

Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team News Bulletin No. 3, December 2009



Adult male Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Karaginskiy Bay, Kamchatka, June 2009. Photo: Phil Palmer

Compiled by Christoph Zöckler on behalf of the Sbs Recovery Team

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Summary

It has been a while again since the last report in May and again lots and lots of exciting news emerged, most of them rather depressing from the breeding grounds. But there is also hope with new discoveries. Hunting and trapping on the breeding and wintering grounds seems to be a more serious issue than previously thought. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team (Sbs RT) was present with a stand at the Birdfair – British Birdwatching Fair in Rutland Water, UK for the first time. This was a great success and it looks like an event to be repeated in the years to come. The RT was also in discussion and meeting with BirdLife International, RSPB and researchers from the UK on next steps considering the alarming situation. Among others a trial on data loggers using Sanderling and a trial for captive breeding has been launched. More about these activities will be reported in one of the next newsletters. With the launch the RT will also be more formalised in the implementation structure together with NGOs and governments of the flyway countries. Again this will be clearer in the course of next year and discussed in upcoming newsletters. The most recent worries concern the plans to create a deep sea port in one of the most important Sbs wintering sites in Bangladesh with potentially detrimental environmental impacts. Information on these and more in detail below. As this will likely not be complete please provide us with update and corrections from your end.

1) Launch of the CMS Action Plan planned for February 2010 in Korea

After the CMS (Convention on Migratory Species) Action Plan on the species has been approved by the COP last December the action plan is now printed and will be launched together with the Chinese Crested Tern action plan at the EAAFP (Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership) meeting in Korea in February 22–26.

At the moment we are discussing to convene a side event and workshop on the implementation of the action plan. For more details contact Simba Chan at simba@birdlife-asia.org

2) Breeding Season 2009: Preliminary results and conclusions of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Survey in Kamchatka and Chukotka 2009 (sponsored by Packard Foundation via BirdLife International)

Evgeny E. Syroechkovsky & Christoph Zöckler

a) Karaginskiy Bay coasts, NE Kamchatka, June–July 2009

An international expedition of British, German, Russian and Swedish participants under the lead of Evgeny Syroechkovskiy (Russian Academy of Sciences) and Christoph Zöckler (ArcCona Cambridge) explored suitable coastal areas as potential breeding sites for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper on the southern most edge of the known breeding range in north-east Kamchatka in the Karaginsky Bay. Previous records from the area dated from the 1970s. Suitable habitats south and north of the area were checked and surveyed as appropriate (see survey map). A total of about 400 km coastline was covered in June–July 2009 by two field teams of four people each. 12 of 15 potentially breeding sites of SBS (crowberry spits and lagoon coasts) identified by satellite imagery interpretation were covered by approx. 370 km of field surveys.

Preliminary Results

- Only one probably breeding Spoon-billed Sandpipers was found within the most southern part of the species breeding range in Kamchatka. This region was supposed to have 5–50 breeding pairs (Syroechkovskiy 2005) so this survey cut the evaluation of total numbers considerably;



Territorial male, displaying briefly at Ilpyrsky spit, June 2009 (Phil Palmer)

- Two breeding locations known from ornithological literature and one more breeding discovered according to local knowledge were no longer occupied and had no breeding pairs left;



Kayum spit 11 June 2009. Photo: Christoph Zöckler

- The breeding habitats of the species are changing and many locations are becoming less suitable for the species, most likely due to climate related changes in vegetation. In Kayum spit, where SBS brood was recorded in 1972 hardly any good habitat was left;
- In contrast to Chukotka, most of the spits with potential good habitats for SBS are permanently disturbed by humans in June-July, the peak salmon fishing time. Salmon fishing activities were once high: in 1950–60s after the forced settlement of former nomadic reindeer herders from inland to the coast to ease up ship supplies. Then, human population of the coastal spits decreased in 1970-80s, but increased again in late 1990s – early 2000s after Perestroika, with the intensification and modernisation of the salmon fishing by private investors. This coincided with the period of most rapid decline of SBS;
- The tradition of shooting waders in local villages (quite distinct from Chukotka) makes the killing of SBS in flocks during spring migration more likely and a regular event: 30% of 60 hunters knew SBS and records of shot birds are known even as recent as 2008 and 2009 (see table 1 below). Areas of traditional spring hunting at spits are the areas of important regional spring stopover of SBS on snow free mudflat areas;
- As Karaginsky Bay coasts are likely the area of spring pre-breeding concentration on migration of probably the whole world population of SBS local hunting pressure may play significant role in species decline and should be considered for the future as a threat to be addressed by Action Plan;
- Considering the widespread tradition of shooting waders in the intertidal areas in southern Russian Far East (Japan Sea, Sea of Okhotsk) further survey, capacity building and awareness raising work may be necessary to evaluate and eradicate this threat;
- Neither hunters nor decision makers in Game Management and Environment Protection in Kamchatka are aware of the critically endangered status of SBS. Awareness raising is a crucial element of future conservation efforts in the region but also beyond in the Russian Far East. It needs to be focused and targeted to selected audiences, first of all hunters and schoolchildren regularly shooting waders by catapults, but also include increasingly Game Keeper Associations and Hunting Inspectors and authorities.

