Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force
News Bulletin No. 8, August 2012

Compiled by Christoph Zöckler on behalf of the EAAFP Sbs Task Force

Update August 2012: Contents

Male Spoon-billed sandpiper displaying in Meinypilgyn, Chukotka June 2012 *© Baz Scampion*

In figures:

25 birds on Nan Thar in January 2012

Over 100 SBS sightings in the Gulf of Martaban

Max. 49 SBS in Rudong in spring 2012

6-9 SBS on spring migration on Sakhalin

< 10 pairs breeding in Meinypyl'gino

20 eggs exported from Meinypyl'gino via Moscow to Slimbridge

17 chicks hatched in Slimbridge

3 ad and 1 juv. arrived in China in August 2012

Foreword from the Editor

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is quite incredible to see the amount of activities, the level of attention and the things we have all achieved over the past two years. There are many signs in both Bangladesh and Myanmar that our efforts in the wintering area might have had some first successes with increased numbers of observed SBS in some regularly monitored sites. However, alerts of so called nomadic hunters seeking to fill the gaps are challenging and a continuation of our work is necessary.

Very promising is the prospect of the designation of the most important wintering sites in Myanmar as Ramsar sites. It is fascinating and encouraging to see the pace with which our partner BANCA and the government departments move ahead. We are very hopeful to provide more details in one of the next newsletters.

Less promising is the lack of progress observed in China. In fact the habitat loss and destruction of SBS sites is accelerating in pace and urgent action is needed to safeguard these vital stepping stones in the flyway of SBS and many other wader species. Many sites that have only just been discovered or recognised as important sites for the species (see also previous newsletter) are at the same time threatened by many different forms of reclamation disturbance and pollution. Even the very few protected areas are not safe from further destruction. It looks like a desperate situation and a lost fight, but there are many signs that also in China things are changing. Our Task Force has gained more and more support of an increasing number of Chinese SBS enthusiasts – and very talented photographers – who require our continued support. The IUCN published a report of the situation of the intertidal mudflats, which a wide range of NGO partner organisations are supporting. Let's hope that this broad platform of support can achieve a change in attitude and could even aim for a memorandum on reclamation.

The situation of the SBS still is precarious, despite our progress in the winter and on the breeding grounds and once again the detrimental development in China explains why we need to go the long, expensive and cumbersome route of captive breeding to establish a stock of captive bred birds as a backup plan in case all our efforts on the flyway fail. We are very fortunate to have a dedicated partner in WWT and this year's expedition was even more successful than last year's. The situation in the breeding area is still not stable. The number of pairs in our core area Meinypylgino continued to decline. Luckily the team could find another strong population of at least 6 pairs. More details of the latest expedition to the breeding grounds and many other activities between NE Russia and Myanmar and beyond can be found in this newsletter. Again I would like to thank all those many supporters within the flyway and increasingly from outside on all continents. There are too many to mention them all, but I'd like to thank BirdLife International for its continued support over many years and also the EAAFP, who continued to host our Task Force and provides support in many other forms. The RSPB stepped up its support and secured major funding through the Darwin Fund of the British government. The US Fish and Wildlife Services, the Lucile Packard Foundation and the Lighthouse Foundation continued their support, like many other individuals. Without all their support we would not have achieved this much progress. I hope you enjoy this new edition of the SBS newsletter.

Dr Christoph Zöckler, Coordinator SBS TF, August 2012

2) EAAFP SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER TASK FORCE WORKSHOP, Palembang, Indonesia, 23-24 MARCH 2012

For two days, back to back with the 6th EAAFP meeting of the Parties, the Task Force held its 12th meeting in Palembang, Indonesia with a record 38 participants from 14 different nations. The meeting was supported by BirdLife Asia and focussed on developing the workplan for the coming two to three years to implement, update and revise the Action Plan. Matters related to the hunting issue as well as improved surveys and monitoring dominated the workshop, but the current IUCN synthesis analysis of coastal habitat loss naturally featured strongly in the discussions. All countries and regions reported on the status and conservation progress and it was good to see how much progress has been made over the last two years. It was encouraging to see so many new members, mostly from China, but also from Vietnam and Thailand. Particularly welcome was the stronger representation of governmental reps, namely Russia, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh. A detailed account of the reports and discussion can be found at http://www.eaaflyway.net/documents/tf/EAAFP-SBS-Task-Force-meeting-March-2012.pdf

SBS TF Workshop and EAAFP excursion members enjoying the Sembilang mudflats *© C. Zöckler*

3) Breeding Season 2012: Preliminary summary of results and personal perspectives of expedition members

(sponsored by Packard Foundation via BirdLife International and the Darwin Initiative)

a)This year's expedition into the breeding grounds was hampered by an unusually cold spring. Fog and a bitter cold wind prevailed for most of May and June. Yet, on 25 May the weather was fine allowing us to arrive without any delay by helicopter at Meinopyl'gino, our final destination in South Chukotka, the core breeding area of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The temperature rarely ever passed beyond 6 or 8 degrees and a cold wind blew wet air from the cold Bering Sea creating foggy conditions for most of the time. However, SBS arrived in time, in fact a day earlier than previously recorded and started displaying, pairing and nesting without much delay.

Male Spoon-billed Sandpiper just after arrival in Meinypilgyno *©Tom Noah*

In total only 9 pairs have been found in the last remaining core breeding area in Meinopyl'gino. This is another decline in the population. Although it is still possible for one or two more broods to be detected, for the first time the population dropped below ten pairs. Also areas east of Meinopyl'gino that were home to two more pairs last year seemed not to be occupied this year. It is comforting though, that the team discovered at least five more pairs, possibly up to eight in a previously hardly visited area to the West. The site is remote and bad weather and ice conditions did not allow earlier access to the area. Five territories found might be only the minimum.

