Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force News Bulletin No 19 · November 2018

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Spoon-billed Sandpiper Lime Green 07 with satellite tag, North Sumatra, 3 Nov 2018 *Chairunas Adha Putra*

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force (SBS TF) News Bulletin is a regular, half-yearly update of activities of the SBS Task Force of the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP). The News Bulletin is edited by Dr Christoph Zöckler, Coordinator of the EAAFP SBS Task Force with assistance from Sayam Chowdhury, Bangladesh.

Mission:
The East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force (SBS TF) aims to coordinate the conservation activities identified in the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Single Species Action Plan for the species, which was commissioned by BirdLife International. The activities in the Action Plan are regularly reviewed and updated by all Flyway Members and a growing network of active supporters and groups in the Flyway countries, and beyond.

The Task Force originates from the establishment of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team (SBS RT) in 2004, when several partners active in the conservation of this globally threatened wader met in Edinburgh. With the growing level of activity, the finalization of the Action Plan in 2008 and a growing network of partners, organisations and supporters the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force (SBS TF) was formed at the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) meeting in Korea in February 2010. In December 2010, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force (SBS TF) was officially endorsed as one of the first species Task Forces by the Partnership under the EAAFP Shorebird Working Group. Implementing organisation for the SBS TF is BirdLife International through its partner Birds Russia. It is chaired by the Government Partner of Russia. Task Force members consist of the EAAFP Government Partners of key range states for the species and international conservation organisations. These are: the Russian Federation, Japan, People's Republic of China, People's Democratic Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Vietnam, Union of Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India, the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT), Wetlands International, a representative of the EAAFP Shorebird Working Group, Fauna Flora International (FFI) and experts and conservation organisations from principal range states and other partners. We are grateful to the RSPB, NABU and the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung for their continued support of the SBS Task Force and Spoon-billed Sandpiper projects across the range states.

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Foreword from the Editor

Dr Christoph Zöckler · Coordinator SBS TF · November 2018

It is only eight months ago, but so many things have happened since the last newsletter that we struggle to fit it all into 44 pages and our newsletter becomes bigger and bigger. This is not surprising in many ways as our Task Force is growing in members, friends and tasks.

Only this month we were joined by Nchay from North Sumatra, who found marked Lime 07, a first for Indonesia. You'll find more details in this issue on this incredible story and many others like Lime 05, the 'Queen of the Flyway' from Thailand and Lime 27, the 'King of the Flyway' from Myanmar, meeting up and pairing on the breeding grounds.

This recent period has been full of exciting but also sad events. While our Head-starting Programme in the breeding grounds in Russia seems to take full effect and the local population of SBS is increasing, we still witness declines or even extirpation at other breeding sites and on the wintering grounds. The story by Alexei Dondua from the remote Belyaka Spit in the very North is particular poignant. The Conservation Breeding Team in Slimbridge went through a real roller coaster of emotions; elated when the first ever bred spoonie grow up fast, but devastated when the bird died unexpectedly in a freak accident. It is heart-breaking and we all feel with the team, whose dedication is unbroken and should be stimulated by this year's success of the first successful breeding of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper in captivity!

It is an incredible experience to be part of this diverse group of dedicated conservationists from all over the flyway and beyond, from different cultural and religious backgrounds and political systems; all united in the one goal to save this enigmatic little bird which continues to show us more and more about its secret life. Without the collaboration of many different organisations and individuals our conservation goals cannot be achieved.

The projects like Head-starting or the satellite tagging have again demonstrated the fantastic level of cooperation across the flyway and across organisations. It is also impressive to see the utmost care that has been taken at every step dealing with such a precious and fragile little bird. I feel very glad and privileged to coordinate the Task Force in its 15th year and I am looking forward confidently to all the many tasks ahead.

Feeling the growing support of so many friends and sponsors I am more and more convinced that we all together will achieve our common goal in saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper from extinction.