Hunting pressure in Kamchatka

Our findings in Kamchatka on quite some high hunting pressure on waders and Spoon-billed Sandpiper were surprising and contrary to the observation from Chukotka, where hardly any hunting pressure exists.

At least 23 observations of SBS by local hunters (evaluated by us as reliable) make around 30% of total of 60 hunters interviewed. More than half of these observations refer to shot birds, about half of them to teenagers using catapults but also some recent shootings with shotguns (even in spring 2009!). The number of cases reported as “observations” are likely to include shot birds as well, but they might not be reported as interviewed people had already heard that we are studying the protected species. Most of birds shot by catapults were reported for 1960–70s by the time current hunters where young. No data on current pressure of teenagers with catapults is available.

Such a high percentage (30%) of hunters, who recognise SBS is the first time that we recorded this in the last 10 years of work within breeding range of the species. In Chukotka number of people reliably seen SBS was never higher then 3–5% of hunters interviewed. It could be explained by the fact that Chukotka hunters nearly never shoot small waders and that in Chukotka SBS are wide spread in the breeding habitats but not concentrated on migration in spring on limited snow free areas near to mudflats, which are at the same time best hunting grounds in spring for local hunters.

The Karaginskiy region of Kamchatka has around 600 active hunters. Most of them regularly shoot waders including small ones. None of the hunters have ever heard that the bird is protected. Sampling of interviewed hunters was not scientifically planned but we think it was close to random as we had been requesting all adult male villagers who were sober and willing to communicate. We can't be sure if our results can be extrapolated but it is clear that several SBS (probably 3 to 10 birds) could be shot each year by hunters of Karaginskiy region only.

As it is likely that most of global population is migrating in spring and autumn through Karaginskiy region on their way to Chukotka and on return, the threat to the global population of SBS from local hunters is real. Education work with hunters and schoolchildren is needed in this region. Further surveys may clarify other coastal area of Kamchatka with high pressure of hunting on small waders. Within the area of migration of SBS in Kamchatka estimated numbers of active hunters in the south-west coasts and north-east coasts of Kamchatka peninsula is around 4000 individuals. The recommendation to ban shooting of small waders should be advised to Kamchatka Game Inspection. But as the enforcement of any hunting laws is very low only education of hunters themselves in key locations could decrease the chance of more SBS being shot on Karaginskiy Bay coasts of Kamchatka.

Potential hunting pressure in the southern parts of Russian Far East should be evaluated. Considering the recently shot SBS near the Vladivostok (individually marked in Meinypilgyno in 2005 the adult bird was shot in August 2007 and stuffed for taxidermy collection near Vladivostok). This is the only one known record but considering mass wader hunting in several locations of Prymorie and Sakhalin it may add to the mortality of the species. 99% of hunters in the southern Russian Far East are clearly not aware of how rare SBS is and its protected status. Estimated numbers of hunters in coastal areas of southern Russian Far East is around 80,000 individuals. It is likely only small part of them may influence small waders but there are no data available for any more speculations on the subject.

Future activities should address the spring and autumn hunting in the Russian Far East at a large scale awareness raising scheme among local hunters and the game and hunting authorities.

For further details contact: Evgeny Syroechkovskiy: ees_jr@yahoo.co.uk

b) Meinypilgyno, Chukotka

The survey team of Pavel Tomkovich (2 people) started work in 2009 as early as early June. But that they found only 4 nests, 5 broods and probably 5 more breeding pairs in the outer spits (see table below for the decline of the population over the last 7 years). Three of the four nests have been predated and it also was a very rainy and cold (+4°C) early July so survival of any broods is very questionable.

Three previous flagged birds were resighted. Interestingly, one was ringed as female in 2003, breeding in 2009 only few hundred meters from the ringing site, confirming the high site fidelity of the species, but also the extremely low return of about 50% (Zöckler & Syroechkovskiy in prep.). The bird has reached at least an age of 7 (more likely 8 or more years, as the adults return to the breeding grounds in general in the second year). The second bird was ringed in 2007 and the third was ringed as juvenile, one of more than 250 ringed that survived in the breeding area.