Almost all clutches were collected for the re-stocking of the captive breeding population and the head-starting programme. Head starting will reduce the predation of clutches and chicks as clutches will be brought in an incubator and chicks raised at site nearby for later release into the wild and increase the number of offspring significantly. The eggs were taken at an early stage to encourage replacement clutches and avoid predation which has been noted at least in one case. Some eggs will be taken back to the birds that were sitting on dummy eggs just before hatching. This is important as parent birds remain attached to the breeding site, chicks grow up by wild birds have more experience and can share this with head-started birds.

This year the team consisted of 14 people from six countries. The team was led by Christoph Zöckler from ArcCona Consulting on behalf of Birds Russia, who returned to this core breeding site for the fourth time, while Russian researcher Nikolay Yakushev returned again for the seventh year. The team was supported again in a very effective manner by the Friends of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, a group of local villagers, supporting the conservation efforts by providing logistical support, organising accommodation, transport, and helping in many other ways.

Very special guests this time were Sayam Chowdhury from the Bangladesh Bird Club and Karin Eberhardt from BANCA in Myanmar, who are active on SBS conservation in their respective countries, but most of all responded to school children from Meinopyl'gino, who sent a message last year to all school children along the flyway to tell their parents not to hunt or harm their Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Sayam and Karin reported from their countries and brought traditional presents to the school. They also reported back that in both countries comprehensive measures have been taken to stop hunting and to conserve the areas where the birds that breed in Meinopyl'gino spend their winter. The teachers especially were very surprised to see such a response and encouraged their children to respond in equal measures which resulted in more messages and presents created for school children in China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. This went well beyond the expectations of all involved in the initial awareness raising efforts at the school two years ago and it could be the beginning of an incredible exchange between schoolchildren among all the flyway countries.

All the work, from the painstaking nest searching, the careful egg collecting and incubation and the work with school children, has only been possible due to the generous support by the Packard Foundation, SOS Fund, Darwin and the RSPB. This is a joint effort of Bird Life partner Birds Russia with support of WWT, RSPB, ArcCona Consulting and the SBS Task Force.

C. Zöckler on behalf of the expedition team

Meinypyl'gino – Breeding Habitat and school children creating sculptures of Spoon-billed Sandpiper *© C. Zöckler*

b) Expedition 2012 to Meinypyl'gino (South Chukotka)
A personal account from Phil Palmer

Holiday in Siberia?

Opening the zip of a tent to taste droplets of freezing fog is not something you want from a birding holiday. But this is precisely what I had signed up for! I returned to Chukotka at the request of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force to help locate the few remaining pairs of this critically endangered bird. Being a volunteer with limited leave and funds means that the decision to join the team is a hard one, but also very easy…..who could turn down the chance to visit Meinypilgyno?

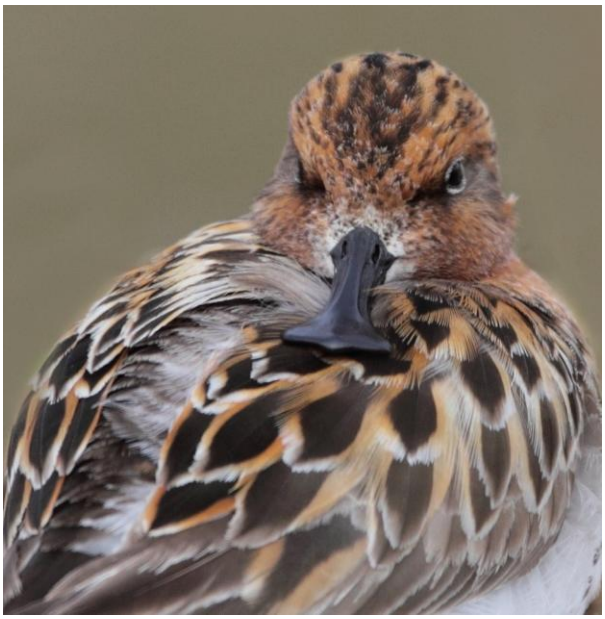
My task on two previous Russian expeditions in 2004 and 2009 was to find territorial birds, while monitoring other breeding species in this little-studied region. These journeys took me to places so remote that the only way in (or out) was by using helicopters and kayaks. On more than one occasion, friends thought I had disappeared for good. This time I was hoping to see plenty of brick-red Spoon-billed Sandpipers as I would be based beside the last remaining breeding colony for the species. The fact that I had only seen one during the whole of my previous expeditions indicated just how serious the situation was for them. The SbS Task Force had been working here for several years and so routine and logistics were well established. A rented house, easy access to food supplies and even our own cook (Sveta) meant that this was going to be the most comfortable of Russian trips I had undertaken.

We were joined by WWT staff that were taking eggs for the captive breeding programme. My task was to locate nests as well as mapping SbS territories and recording other bird species in the area.

Leaving the UK on 23rd May, we swiftly settled in to the frozen landscape of Meinypilgyno. The 2 hour helicopter ride over the mountains was spectacular with all the rivers and lakes still locked in ice. This was an advantage when we started to explore as we were able to cross the rivers to reach the sea where thousands of wildfowl, divers and grebes passed or paused to feed. Perhaps as many as 200 Grey Whales fed close to shore. So close that you could smell their 'stale cabbage' breath!

The daily turnover was incredible with thousands of Black and Stejneger's Scoters and all four species of eider one day, followed by masses of Harlequin Duck and hundreds of Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas the next.

The Spoonies arrived on 30th May, a day earlier than previously. We monitored the feeding males until the first females arrived, and then it was all systems go. We hiked the moraine hills to locate singing males where we hoped they breed. As these were mapped ready for Nikolay to locate their nests, I was then sent to Ankavye; a flat area of lakes and dry tundra: This was to be my local patch.



Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Spectacled Eider © *P. Palmer*

While SbS return to the same location to nest each year making them easier to find, Ankavye had always been unpredictable due to massive annual fluctuations in water levels. Some years the whole area would become one big lake, so finding nests here had proved impossible. With daily visits or camping trips, I gradually built up a picture of what was happening. There were three males here that enjoyed brief encounters with females that seemed to quickly move on. Despite the others already finding nests in the west, I struggled.

I took comfort from Pavel who repeatedly warned that things were always a week late at Ankavye, due to the colder temperature and lingering ice. The problem here was that feeding opportunities were low so SbS made long flights to other areas confusing the picture. Birds would appear settled in one spot, only to disappear soon after. Some were so shy that it was impossible to know if the same birds were concerned with each sighting. However Baz, Karin and I noted one pair lingering in the same area on several occasions. After many frustrating sessions of just watching them, it was clear that egg-laying was imminent. The female was so plump that her wings drooped and she spent long periods asleep. She had surely chosen a nest site to be nearby? Deciding to leave them for a couple of days, we ensured that she was undisturbed. It was then almost too easy when we returned and watched the male sit down in a patch of willows and sedge…phew! My first SbS nest and quite a feather in my cap apparently. Who can put "Spoon-billed sandpiper nest finder" on their CV?

From then on, it only became slightly easier as I could now read behavioural signs that would help me. The other birds at Ankavye roamed far and wide, so I decided that it was better to let them settle and try later. I then ventured to the nearby 'Overwashed Spit' in Lake Pikulny.
No SbS had ever nested here, but I found a male that looked quite happy here. Soon it was joined by a female and despite being told that they were most likely just migrants. I persisted. Again they seemed to like the place but certainly had not laid eggs. So another waiting game began.
Having given them enough time, it was again just a matter of watching the male walk to the nest to betray four spotted eggs surrounded by beautiful pink catkins.

It was both exciting and sad to see them taken away and replaced by dummies just a few hours later. But the fact that they were situated in a Vega Gull colony made them obvious targets for predation. During the period spent watching this pair, I had witnessed gulls taking eggs of Ringed Plover and Pacific Diver, all within 200m of the SbS nest.

Nest-finding is a branch of birdwatching that is dying out in Western Europe. This meant that the discovery of a Buff-bellied Pipit's nest and the first Common Sandpiper's nest in the Meinypil'gyno region was exciting. But like most birders, the big thrills often come from finding rare birds.
I found several vagrants like Eye-browed Thrush and Brambling, as well as pairs of American Wigeon and Mallard (yes, Mallard are rarer than Spoon-billed Sandpipers here!). But I guess that my Siberian Bullfinch was perhaps my favourite discovery. Perhaps the biggest challenge was to become accustomed to working with bears. The more experienced surveyors told me that they just run away, but they all carried guns, so why should they worry about bears? I had a flare or pepper spray. Pepper spray might make me attractive to bears that enjoy spicy food, while a flare would make me appear like a birthday cake, so neither inspired me with confidence.

My first sightings involved sleepy bears that just looked up and didn't want to move. Another woke up feet from me and ran so fast that it crossed an area of tundra in three minutes that had taken me an hour to struggle through; this illustrated that running was futile. Climbing a tree was not an option as I would have to bend down to reach the canopy and so the only thing to do was to accept them and use common sense for each encounter - this worked well.

Equipment seemed to be a personal problem. I ripped both pairs of trousers, destroyed 2 pair of gloves and an Arctic-proof rain coat, wore holes in all my socks, and even managed to wear out a pair of new wellies by hiking across 20-30km of tundra each day. It was so cold that I melted my waterproof over trousers on the camp fire one evening and so I became a bit of a womble in Russia. Along the coast just outside the village, I would find discarded old clothes that I was able to 'recycle' and the ability to spot things meant that I found a passport, house keys, some coins, a stolen quad bike and even the mayor of Meinypil'gyno's lost dog. This ensured that I was welcome in the village and got several hugs or offers of tea from the Chuckchi ladies.

I have been fortunate to see SbS on migration during our China bird tours and next year's Myanmar tour will allow us to search for the ringed birds from Meinypil'gyno.
That is exciting and very comfortable but if anyone was to ask if I would brave the cold, risk being eaten by bears, and walk miles in clothing full of holes, just to see another Spoon-billed Sandpiper, the answer would be yes. And if I can help stem their slide towards extinction at the same time, this would be the most satisfying time of my life.

I would like to thank Pavel, Egor, Nikolay, Sveta, Tom, Karin, Sayam, Baz, Richard, Liz, Roland, Roman and Yuri and all of the friends I made in Chukotka for making this summer so special. As well as Christoph, Evgeny and Lisa for organising it.

Phil Palmer
www.BirdHolidays.co.uk

4) Surveying remote SBS breeding population of Korayk Coasts in 2012 with the help of Heritage Expedition.

Heritage Expeditions (HE) supports the conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper as species champion of BirdLife International's Preventing Extinctions Programme. For the second year HE offers a cruise along the most remote and inaccessible areas of the southern breeding range at the Koryak coasts between Chukotka and Kamchatka and provides BirdsRussia with the unique opportunity to survey suitable sites yet unvisited. Survey groups, consisting of volunteers and guests on board the vessel are coming by zodiacs to lagoons selected by BirdsRussia using satellite images and predictive modeling. They carefully search all day for nesting or feeding SBS in the best potential and most suitable habitat under the guidance of two experts from BirdsRussia, invited by HE to join the cruise. These are this year the SBS Task Force Chairmen, Evgeny Syroechkovskiy and myself. HE is well known with its high standards of responsible ecotourism so participating teams were trained to make the minimum environmental impact. Each team was led by experienced staff to minimize any kind of disturbance to breeding birds and particularly potential breeding SBS.