Guest Editorial

Spoon-billed Sandpiper as a case study for species conservation in the EAAFP

Dr Lew Young, Chief Executive East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership

Wow, has it really been eight months since I started working for the EAAFP? The time has gone very fast, getting used to working with a great team in the small EAAFP Secretariat and living in the modern Songdo district of Incheon. Arriving at the Secretariat where there has been no one at the helm since Spike Millington left the position as Chief Executive in autumn 2017, meant that there was quite a bit of work to catch up on. The foremost of these was the organization of MoP10 which is now coming up on Hainan Island in just about 5 weeks' time and it feels like there is so much more preparation work to do. There have been other challenges, such as staffing issues including the departure of Tomoko Ichikawa (Communication Officer) at the end of her contract to go back to Tokyo where she is now the focal person for the EAAFP in the Japanese Ministry of Environment which is quite fortunate for us actually! After some searching, we were very fortunate to find a replacement for Tomoko who was up to her high standards, in the form of Vivian Fu who many may know from her previous work in the Hong Kong Birdwatching Society. This included her work in producing the lively animated video of the migration of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the threats that it faces, using pictures individually coloured by children from along the flyway.

Throughout these busy past months however, I have been impressed by the amount of support that the EAAFP Partners were giving to the Secretariat, often on a voluntary basis and even when I know particular individuals were already busy with their own work. The backbone of the Partnership is indeed the individuals in each of the Partners, Working Groups and Task Forces, who often devote much of their time in supporting the work of the Partnership. One group whose work stands out for me in particular, is that of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force.

Since December 2010 when the SBS TF was formally established under the EAAFP, it has done some remarkable work in developing collaboration with a range of people along the range of the species from governments to conservation organizations, researchers and local communities, to raise the profile of the threats to this critically endangered species and to take steps for its conservation.

I am not trying to flatter the members of the Task Force but the work on saving the SBS should be an example for others trying to save the many threatened waterbirds in the Flyway. At the Secretariat, we are happy to publicise your latest news and to help where we can. One example is during MoP10, to link TF members with the officials in the DPR Korea to find out more information about the site where two of the tagged SBS have recently been found. Maybe in 2019, the Secretariat can support a team from the TF to visit the DPRK and to the site? Anyhow, there is more to be done and the story continues….

Achievements in Spoon-billed Sandpipers conservation work in Russia in summer 2018

Evgeny Syroechkovskiy, Pavel Tomkovich, Nikolay Yakushev, Egor Loktionov and the Meinypil'gyno team

In 2018, an international team of professionals and volunteers organized by BirdsRussia continued the monitoring of the breeding population and carried out the Head-starting Programme of Spoon-billed Sandpipers (SBS) in the vicinity of Meinypil'gyno Village, southern Chukotka, Far Eastern Russia. Nature conditions vary from year to year, and this summer was not an exception. By spring, deep snow accumulated over the winter, but it melted fast in two weeks at the turn of May and June. Large amounts of water from melted snow and absence of any outlet for this water (the river mouth was blocked by a high bar of gravel washed ashore by storms during the preceding autumn) resulted in an exceptionally high flood at the two big lakes in the area thus reducing the preferable nesting habitat of SBS and presumably flooding several nests of SBS with incomplete clutches.

The first SBS arrived in the area extremely late, on 6 June. The number of breeding birds significantly increased this year from 13 pairs in 2015–2017 to 16 pairs in the main monitoring area. This was the most important news of the year. In the overall vicinity of Meinypil'gyno including pairs outside the regular monitoring areas the population increased to 24 pairs in 2018 compared to a minimum of 18-21 pairs known in 2014-2017. We presume that this increase is related to the Head-starting Programme which runs since 2012. In recent years, up to 3 head-started SBS were breeding annually in the Meinypil'gyno population. In 2018 this number increased to 6 birds. Also unlike in previous years, all head-started birds spotted in 2018 were breeding. Weather and ice conditions in this season didn't allow us to monitor neighboring sites at Kainypil'gyno, Okeanskoe or other sites. Heritage Expeditions were able to pay a short visit to Kainypil'gyno and other sites along the southern Chukotka coast but could not find any hint of SBS presence.

