90% accuracy). In addition, the top three predictor layers driving the results (from a list of over 15 environmental variables covering all sorts of things are: 1. GLD (the higher the better), 2. Altitude (very low is best), 3. Mean Air Temperature (in 10* degree Celsius).

Falk owes some of the data overlays to his colleague Keiko (big thanks), and hopes she can provide us with more details on the actual variables used and future work, for promising her that we would name and band a chick with her name!

To read these figs:

Y-axis is a Relative index of occurrence (upper end = high)

X-axis is the actual predictor value (towards right is getting higher values)

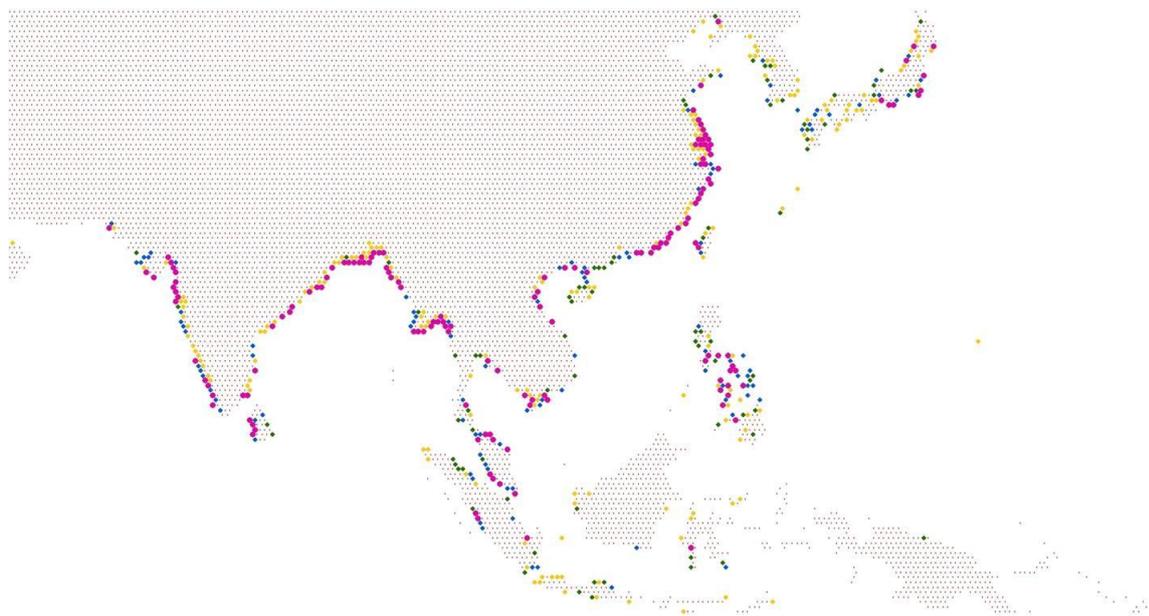


Figure 10a: SBS wintering area modelled using TreeNet, Red= absence, Yellow = low, Green = medium, Blue = high, Pink = highest predicted occurrence index