In July 2011 HE team had discovered an unknown breeding population at the Koryak sea coast in Kamchatka (see SBS newsletter No. 6). This year we had visited three different new sites, to survey not only crowberry spits, but also the nearest lagoons in moraine hills, another promising SBS breeding habitat. Despite of many good habitats and huge efforts of four teams with a total of nearly 50 people, no further evidence of breeding SBS was found. Considering the quiet period within the breeding cycle, and the short time permitted at every landing site we could not exclude we are missing 1-2 pairs, which are highly secretive at the late stages of incubation. But with the number of surveyors and the coverage of potential sites it seems impossible to miss any serious numbers of breeding birds.

There is a hope that some more breeding SBS will be found next summer. A third year of cooperation with HE is planned for 2013 to complete the first round of surveys, covering around 70% of the most promising SBS sites of the Koryak coasts. This year's survey results are still very valuable and important for our SBS conservation work. They add a lot to our current understanding of the breeding distribution and unfortunately support even more the fact that our most recent estimate of up to 120 breeding pairs is probably too optimistic. The Koryak coasts is supposed to be the most promising to find new breeding pairs. The results of the survey also point more and more to the high significance of the last remaining known site of the breeding range in the vicinity of the Meinypilgyno settlement, which is critically important for the species having the highest breeding numbers anywhere. It is now more and more important to pay all the attention of conservation action to this site.
On the final stage the cruise spend two days around Meinypilgyno. All tourists had a chance to see an incubating bird through the scope from a distance without disturbing the breeding bird. Important support for our SBS conservation team was also provided by the transit of important expedition cargo by the Heritage cruise from Petropavlovsk and allowing transportation of expedition members from the survey site to Anadyr.
We would like to thank Rodney Russ, the stuff of HE and research vessel "Professor Khromov" and all the tourists for their dedication in supporting a crucial and important part of our SBS conservation work.

SBS Museum Exhibition in Anadyr planned for this autumn.

This year a special exhibition dedicated to SBS conservation will take place in the Anadyr museum for three months. This follows a meeting with the Chukotka Governor, Mr. Roman Kopin, who expressed an interest to the conservation of the species. The SBS exhibition will play a key role in the education and raising awareness of the species conservation among the citizens of Anadyr and will present the SBS as a unique natural heritage of Chukotka. A similar set of materials, which will be temporarily shown in Anadyr is planned to be sent for permanent exhibition to Meinypilgyno, the core breeding site for SBS.

The exhibition will reflect the situation in the breeding grounds, shows various result of scientific work on the species, such as the distribution, the decline in the population, ringing and color marking, habitat evaluation etc. Information collected for many decades in Chukotka will be combined with illustrating the situation in the non-breeding areas, including information on threats - hunting and habitat change in the intertidal areas. Different conservation programs (such as Captive Breeding in Slimbridge and Headstarting in Chukotka) will be described and key players of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force of EAAFP, such as BirdsRussia, BirdLife International, ArcCona Consulting, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), RSPB, Moscow Zoo, British Trust for Ornithology and others will be presented at the exhibition.

The exhibition is planned to open in early October 2012 together with the meeting of the CAFF Management Board (working group of the Arctic Council for the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna) currently chaired by Russia. We hope that the exhibition will attract the attention of local people and officials both nationally and internationally to SBS and its need for conservation. People still need to understand that this most unique bird, endemic of Chukotka, the fastest declining bird of Russian Red Data Book, might get extinct as quickly as in next 10-15 years. And only urgent actions now may help understand and the support of the people of Chukotka is most needed for that.

Elena Lappo (BirdsRussia and Institute of Geography Rus.Acad.Sci)

5) The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Breeding Programme

Baz Hughes, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)

Three months ago I could only have dreamt that this year's expedition would be more successful than 2011. We had decided to adopt a different, higher risk but potentially higher gain strategy – rather than rear chicks in Anadyr then quarantine them in Moscow (and probably suffer losses like we did last year), we would collect eggs in Meinypil'gyno and fly them back to the UK. Sounds easy doesn't it? I can assure you it was not.

On 22 May, this year's WWT expedition team (Richard Smith, Richard Hesketh and Liz Mackley) left Slimbridge to join the international field team led by Christoph Zöckler – 16 members from Russia, the UK, New Zealand, Germany, Bangladesh and Myanmar - a real multinational effort.

Never in the history of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper expeditions had the journey from Moscow to Meinypil'gyno been as swift. The town of Anadyr, Capitol and Gateway to Chukotka, is notorious for weather and bureaucratic delays. But thanks to Nikolay's quick logistical manoeuvring, to fast and sweaty teamwork hauling mountains of gear in endless stages to the helicopter, and to great good weather-luck, the team was through the town in under 24 hours and arrived in Meina on 25 May.

Surveying began immediately and the first Spoon-billed Sandpiper was seen on 30 May – 3 days earlier than in 2011 – and the first nest was then found on 15 June – 1 day earlier than last year. The four newly laid eggs were collected immediately, firstly to prevent them being predated but secondly, and importantly, to give the parents the best chance of laying a replacement clutch.

Over the next month or so, a total of 37 eggs were collected from 10 clutches, all as soon as they were found – providing sufficient eggs not only for the conservation breeding programme (20 eggs) but also for headstarting – rearing and releasing birds on the breeding grounds (more on this in the next newsletter).

And so the mission to extract the eggs began. Nigel Jarrett and Liza Tambovtseva arrived in Anadyr on 25 June. Again we were blessed by the weather. After a week of continuous cloud, fog and rain (meaning the helicopter couldn't fly), the next day turned out to be glorious sunshine, allowing the WWT egg extraction team to fly in to Meina, collect the 20 eggs, and return to Anadyr – an operation that took only 12 hours, with the helicopter on the ground in Meina for only 30 minutes!

Collecting the first clutch.

Egor Loktionov lifts the eggs into the helicopter.

Liz Brown hands over to Nige Jarrett during the flight.

Team celebrating the completion of the release pen site.