For the first time, the Head-starting Programme was carried out without the involvement of Roland Digby from the Waterfowl and Wetlands Trust, who was an initiator and the heart of this programme through the years, but he was replaced by Jodie Clements from WWT, who assisted Ivan Shepelev. The Russian HS team was

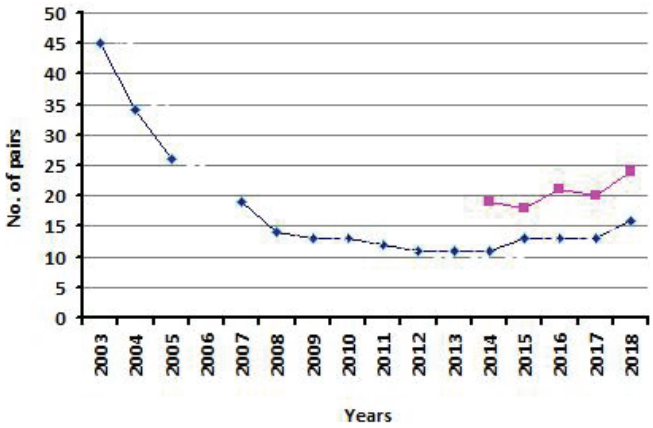
2018 head-started SBS *both Nikolay Yakushev*






Spoon-billed Sandpipers from the breeding season 2018 *all Pavel Tomkovich*

Impressions of the Head-starting actions in and around Meinypil'gyno from the breeding season 2018 *all Pavel Tomkovich*



*SBS population estimates near Meinypil'gyno in 2003–2016. The graph in **blue colour** shows numbers of pairs in the main monitoring area and those in **pink colour** in a larger expanse surveyed irregularly*

now responsible for the process and it worked out well. Significant support was received from Jodie and other team members. WWT volunteers were very efficient, excellent team members and contributed to overall work a lot.

This year a total of 22 artificially raised chicks were successfully released into nature on 30 July 2018.

Colour-marking with engraved leg flags continued for individual recognition of birds both on the breeding grounds (this was invaluable for monitoring and nest search) and on the flyway. In addition to the head-started chicks, 7 adult birds and 30 wild SBS chicks were marked this year. Most exciting this year was to find birds marked outside the breeding area for the first time in Meinypil'gyno. One male was carrying a yellow flag with engraving 'YU', it was marked in Tiaozini, China, in October 2017. Another bird was a female marked with white engraved flag 'A5' over orange flag at Yubu Island, South Korea in October 2016. Both birds successfully raised chicks.

Thus, the passed field season in Chukotka turned to be very successful and brought us a number of positive news.

Significant progress has been made in preparation for the creation of the Nature Park "The land of Spoon-billed Sandpiper" in Southern Chukotka. The proposed area covers 1,5 million ha (15,000 sq km), with all key remaining SBS breeding

Hat-starting *Egor Loktionov*

First bird flagged abroad and found in Meino *Pavel Tomkovich*

locations included and other important biodiversity components. If established this would be a milestone in PA development for the whole of the Russian North East. As the development of the park is touching upon the interests of many local people, many serious and time-consuming discussion with local authorities and communities are required and started this year already. At least another year of work and some significant resources are needed to finalize the project.

Heritage Expedition (HE) with support from Christoph Zöckler (see page 22) had checked previously known SBS breeding areas along the northern Koryak coast and did not find anything there. Sadly all previously known SBS breeding locations in Kamchatka are now vacant. The site where 3 pairs were seen during our first year of cooperation with HE had none this summer.

The team of Yuri Gerassimov and Ivan Tiunov monitored for the fifths time SBS stopover sites in West Kamchatka near Sobolevo. During August they ringed and flagged a total of 3200 waders including 10 young SBS: the highest number in 5 years. One of them was the bird ringed as chick near so called 'Cross' in Meinypil'gyno on July 10, confirming a regular connection of this Kamchatka site with mostly young Meinypil'gyno ringed birds on southward migration.

BirdsRussia is very grateful to all its supporters of the project, namely the RSPB,WWT, Manfred-Hermsen Stiftung, NABU, the Bird Conservation Fund and the Bennett Lowell Fund, Heritage Expeditions, the Chukotka administration, many volunteers from abroad and Russia as well as many local people of Meinypil'gyno, who all contributed to the success of this summer work.