Table 1. Breeding population trend of Sbs in the core breeding area of Meinypilgyno, southern Chukotka

	2003	2004*	2005	2007*	2008	2009
Nests	23	14	15	10	6	4
Add. broods	16	11	11	5	-	5
Additional territories	21	11	6	6	9	5
Total	60	36*	32	21*	15	14

*incomplete survey

For further details contact: Evgeny Syroechkovskiy: ees_jr@yahoo.co.uk and cz@arconca.com

c) Belyaka Spit, Chukotsky Peninsula

Pavel Tomkovich received very sad news in late in autumn, when researcher Alexei Dondua returned from Chukotka. He spent the 2009 summer season on Belyaka Spit, northern Chukotka, which is one of the two key breeding sites known for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. It is the area, where Pavel's main studies of this species were undertaken in 1986-1988 (ca. 50 males were breeding there) and in 2002 (22-24 males). During the whole breeding season of 2009 in the very same area Alexei was able to find about 100 nests of waders and ringed 202 chicks and adults, but DID NOT HAVE A SINGLE RECORD OF Spoon-billed Sandpiper. This means that one of the two largest local breeding populations of this species is now extinct. Considering the large decline of another local population Pavel and Vladimir Arkhipov revealed this summer (see above), it shows the critical state of this species. Pavel is becoming more and more pessimistic about future of this species, and thinks it is really very close to the brink of extinction.

For more details contact: Pavel S. Tomkovich, Dr.Sci., Zoological Museum, Moscow State University, Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street, 6, 125009, Moscow, RUSSIA
pst@zmmu.msu.ru

3) Sbs RT at the Birdfair, Rutland Water , UK August 2009

From August 21–23 the SBS RT had been present at the 21. British Birdfair in Rutland Water, England. The stand was sponsored to 50% by the organisers Rutland Water and RSPB. Several RT members were able to participate. They included Evgeny from Russia. His wife Lena and daughter Anna could not come in time due to strict visa regulations, Minoru from Japan, Tony and Thiri from Myanmar, Jens and Sus from Denmark, Phil, Gill and myself from the UK. We were selling lots of goods such as T-shirts from Myanmar and Russia, vodka glasses (very popular) and many other items. We had a great response and generated a huge RT support team. Many people visited us, too many to list them all, but among them were our species Champions from Wildsounds, Marco Lambertini, the new ED and Jim Lawrence the Fundraiser at BirdLife International, Bert Lenten from AEWA (Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds) and Charlie Moores, who kindly kick-started a series on his 10,000 Birds web site on Sbs in support of our work. This site <http://10000birds.com/> contains several interviews with Jim Lawrence, Nial Moores from Birds Korea, Phil Round from BCST (Bird Conservation Society of Thailand) in Thailand and the Chair of the RT. Charles raised some 600 USD for the species. Together with the impressive income from our sales of 270 the RT will support the survey work in Myanmar.



Tony, Thiri, Joseph and Gill at the BirdFair Stand August 2009. Photo: C. Zöckler

Thank you all for your support to make our presence at the Birdfair such a success

4) Deep Sea Port in Sonadia, Bangladesh

Bangladesh's proposed deep-sea port at Sonadia Island: Another alarm bell rings in South Asia

by Zahirul Islam, MarineLife Alliance

The Bangladesh Government is considering establishing a deep water sea-port at Sonadia Island, in Cox's Bazar, a biodiversity hotspot that is currently free from anthropogenic impacts such as development and tourism. Its pristine sandy beach, mudflats, nearshore sandbars, high dunes and mangrove formations are unique – serving as an important habitat for endangered sea turtles and wintering shorebirds.

Lying within the East Asian - Australasian Flyway, Sonadia is used by migratory birds as a stopover during their long migration further south. In January 2009, in the area where the deep-sea port has been proposed, we counted eight individuals of Spoon-billed Sandpiper – one of the rarest migratory birds in the world, with a population of just 300–350 pairs in the wild (Zöckler 2006). Sonadia is considered ecologically important by the government and in 1999 was declared as an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) under Environmental Act of 1995.



A Japanese consultancy firm named Pacific Consultant International (PCI) conducted a feasibility survey for the construction of the deep-water seaport. The proposed port would have 58 jetties, with a total length of 11 kilometers. The plan is to build the port in three phases, with an expenditure of US\$ 8.6 billion. The Bangladesh government will seek project funding from international donors. The first phase would be completed by 2016 and the full development finished by 2055.

If constructed, the port would drastically change the habitats important for sea turtles, shorebirds and cetaceans, but it would also threaten mangroves and overall marine resources in an area where hundreds of thousands of community people from the whole of Moheshkhali, Kutubdia and even Chittagong depend for their daily livelihood. According to some estimates, 700-800 fishing boats are engaged in fishing in Sonadia's nearshore and offshore waters, depending on the season.