To cut a very long story short, the 20 eggs arrived back at Slimbridge at 10am on 5 July – after a monumental eight day journey from Meina. The first egg hatched only 6 hours later and so began a nine day, 24 hours a day vigil as the eggs hatched. And I am very happy to say that we now have 17 healthy Spoon-billed Sandpiper chicks at Slimbridge – in addition to the 12 birds from last year's expedition (7 males, 4 females, 1 currently of unknown sex). So 29 birds in total – or maybe 10% of the world population! This year's chicks will be DNA sexed over the coming weeks and we hold out hope that there are enough females to achieve our target captive population of 10 pairs.

BA Captain Jerry Woodham and Nigel Jarrett.

The eggs arrive at Slimbridge.

4 day old Spoon-billed Sandpiper chicks.

6) Spotting Spoon-billed sandpipers in Lososei Bay, Sakhalin Island, Russia

Introduction

Lososei Bay, in the Aniva Gulf at the southern end of Sakhalin Island, has long been recognised as an important stopover site for the spoon-billed sandpiper (*Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*). Up to 200 have been counted in the past (Nechaev 1998), but there have been no systematic surveys in recent years.

In 2011, a survey of Lososei Bay was organised by Birds Russia and the Sakhalin Research Institute. Four visits were made by Pavel Ktitorov between 19th and 29th May, and a single Sbs was seen on 29th May (Ktitorov 2012). A more comprehensive survey in 2012 was recommended, so during the second half of May a small team of three ornithologists and a photographer spent two weeks camping at Lososei Bay. The team members were: Dr Anton Ivanov of the Timiryazev's State Biological Museum in Moscow (several year's experience of studying waders in salt lakes in southern Russia); Doug Radford of the RSPB UK (nature reserve manager with >30 year's experience of bird monitoring particularly in inter-tidal habitats); Gennady Savchenko of the IMGG

FEB RAS Ecology Laboratory in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (indigenous ornithologist with detailed knowledge of Sakhalin's birds and local information); and Evgeny Kuzmenko, an amateur bird photographer from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Pavel Ktitorov was unable to participate as he was 'defending his thesis' in St Petersburg, but he did much of the preparation with Gennady and provided much of the equipment, and his wife Ana provided us with a base in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk from which to launch the expedition.

This article is a short summary of the activities of the expedition; a more detailed report is in preparation (Ivanov et al 2012), and at least one paper in a recognised scientific journal is anticipated.

Objectives and logistics

At low tide, a vast area of intertidal mudflats is exposed at the northern end of Aniva Gulf. For purely practical reasons, the survey effort was concentrated on Lososei Bay, an area of approximately 4 km^2 that is exposed at low tide and variably covered at high tide.

The objectives of the survey were:

- to make an intensive search for Sbs among the flocks of waders in Lososei Bay, and record as much information as possible about their habitat preferences, feeding behaviour, interactions with other species, etc;
- to monitor the numbers of all wader species daily;
- to record any marked birds (mainly leg flags);
- to attempt to catch waders for ringing and colour marking.

The three ornithologists assembled in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 12th/13th/14th May, and moved out to Lososei Bay on 16th May. Vehicle access was possible along an unmade road from Solovievka as far as the Susuya River, but because the wooden bridge had collapsed all the equipment was ferried across the river by Anton in Pavel's inflatable boat and carried 500m to a camp site, situated directly under the main wader flight path as they departed from Lososei Bay on their northward migration. The camp site was about 0.6km from the eastern shore of the estuary, and about 4km from the most westerly of our viewpoints.

From 20th – 27th May the ornithologists were joined by Evgeny, complete with camera equipment, extra water, and fresh fruit and vegetables. Expedition members initially visited the estuary in pairs until they became familiar with the terrain. The duck hunting season was still open when we arrived, and more than a dozen hunters were present around the shoreline on some occasions, so we limited our exploration to areas where we would not come into conflict with hunters until the season closed on 20th May. Access was on foot through up to 1.5km of reedbed/fen and then across saltmarsh and intertidal mud flats. This meant that a significant amount of time was spent simply getting to the viewpoints initially, but increasing familiarity with the hidden holes and ditches in the reedbed and the softer/deeper mud and channels allowed observers to spend progressively less time getting to and from the estuary.

Waders were counted at least once a day, but more frequent counts were made on some days depending on the state of the tide. Often part of the day was spent in searching sections of the estuary for roosting and feeding locations away from the places where birds were usually seen. Individual birds were scrutinised very carefully in order to find any Sbs among the hundreds of red-necked stints, and to spot any leg flags on all species. The precise locations of each Sbs were recorded by GPS.

Anton was very keen to catch and ring some waders, but all the advice we had received from wader specialists before the expedition urged a cautious approach until we had become familiar with the estuary and the movements of the birds. Anton and Gennady tried mist netting in various locations on the intertidal mud adjacent to the saltmarsh during four nights coinciding with the highest tides, starting with 30m (3 x 10m) of net and gradually increasing the length on each occasion up to 80m.

Results and discussion

28 species of waders were recorded. The most numerous were thousands of red-necked stints (*Calidris ruficollis*), and hundreds of dunlins (*C. alpina*) and Mongolian plovers (*Charadrius mongolus*). Spoon-billed sandpiper sightings are summarised in the table below:

Date & time	Number	Observer	Comments
22.05.12 (09.30)	1	DJR	feeding with c20 R-n stints
27.05.12 (19.20)	1	AI (DJR)	identified in photo of flock of R-n stints in flight
28.05.12 (07.15)	1	DJR	feeding with c100 R-n stints; photographed
28.05.12 (11.05)	4	GS	feeding with c300 birds of four species
28.05.12 (15.00)	1	AI	feeding with c300 birds of three species; photographed; different bird to previous four
29.05.12 (09.40)	1	AI	feeding with 343 birds of four species

Although as many as nine Sbs could have been seen, after due consideration of the times of sightings and comparison of notes and photographs we feel justified in claiming to have seen at least six individuals. We think that the Sbs seen on 22nd May was probably a different bird to those seen later, being more than five days earlier than the second record. The second Sbs, identified in flight after the expedition in a photograph taken on the evening of the 27th by Anton, may have been one of the individuals seen the following day; this may also apply to the bird seen on the 29th. However, the photos of the bird seen in the afternoon of the 28th indicate that it was not one of the four in full summer plumage that were seen together in the morning, so a total of five were seen on the 28th. While we were thrilled to have seen these birds and demonstrate that Lososei Bay is still an important staging site for Sbs on their spring migration, it is sobering to consider that we have probably seen 2% of the world population of approximately 300 birds! Detailed accounts of each sighting (including photos) will appear in the full report (Ivanov et al 2012).