The moment when life begins for little Spoonie *Egor Loktionov*

A Summer in Chukotka

Chris Kelly

Thursday the 7th of June 2018 saw me climbing down from the helicopter having finally arrived in the small Chukchi village of Meinypil'gyno. The whole village seemed to be surrounding the helicopter, not to meet me I might add but because the helicopter is the social highlight of the week. I had tried to get to Meinypil'gyno the previous year but delays with the flight from Moscow had caused me to miss the helicopter and I had to return home deeply disappointed. So expectations had been growing over the intervening year and I was very excited indeed. This wasn't my first visit to Chukotka as I had spent the summer of 2002 on the north coast enjoying the company of Spoonies. At that time we were just beginning to realise the desperate plight that Spoonies were facing. In 2000 Evgeny and his team had surveyed the area around Anadyr bay and hadn't found nearly as many as they had expected and warning bells were beginning to ring. However, in 2001 Evgeny and his companions discovered Meinypil'gyno and immediately realised they had uncovered a gem. There were more Spoonies here than any other place found before or since so maybe things were not so grim after all. But the expedition of 2002 brought us back down to earth as we discovered that Belyaka spit, previously the paradise for Spoonies, now only had 18 pairs whereas 14 years previously there had been approximately 50 territories. So Spoonies were desperately in trouble and as we all know things were going to get a lot worse (see also note by A. Dondua in this newsletter!). In 2002 as Evgeny regaled tails of Meinypil'gyno I was eager to go there and explore this wonderland for myself. However, being in mid career as a software developer I wasn't able to take another summer away. In the end I had to wait 16 years until I retired but now I was finally where I had dreamed of being for so long and had a whole summer before me to soak in the wonder of the place. Compared to 2002 this was going to be a very comfortable expedition as we not only had cottages to live in but a wonderful cook to provide us with plenty of food. I was eager

This head-started female is preparing for migration after successfully breeding and leaving her mate to tend the chicks *Chris Kelly*

to explore the tundra and within minutes of me setting out a quad bike trundled towards me and it was Pavel Tomkovich the undisputed world expert on calidris sandpipers and a companion from the 2002 expedition. I was ready to carry on where I left off 16 years previously.

My expedition companions this time, with whom I had travelled from the UK, were James and Jodie. Jodie is a specialist aviculturist and was to be busy looking after the eggs and chicks in the headstarting project. James, like myself, was a volunteer and our job was to find the Spoonie nests both for headstarting and also to monitor the wild reared chicks. I had previously worked with James in Myanmar when we were surveying wintering Spoonies and we had an easy friendship and worked well together so I had no doubt we would very much enjoy our summer in Meinypil'gyno.

Meinypil'gyno is basically a narrow 42 km coastal spit running more or less west-east with a gap in the middle through which fresh water drains into the sea. Behind the coastal spit is a more complex 35 km long spit system running parallel to the coastal spit where the village is situated not too far from the gap. North of this spit is an area of low moraine hills leading up to the mountains. On either side are two enormous lakes, Vaam'eachgyn and Pekul'ney, which catch the water from the winter snows and drain to the sea though the small gap in the coastal spit. The trouble is the gap generally blocks over the winter and causes vast quantities of water to back up in the lakes. Until the gap is cleared by the villagers each year the water gets higher each day and floods the inner spit complex. 2018 was notable for large quantities of winter snow much of which thawed just before we arrived due to two days of heavy rain. The clearing of the gap was particularly late this year and this lead to the water being more than two metres higher than the sea and giving rise to the worst flooding for more than twenty years. So as James and I started searching for Spoonie territories we were confronted with most of the suitable nesting grounds being deep under water. James and I concentrated on the area of the inner spit complex to the west of the village as well as the moraine hills. The first of these areas had not had any breeding Spoonies for a number of years and that combined with the high flooding made the work hard with little return. However, we did eventually find a pair in a new area and these birds were busy nest scraping and a few days later we found our first nest. This gave us a great deal of pleasure and a sense of relief as we felt we had at least started to gain some credibility with our much more experienced Russian colleagues. We didn't realise at the time but there was a second pair at the same location that I didn't find until the chicks hatched. How they had gone under the radar is a mystery and a lesson in how secretive Spoonies can be.

This head-started male from 2014 was breeding for the first time and managed to fledge two chicks *Chris Kelly*

Although this was my first time in Meinypil'gyno I had travelled there many times before in a virtual world courtesy of Google Earth. One area that captivated me and which I was most eager to visit was the moraine hills. These low lying hills with lakes and streams captured my imagination. The reality was even better than the imagination and both James and I fell in love with these magical hills. It is truly one of the most beautiful places