PCI selected the Sonadia site in the Cox's Bazar district, with a second suitable site option (of similar depth) about 20 km north at Kutubdia Island. This alternative site is less important for biodiversity as compared to Sonadia Island, and would leave a sufficient buffer zone. Sonadia's selection is backed by people with financial motivations, who appear not to have any environmental consciousness. One has to question whether a full environmental assessment was even carried out during the feasibility study.

It is sad that none of the government departments responsible for these issues, nor the international conservation organisations in the country, have raised questions publicly about the deep seaport proposal. It is our request to all concerned people, scientists and environmentalists – nationally and internationally – to advocate and raise these issues and try to convince the Bangladesh Government to relocate the deep-sea port site away from this biodiversity hotspot.

Please support Zahirul Islam on his campaign to prevent the project. The RT is thinking to launch a major international campaign soon and we will inform everybody in time. For further details and also moral support write to Zahirul: marinelife_al@yahoo.com

5) Awareness campaign on hunting and trapping in Sonadia

In 2009 MarineLife Alliance conducted an awareness program, funded by the AWCF (Asian Waterbird Conservation Fund) Hong Kong, with the bird hunters and trappers in Sonadia-Moheshkhali Island, Bangladesh. At least 19 active trappers returned their traps of 4 different types and agreed not to kill any more birds. But we need to keep them volunteering in our program. Ecotourism will help this process and has been suggested as an economic alternative.





Photos: Zahirul Islam

For further details contact Zahirul: marinelife_al@yahoo.com

6) Stopping the trapping of waders on Nan Thar Island, Myanmar

Interim Report on the Project on Socio-economic alternatives to trapping birds, Nan Thar Island, Myanmar (Burma)

Sponsored by the Lighthouse Foundation

With Ren Nou Sou we could secure a partner at site who implemented our initiative to stop the trapping. This was not an easy task. Ren, who also founded the Sittwe Bird Lovers (SBL) could arrange a deal with various influential local stakeholders to secure the hunting rights to catch birds on the island. During several visit on the island which is not far from the Bangladeshi border he also interviewed the local people and found out that still in March 4-5 hunters from adjacent villages were active on Nan Thar. Even in September he could see that trapping was conducted (see photos below). During one catch/night more than 100 waders and terns are caught. Only a fraction (1/3) survives. The others suffocate or drown in the upcoming tide during the night. Those that are not wanted, either too small or not tasty and released are often injured and perish shortly after. In the summer there were still waders. Among them Greater and Lesser Sandplover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover, Knot and Turnstone and Terek Sandpiper, but no Spoon-billed Sandpiper.





Bird Trapping Nan Thar, 21 September 2009. All photos: Ren Nou Sou

Ren informed the people about the conservation aspects and most people reacted positive. Nobody relies entirely on bird trapping but they appreciate the diversity in food. There are still 5 trappers active in neighboring villages (Aung Dai und Don Byin) catching birds at appr. 10 nights around spring tide. The trade with birds is very common and valued high to secure a certain income. Trapping birds is also easier and also promising higher yields than fishing. However fishing in itself is sufficient for survival. Often the women sell the birds in the markets. They get between 400 und 500 kyats/bird depending on species and size. Catching and trading of birds is not legal but it is also not enforced.

Together with ArcCona Ren is developing an ecotourism on the island. A first novice trip with foreign tourists is arranged for the coming January. Ren will follow up and visit the island regularly

For further details contact: cz@arccona.com

7) GIS database development and new wintering sites in China

Gillian Bunting received a small grant from BirdLife to update the database on records from the non-breeding areas. The data set now includes well over 1000 observations.

New data include mainly recent information on China. Paul Holt, Wang Qingyu & Zhang Lin report from wintering birds in Minjiang area (Fujian Province). According to observations by Paul Holt, especially the coastal habitat at Shanyutan is unusual – there are extensive areas of mudflat exposed at low tide, but the mud is very sandy and its irregular surface is heavily corrugated. As the tide declines the Spoon-billed Sandpipers were among the first shorebirds to start feeding around the edges of the numerous small, shallow pools that were left.

Other sites in China include a first for Hainan in January 2009 and from the Jiangsu Province with several records from Chinese birder Zhang Lin. We will feature on China in more detail in one of the next bulletins.

Please send your records to gb@arccona.com

8) First records of this autumn

First records from this autumn include 12 birds from Korea, 7 birds in Thailand (5 in Pak Thale) and three birds in Sonadia, Bangladesh. 6 of the birds in Korea and all three birds in Bangladesh are most likely juveniles, which is promising and gives hope that some birds still have bred successfully.

LATEST NEWS:

While writing this newsletter I received a report by Ren Nou Sou of 14 Spoon-billed Sandpiper on Nan Thar Island, Myanmar

With this slightly more optimistic note and thanks to all contributors, and special thanks to Axel Bräunlich for proof reading and formatting

Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona, Cambridge