Leg flags were seen on at least six, and possibly eight birds of three species. We saw red-necked stints that had been ringed in Chongmin-Dao (China), Taiwan, North-west Australia, and Victoria (south-east Australia); a dunlin from Chongmin-Dao (China); and a grey-tailed tattler from Hokkaido (Japan).

Anton and Gennady caught four birds (two red-necked stints, one Mongolian plover and one ruddy turnstone), which were ringed with standard metal rings and two coloured leg flags. The colour combination allocated to Sakhalin Island on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway is white and yellow; birds ringed in Lososei Bay have the yellow ring above the white. The small number of birds caught was disappointing for the amount of effort put in, but we recognised the need to err on the side of caution on a tidal site where we had counted up to 900 red-necked stints in a single flock, and lessons were learnt that will help any future attempts to catch waders at Lososei Bay.

Duck hunters were present each day until the season closed on 20th May. Therefore we suspect that hunters have no effect on Sbs on their spring migration, which probably starts after this date, but we feel that disturbance of wildfowl and waders during the hunting season is considerable. The density of hunters far exceeds anything Doug has seen in the UK, with hides of varying levels of sophistication often only a few hundred metres apart all around the estuary. There were also several recently excavated flight ponds in the saltmarsh.

Shortly after the expedition, Gennady sent out a press release and made an appearance on local television, in which he drew attention to the plight of the spoon-billed sandpiper and the importance of Lososei Bay and Aniva Gulf for migrating waders.

Acknowledgements

A significant proportion of the cost of the expedition was provided by Birds Russia, whose work on spoon-billed sandpipers is supported by the Packard Foundation. Within Birds Russia and the Sbs Task Force, help and encouragement were gratefully received from Evgeny Syroechkovskiy, Christoph Zockler, and Elizabeth Tambovtseva. We thank our respective employers for allowing us the time to participate in the expedition.

We are extremely grateful to Pavel and Ana Ktitorov for doing much of the preparation for the expedition, the loan of the boat and other equipment, and their generous hospitality. Transport between Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and the Susuya River, and the loan of the communal tent, was provided by the Institute of Marine Geology and Geophysics in the Far East Branch of Russian

Academy of Sciences in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Several wader specialists, particularly Guy Anderson of the RSPB, gave some much appreciated advice on catching waders in intertidal habitats.
Finally, this article has been written by Doug in the absence of Anton and Gennady, who are currently studying Steller's sea eagles in the wilderness of north Sakhalin, and therefore cannot be contacted. The information herein has been drawn from the draft report, but any errors or omissions are the author's.

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Author Contacts

Doug Radford, c/o RSPB, Fowlmere Nature Reserve, Manor Farm, Fowlmere, Royston SG8 7SH, UK. Email: doug.radford@rspb.org.uk
Anton Ivanov, Timiryazev's State Biological Museum, Malaya Grusinskaya, 15, Moscow, 123242, Russia. Email: apivanov@gbmt.ru
Gennady Savchenko, IMGG FEB RAS, Ecology Lab, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Russia. Email: ggsavchenko@gmail.com

Crossing the river near the old bridge © *D. Radford*

Waders and Wildfowler's huts *© D. Radford*

7) 2012 Spring Spoon-billed Sandpiper Survey of Rudong, Dongtai and Wenzhou (Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces, Eastern China)

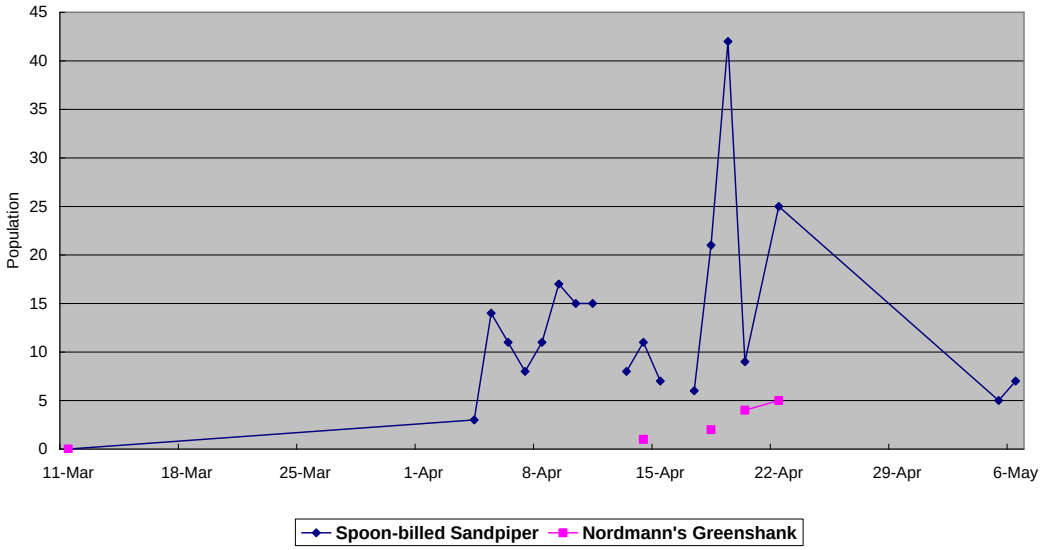
Tong Menxiu / Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China

Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Yongqiang Seashore, 5th April *© Dai Meijie*

Rudong

From the11th March – 6th May the coast of Yangkou Town and Pincha Town were surveyed by Tang Zhenghua, Li Jing, Zhang Lin and myself. In 30 days field work a total 235 SBS were recorded during this period. From April to May, there are about 30-50 birds staying in Rudong every day. The maximum day was on April 19th, Tong Menxiu counted a total of 49 SBS during high tide period.