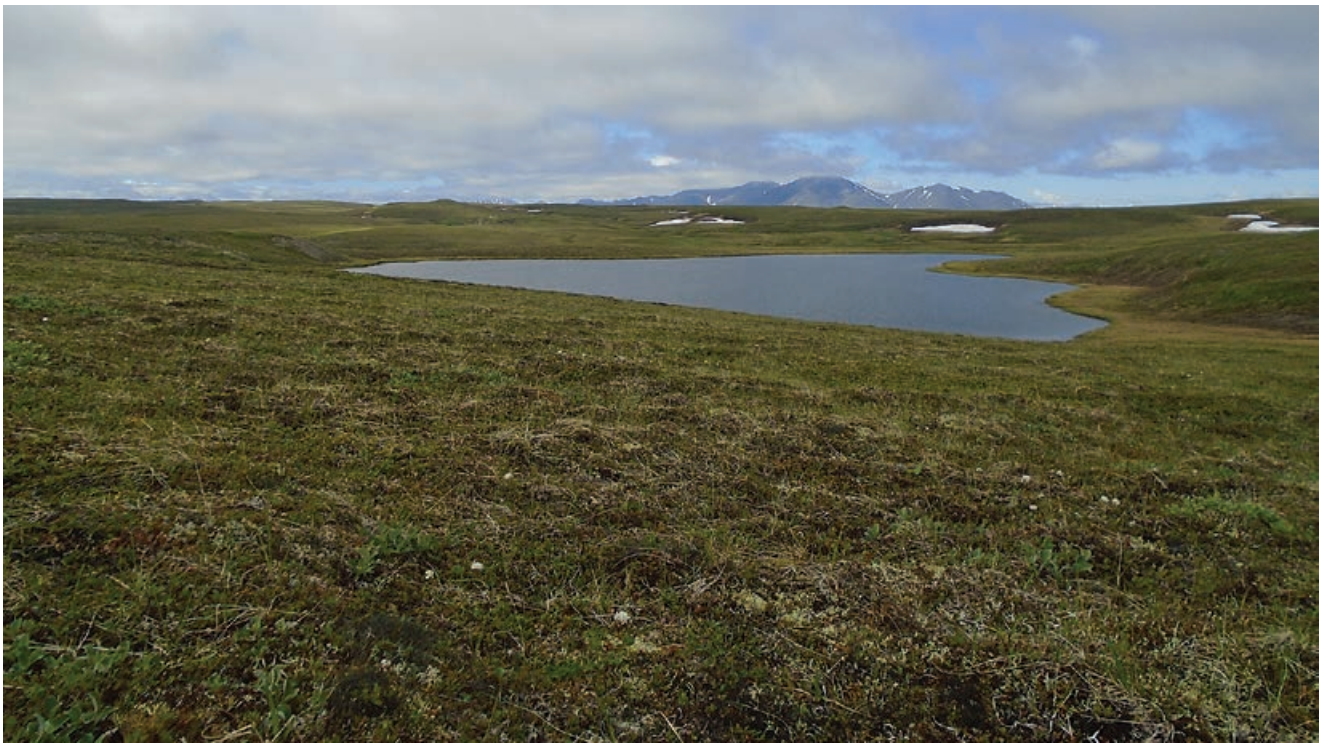
I have ever been and over the summer this was where I was to spend most of my time. This is the land of brown bears and we were privileged to share their home with them. We encountered them every day and I never tired of watching the graceful way they moved across the landscape with their effortless gait. They are the spirit of the moraine hills. Were they dangerous? Well they could be and you had to be very alert and careful. Was I scared? Sometimes yes very scared. But despite all this it was a joy to have their company. As Pavel said to me "we don't bother them and they don't bother us" and that was very much the attitude I took. Show them respect and give them their space – we are not the most powerful animals in the landscape and that is somewhat humbling.