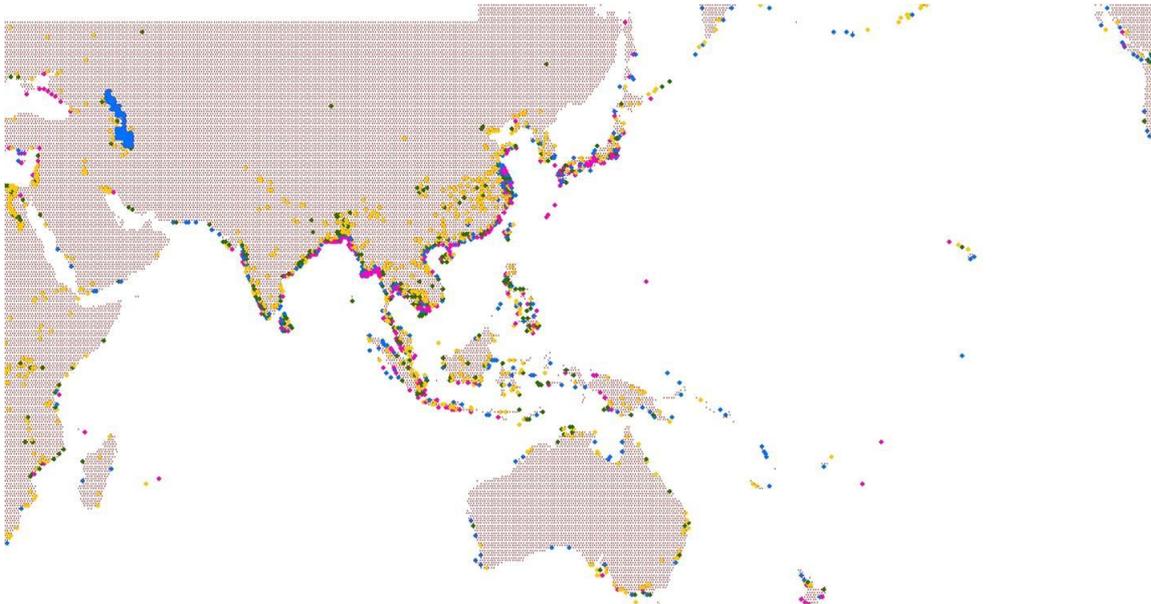
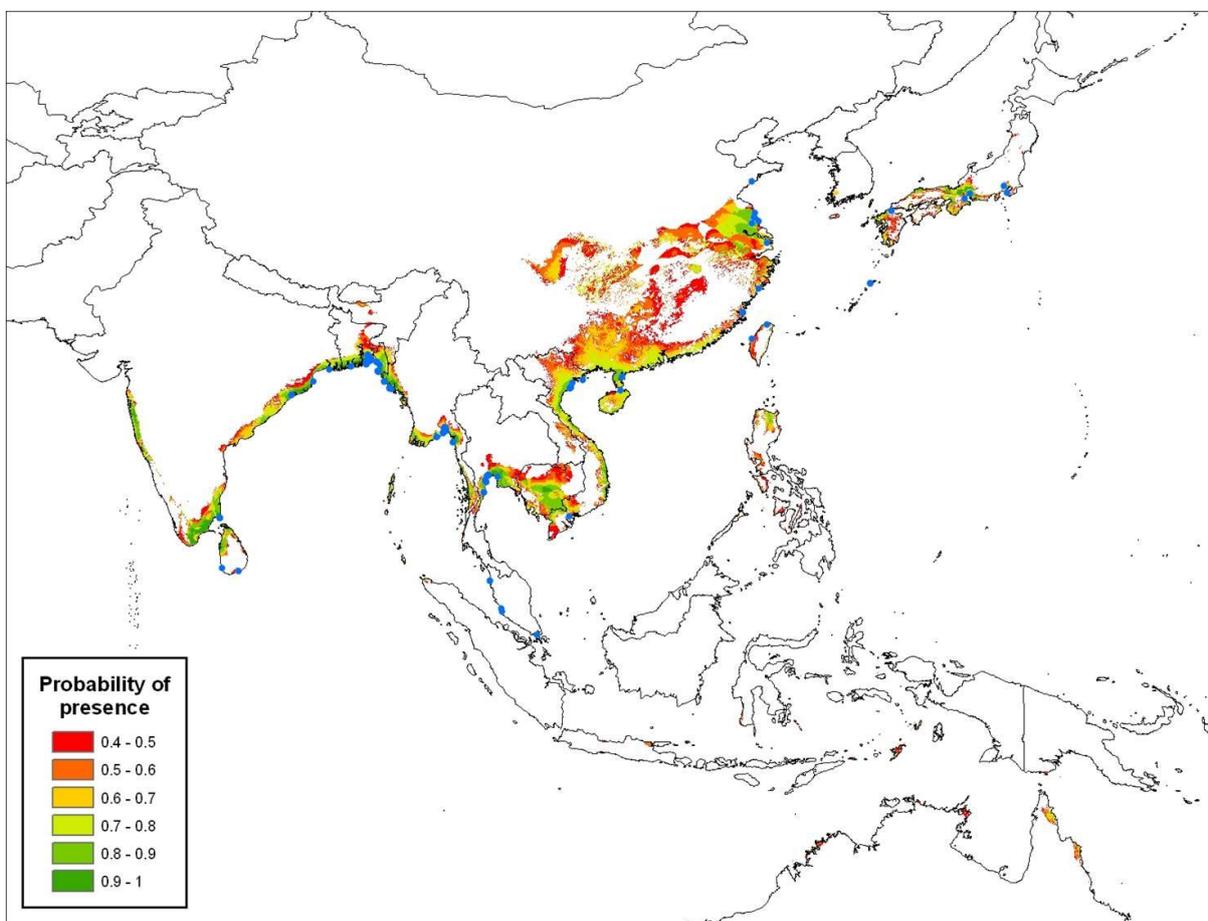


Figure 10b: SBS wintering area modelled using RandomForest, Red= absence, Yellow = low, Green = medium, Blue = high, Pink = highest predicted occurrence index

The second model has been produced by Jeff Price (WWF –US) and Rachel Warren, University of East Anglia, UK, using all 19 variables (fig 10c). Green is high probability of suitable climate, red lower (but still above 40%).



Both these models are initial drafts and need more work. However, interestingly they both show high potential for South China and East Coast of India, and less so for South Vietnam and Cambodia. These maps should be tested on the ground (at pres and abs sites)

Future models should be improved by better modeling, if possible on higher resolution and may include predictions by month; focus specifically in the coast and take the coastal peculiarities of sediment types into account.

We are looking forward to see further results and other models that are in progress. These maps should be considered only as early drafts, hopefully triggering some discussion and further model work.

12) News and Forthcoming events

In at least three countries outside the range states SBS support group have evolved. In the UK this has a focus on scientific support and is lead by CMS rep Nicola Crockford from the RSPB and Nigel Clark from the BTO. In Germany many volunteers join in supporting the conservation work by actively participating in expeditions. Tom Noah from the Biosphere Reserve Spreewald is leading the group. The US supporters focus on funding and awareness raising, lead by Graham Chisholm from the Audubon Society.

For long it was uncertain if there is enough funding in the forthcoming breeding season to send anybody in the 2010 breeding season to Chukotka. Now BirdLife International has come forward with some funding to support a small Russian team to continue the crucial monitoring on the core breeding site in Meinypil'gyno, South Chukotka. Dr. Pavel Tomkovich and co-worker Nickolay Yakushev will leave at the end of this month and hopefully find plenty of breeding pairs to look after and a chick to name after Keiko!

In August 20-22, the 22nd British Birdfair will take place again in Rutland Water and The SBS RT will be present again with its own stand and we hope that many of you can come and see us. We will offer info material, advice on tours to see the species and offer a range of goodies such as T-shirts and the infamous Russian vodka glasses. This year for the first time we are lucky have a sculpture of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper to be auctioned or raffled, kindly donated by artist Mark Andrews. Below you can find a picture of work in progress.



Courtesy Mark Andrews