2012 Spring Spoon-billed Sandpiper Survey of Rudong



We still observed SBS were moulting in Rudong in spring. The first full summer breeding plumage was found in early April, then more and more breeding plumage SBS appeared in Rudong. As we know, Rudong is being used by moulting SBSs and these are the first records of moulting SBSs anywhere! This again proves the importance of this stopover for Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

Moulting SBS at Rudong, ©*Zou Yu*

Unfortunately, because of lack of surveyors and bad weather, we can't survey the whole spring migratory season. But during 2012 spring, we still total recorded 74 species of water birds, a total number of 103,397 birds, and 96% are waders; 6 species of endangered water birds and a total number of 1,189 were recorded during this period.

More and more construction is carried out in the chemical industry park. All the wasteland area is being built upon, where the waders have used as a roost area. Now some waders are moving to the fishpond of Pincha Town further East for rest, others are moving to nearby areas, such as Qionggang, Dongtai City. Many fishponds were abandoned last winter, as many fisherman went into bankruptcy. The ponds became a new roost and breeding area for the waders and gulls.

As we said, Xiao Yangkou is one of most important stopover sites for water birds, but there's very little attention and conservation action at the local level now. And more and more construction is happening right now.

In the chemical industrial park the construction of a big waste pipe leads into the tidal flat. After it is finished, more and more sewage will pollute the whole tidal flat. Last year we already found many Benthos were dead in the tidal flat.

Smooth Cordgrass are moving much further in the east side, and more and more tidal flats are covered by the alien plant. If no effort will be carried out the whole mudflat will be destroyed very soon! WWF try to do some conservation action about clearing Smooth Cordgrass in the tidal flat, but local government isn't interested to support these efforts and nothing else happens.

Although some volunteers, who come from Nantong, Shanghai and Najing City, joined us for the SBS survey, most of them are available only at weekends. We still need more volunteers who can do the Long-term SBS survey. We're also training local birders and students to help us. They will be of great help in future. We also ask for an international team to work together for the future to conserve Xiao Yangkou and nearby wetland.

Dongtai

From the 9th-20th April Zhang Lin, Tong Menxiu, Tang Zhenghua also surveyed the mudflats at Jianggang Town, Dongtai City. Jianggang Town is about 45km in the NW of Yangkou Town. From 2010 to now, we did several surveys in this area, recorded some SBS and also Nordmann's Greenshank. The habitat here is better than Yangkou Town; less construction and less Cord Grass in the tidal flat.

Coast of Jianggang Town © *Tong Menxiu / China Wild Tour*

Three surveys were carried out in this area in April. 17 SBS were recorded on 9th April, 20 SBS were recorded on 15th April, 14 SBS were recorded on 20h April. Most of SBS were halfway in breeding plumage. We believe that some waders were moving from nearby area of Yangkou Town, due to disturbance in Yangkou area.

As in Yangkou Town, we lack skilled surveyors. Reclamation is happening and Smooth Cordgrass is also spreading. Again, no conservation action is being carried out.

We suggest to continue surveying around the coast of Yangkou Town. If tidal flat were completely destroyed, SBS and other shore birds may well be moving to this area.

Wenzhou

Between 2nd April- 15th April several surveys were carried out by Tong Menxiu, Wang Qingliang, Dai Meijie at two sites in the Wenzhou area: Yongqiang seashore and Lingkun Island. On 2nd April we found 5 Spoon-billed Sandpiper, 3 Nordmann's greenshank, 7 breeding plumage Saunders's Gull and more than 7000 waders at Yongqiang Seashore. One Spoon-billed Sandpiper was 3/4 breeding plumage, and the other 4 birds were less than 1/4 breeding plumage. After that in first half of April, at least 2-3 SBS were found in the same place every day.

One Dalmatian Pelican, 38 Black-faced Spoonbill and 5000+ waders were recorded in Lingkun Island on 2nd April. On the coast of Lingkun Island, fisherman used nets to prevent shorebirds to feed on the mudflat, where they have Aquaculture. This creates a huge threat. Many small waders, incl. SBS and other birds died in the nets!

From 25th May, reclamation is constructed in east coast of Lingkun Island. All the fishponds are being filled by mud, taken from the Oujiang Estuary and coast. But depending on the reclamation, the area can still be used for several years. Now the area will be a good place for the waders and other shorebirds in the recent year.

At present, we know very little about SBS in Wenzhen, and we strongly suggest a planned survey in migration seasons at a frequency every 10 days, about 3 times both in autumn and winter!

Area under reclamation on the east coast of Lingkun Island, 14th July © *Tong Menxiu / China Wild Tour*

Nets in the Aquaculture mudflat.

Nordmann's greenshank in Yongqiang Seashore on 2nd April
© *Tong Menxiu / China Wild Tour*

Shorebirds in the reclamation area of Lingkun Island, 11th April *© Dai Meijie*

8) **Brief Summary report on 2012 Spring Survey in Min Jiang Estuary**

Time: 1st April – 15th May
GPS: N26°01'49.04",E119°38'42.34"
Survey Method: Line Transect at Min Jiang Estuary. Surveyors arrived at the site during high tide, and started surveying after the tide went down. About three to Four transect of 100 m surveyed each time. Survey always conducted by a group of 2 to 3 surveyors, every Spoon-billed Sandpiper record confirmed by at least two surveys at site.