When James and I first started exploring the moraine hills there was still plenty of snow and it is in the snow patches that Spoonies are most often found in the early spring. Unlike some shorebirds like Red Knot that feed on crowberries and cranberries when they first arrive on the breeding grounds Spoonies don't appear to do this. In addition with their spatulated bills they are not really able to probe into the tundra so finding food must be very challenging at this time. But somehow they seem to find food on and around the edges of snow patches. The first time James, Jodie and I found a pair of Spoonies feeding on a snow patch by a small stream was one of those magical moments that I keep reliving in my mind. It was made even more extraordinary because a Grey-checked Thrush landed on the snow field next to the pair of Spoonies – not two species you would expect to see together. We spent many days exploring these hills and finding the territories but Nikolay, the expedition leader, was also working these hills. He really knew how to do it properly and was quick to find the nests of two pairs. Quite how he did it in such a difficult landscape is a bit of a mystery but it seemed to came down to immense skill, patience and just plain hard work. However, one Spoonie did go under his radar and James and I managed to find its territory. At first we thought it was an unmated male and this was the conclusion of our more experienced Russian colleagues too. It was living in such a beautiful place on the edge of a lake that James and I kept returning to watch it. On one occasion I saw it run from the lake up an adjacent hillside and just vanish. Every instinct told me it had gone onto its nest. James was rather sceptical but I wasn't going to give up. James has much better eyesight than me so I asked him to watch as I walked towards where I thought it had disappeared. Sure enough it appeared out of nowhere and we had found another nest. This was probably the most enjoyable find of the whole expedition for me since the setting was beautiful and the gift had come out of nowhere. I was rather hoping I might be able to follow this nest through the summer but one of the main goals of our work was to find clutches for headstarting and this one was needed for that.

The summer was filled with wonderful encounters with Spoonies but two pairs of birds deserve special mention. The first was lime E3, so called because it had previously been leg flagged with a lime flag engraved with E3. This bird tantalised and eluded all of us for quite a long time. It was seen on multiple occasions by members of the team always along an old track through the moraine hills. Pretty well everyone except me saw this bird but no one knew where or even if it was nesting. I spent several days searching the hills for its nest with James and later with Ewan another member of the team but we didn't even get close. In addition it defeated the experienced Russian observers – it really was an enigma. While the rest of the team were spending the day working at the western oil drill I was asked to give it one more go. It was a gloriously sunny morning and I was searching an upland heath covered in wild flowers. I had worked this heath many times before without success but as I crouched down to photograph

a blue butterfly I heard the quietest of Spoonie chick gathering calls. I instantly knew I had found my goal and in front of me a male Spoonie was tending a brood of four newly hatched but dry and mobile chicks. This was a wonderful scene and I sat quietly on a ground squirrel's mound and for the next 45 minutes and watched the intimacies of Spoonie domestic life. The birds were completely unconcerned and didn't once give an alarm call. I watched them until they disappeared over a ridge out of sight. I had been given a gift and wasn't going to hassle the birds by trying to follow. The male was not leg flagged but subsequently lime E3 was seen near the brood confirming this was indeed the family of this most elusive of birds. Over the next three weeks I was able to follow this brood until eventually they fledged – all four chicks. The brood was extremely mobile and on occasions they moved more than a kilometre in one day. On one occasion the male took the brood right over the top of a ground squirrel mound that had four ground squirrels active on it. I could barely watch – I thought there was going to be carnage but amazingly the family came out the other side unscathed. Ground squirrels are not really predators but spend most of their time searching for crowberries. Nevertheless if they find a nest or a chick they would not normally pass it by. They are probably one of the biggest threats to Spoonie nests as they are abundant everywhere. Each Spoonie nest has a ground squirrel mound not far away and undoubtedly many nests succumb to these most delightful of animals.

The second story concerns a family that came out of nowhere. The 16th of July had been a long, tiring and largely fruitless day for me in the hills. I was exhausted and all I wanted to do was sit down but I still had a fair walk home. At one point I had to choose whether to go left or right as there were two spurs taking me down to the spit. I chose the left, the road least taken, and that made all the difference. As I made my way down the slope I heard the sharp freeze call together with alarms and later



Moraine hills tundra with lake, Koryak Mountains in the background *Chris Kelly*

the chick gathering call. There was a male (leg flagged T8) that clearly had a brood. He gave some aerial displays with calling but I withdrew a little and he soon settled down. The chicks were feeding in long vegetation but I could see two for sure and they were about a week old. So serendipity had taken me from tiredness to the height of elation – I didn't expect that one. I had a renewal of energy and an extra spring in my step as I walked back to the village. T8 was a headstarted bird from 2014 so was now four years old. He had been seen in 2017 but was thought to unpaired so this was his first nesting attempt. I was in the habit of getting up at 4:30 am to get in three hours work before breakfast. T8 was a splendid gift as he was close enough to the village for me to walk to in 45 minutes. I visited him almost every morning and followed his progress as his chicks matured. His favourite area was a lovely little valley with a stream running through it flanked by sedge meadows. I didn't want to disturb him or expose him to predators so I watched him through a scope from an adjacent hillside. Despite never having the experience of being brought up by his parents he seemed to have very good parental skills. He was very astute at spotting predators and giving the appropriate calls. You might think identifying predators was something you had to learn from your parents but apparently not. He was also very good selecting a habitat in which to hide his chicks. He managed to fledge both chicks so an excellent first breeding attempt.

In addition to headstarting another important project was fitting satellite tags to three birds to help find new stopover or more importantly moulting sites. Three males were carefully selected as birds that had not been seen at the known moulting site on the Jiangsu coast in China. Fitting these tags is an extremely skilled task and for that we had Ewan another team member from the UK. The whole process was very carefully planned and all three tags were fitted on 7th July. The skill with which Ewan fitted the tags were very impressive and all three birds looked very comfortable. I managed to see one of the birds two days later and he was behaving perfectly normally. These pioneering birds have the potential to tell us so much about how and where the birds migrate.

The 31st July was a very important day for the expedition as this was release day for the 22 headstarted chicks. The release at the aviary went to plan and at 11am the door was opened and it didn't take long for the first Spoonies to venture out and find freedom. They initially went to the daphnia bowl just outside the door but before long they were foraging in the long vegetation. Once the last ones had left the aviary the door was closed to stop them going back and later in the day the aviary was dismantled. I was impressed at the speed with which the birds started feeding naturally, it must be instinctive. They had a long and difficult journey ahead of them and I could only wish them the very best of luck. The spirited way they ventured onto the tundra gave me great hope.

All good things must come to an end and eventually on the 1st of August I was climbing back onto the helicopter to start my journey home. The previous day I had walked alone through the moraine hills and sat for a few minutes by each of this summers nest just soaking in the atmosphere of this stunning place. Most of the Spoonies had finished breeding and disappeared so as I boarded the helicopter I was not too sad to be leaving. I had enjoyed a splendid summer seeing Spoonies from initial courtship through egg laying, incubation, chick rearing and finally fledging. But the hunger is still there, no matter how many Spoonies I see the next one still sets my heart racing. The moraine hills have left an indelible mark on me – never have I been in a habitat where I felt so much at home. I so much hope they will be the "blue remembered hills" where I will come again.

The female Spoon-billed Sandpiper XF49131 – Records and history from Northern Chukotka breeding grounds

Alexei Dondua

Not only a number but a strong individual: XF49131 in the tundra of Belyaka Spit *Alexei Dondua*

The incubating female was banded on nest on 02 July 2005 at Belyaka Spit, Northern Chukotka, Russia, approx. N 67. 67.06° W 174.61° by Ivan Taldenkov. The bird successfully bred. It was ringed and provided with an individual colour flag combination containing a light blue flag, identified as from Northern Chukotka:
Left tibia: metal ring XF49131
(Moscow Ringing Centre)
Left tarsus: light-blue flag
Right tibia: blue ring
Right tarsus: white ring

In **2006-2008** no ornithological studies were conducted at the site and no observations were obtained.

In the first year of my studies in **2009** there were no records of this bird, and no records of any Spoon-billed Sandpipers at the site at all through all the summer. Yet, there was one observation of a light blue flagged bird from Nan Thar Island by Joachim Schwahn and Christoph Zöckler. Although the bird did not carry a white ring below, it must have originated from Belyaka spit as by that time birds from other known areas in Northern Chukotka were not flagged.

In **2010** this bird bred again successfully at the site together with a male, that also bred at the site in 2005 (marked individually by I. Taldenkov in 2005). The pair was first recorded on June 22 during the survey along the Northern coast of the

Alexei Dondua together with Rodney Russ at Belyaka Spit 2013 *Christoph Zöckler*

Spit: We found the first and, as we later learned, only nest of SBS in 5.5 km from the main camp. After finding the nest we immediately organised a field camp (a little tent and a fire place) in close vicinity to the nest by the sea coast and started to guard the nest for twenty-four-hours.

The camp was 180 m from the nest, which allowed observing the approaching predators without disturbing the nesting birds. On July 11, the behavior of adult SBSs changed, they became more nervous, and on appearance of danger they gave alarm signals. We made a decision to look at the nest and found the first wet nestling. On July 13 the brood left the nest. Up to July 23 inclusive the couple of adult SBSs, who were definitely worried about their chicks, stayed in the seaside tundra, no more than 150 m from the nest. The future of the brood remained largely unknown: on July 26 for the first time we did not find the brood in the area around the nest (the last record of the female was 23 July).