Results:

Survey Date	No. of Spoon-billed Sandpiper sighted
04-04-2012	0
08-04-2012	0
15-04-2012	1
21-04-2012	0
22-04-2012	0
24-04-2012	1
28-04-2012	0
01-05-2012	0
06-05-2012	0
10-05-2012	0
13-05-2012	0

Discussion:

Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Minjiang Estuary like in other years, left the site in February. Very few individuals could still be sighted in March, April and May, and usually in non-breeding plumage.

Threats:

1. Expansion of invasive *Spartina* grass.
2. Human Disturbance by *Spartina* control work and construction of facility within the Nature Reserve.
3. Rainfall in winter 2012 is higher than in other year, lowering the salinity of the water in Minjiang Estuary, which may cause changes in food source
4. Possible competition with ducks raised for poultry (small-scale).

Prepared by Fujian Bird Watching Society

Fig.1Disturbance caused by poultry practice

Fig. 2 Construction site in Min Jiang Estuary Nature Reserve

Fig. 3 Fish pond inside the Nature Reserve

Fig. 4 Invasion of Spartina alterniflora in Minjiang Estuary

9) Spoon-billed Sandpiper Mission Myanmar January/February 2012

There are only a few estuaries in the world that regularly build up a tidal bore at spring tide. The Gulf of Martaban in Myanmar is such an estuary and it is possibly for this reason that this highly dynamic and widely undisturbed coastal and river system hosts the largest remaining population of wintering Spoon-billed sandpiper. Unlike a tsunami, the tidal bore is predictable, occurs with each rising water and intensifies to a 1,5 meter high wave at spring tide. Spring tide is the period when the rising water floods the little channels that connects the many villages with the huge Gulf for 6-7 days twice a month and allows thousands of fishermen to access the rich estuarine water for fish. This is also for us - members of the SBS Task Force - the only opportunity to access, with the fishermen, these rich feeding areas for 100,000s of waders.

Conservationists from ArcCona, BTO, RSPB and WWT from the UK joined the BirdLife partner in Myanmar, BANCA, for a training workshop and survey of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the Gulf of Martaban (Mottama). The field survey as well as the training course was attended by members of the SBS Task Force from Japan, Bangladesh and China, who shared their knowledge, support and experience with the survey team.

The 5-day boat survey took place in the upper estuary during the new moon period which allowed the boats to access the most important wintering site at spring tide. Local fishermen, aware of the tidal changes and dynamics of the area, guided the survey without risking an encounter with the 1,5 meter high tidal bore that determines the upper part of the estuary at spring tide and characterises the dynamics of the site. The bore is responsible for constantly changing coastlines, mudflats and salt marshes, the high productivity and ideal feeding habitat for the Spoon-billed sandpiper.

The team of 12 scientists had over 100 sightings of Spoon-billed Sandpipers during the four days of surveys of their prime habitat in the upper estuary. In February another team of British scientists repeated the survey with similar results. A full analysis of the count data is needed before to be certain, but first indications give hope that the work already done by BANCA to reduce hunting may be having a positive affect on the wintering numbers of SBS. A Japanese–Burmese Benthos team took soil samples for analysis of potential food items of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. In addition 4-8 birds have been observed at Ahlat at the Salween River mouth in the south of the Gulf which confirms that this area is also an important wintering area.

The most positive news comes from separate field surveys at Nan Thar in the Arakhan region, where a total of 25 SBS were observed on 20 January compared to 22 the year before and only 14 the year before that. This increase follows the cessation of hunting after the Task Force's intervention three years ago and the start of ecotourism in the area to supplement livelihoods of the local people. It is fortunate that BANCA, together with Bird Holidays and ArcCona, is offering tours to visit this beautiful little island again next winter. People who join the tour will not only see Spoon-billed Sandpiper in winter, the globally endangered Nordmann's Greenshank and roosting Bar-headed Geese amongst many others, but by visiting will actively support the local community who have stopped the hunting of birds on the island. A more detailed programme is available at Bird Holidays http://www.birdholidays.co.uk/2013%20brochure%20PDFs/Myanmar.2013.pdf . These results are encouraging, and demonstrate that early interventions and the mitigation work on the hunting issue have shown effect.

Even more encouraging has been the workshop on World Wetland Day (2 Feb.) in Nay Pyi Daw, the Myanmar capital, hosted by the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry on behalf of the Ramsar designation of the Gulf of Martaban and other sites important for the Spoon-billed sandpiper. Several members of the Task Force and BANCA presented and highlighted the importance of the Gulf of Martaban, and the ministry outlined a roadmap for protection. Further meetings and close cooperation between BANCA and the ministry are planned to increase the number of Ramsar sites and protected area coverage, including other coastal sites such as Nan Thar Island. Meanwhile, during the Ramsar CoP11 in Bucharest the Myanmar government reiterated its intention to designate these two sites important for SBS among an ambitious total of more than 30 further planned Ramsar sites. At present the RSPB is funding the definition of the boundary at the most crucial site the ca. 150000 ha large Gulf of Martaban.
We would like to thank the BBC Wildlife Fund, Keidenran Fund for Nature and the Lighthouse Foundation for giving financial support to the project.

Tony Htin Hla and Zau Lunn (BANCA)
Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona
Nigel Clark, BTO
Rob Sheldon, Guy Anderson and others (RSPB)
Geoff Hilton, WWT
Minoru Kashiwagi, KNCF
Contact: Christoph Zöckler cz@arccona.com

10)Latest observations from China

The last news that reached us from the main stopover sites in China reveal three SBS in Dongtai (see report from Tong Menxui) and a first summer bird in Rudong!

Moulting adult Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Dongtai China © *Tang Zhenghua*