2011-2012: no records of this bird, and no records of Spoon-billed Sandpipers at the site at all through both the summer seasons.

In the years of **2013-2015** the female bred at the site again (all three seasons – successful breeding) together with another male, the same in all three years. In 2013 this male appeared at the site as non-banded (banded by A. Dondua on 20 July 2013). This male was also, most probably, recorded in Myanmar (Gulf of Mottama) on 06 March 2014 by Lay Win. The behavior of our female in 2013 was extremely secretive: only twice we managed to read the color-combination of bands clearly, and both times (21 and 22 July) – only near the brood (hatching took place on 20 July). The last reliable record of the bird happened on 22 July. In summer 2014 we recorded this bird from 25 June. The last observation – 09 July, when four 1-day old chicks were found near the nest. In summer 2015 we've got the single reliable record

of this female – on 12 June. Hatching happened on 09 July, but we've never seen this female rearing the brood, most probably it disappeared from the site even before hatching, leaving the brood entirely to the male bird. Interestingly, the bird has been seen and photographed in Oktober 2015 in Tiaozini, Jiangsu Province by several observers.

In **2016** no records of this bird, and no records of Spoon-billed Sandpipers at the site at all through all the summer season. Again the bird has been seen and photographed in Tiaozini.

In **2017** the bird bred at the site again together with a new male, it's own son from a brood in 2015! This male was color-banded individually in the nest as downy chick on 09 July 2015 (bander: A. Dondua). The first breeding attempt was unsuccessful – the nest was depredated by an Arctic Fox. The second breeding attempt was successful (in pair with the same male), but only two chicks hatched, and two eggs were infertile. Hatching took place on 22 July, and it was (up-to-date) the last record of this heroic bird at Belyaka Spit: it was sitting in the nest-cup and warming chicks.

It is noticeable that through all years all the nests (except the compensatory clutch of 2017) were situated almost in line along the shore at distances less than 100 m. The nests of 2017 were situated

Two chicks born on 9 July 2015 *Alexei Dondua*

in 464 m one from another; birds shifted from the shoreline to inland tundra.

The bird was last seen and photographed on **18 September 2017** at Tiaozini mudflats (Dongming Li).

Sadly, in **2018** neither the bird or any other Spoon-billed Sandpiper were observed at Belyaka spit and it is feared that the population in the Northern range is extirpated or very close to it.

I like to thank several donors who supported our work over the past nine years. Our work during the period 2009-2013 would have been impossible without the support of Pacific Fisheries Research Center (ChukotTINRO) Anadyr Branch; personal thanks to Dr. Anatoly A. Kochnev – the former leader of the Laboratory of Sea Mammals.

In 2010 the Rufford Small Grants Foundation supported our field work of 24-hour guarding of SBS nest. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) supported us annually with significant funds starting from 2011 in protecting wader nests using wire enclosures etc. Sincere thanks to Dr. Dale G. Miquelle, Cheryl Hojnowski, Dr. Martin Robards, Dr. Jonathan Slaght and Tatiana Perova.

Finally, I am very much obliged to Ivan Taldenkov, the leader of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper project at Belyaka Spit in 2005, whose help throughout 2009-2017, including his financial support (using his own funds) was really invaluable.

Still walking strong – at least for 13 years: Spoon-billed Sandpiper XF49131, Tiaozini, 2017 *Dongming Li*

In search of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Alaska

Elena Lappo, Laura Phillips, Richard Lanctot and Sarah Saalfeld, Stephen Brown, Jonathan Slaght and Evgeny Syroechkovskiy

In June 2018, an international team traveled to northwestern Alaska to search for Spoon-billed Sandpipers (SBS). This study began as a result of a collaboration between the RSPB (Graeme Buchanan and Alison Beresford) and BirdsRussia that modeled habitat selection of SBS using environmental data from three sources (SPOT vegetation, Aqua MODIS ocean colour, and bioclimatic variables), as well as altitude and slope of land to determine potential breeding sites of SBS in the Russian Far East. After the model results were projected to Alaska, a number of areas there were highlighted as being potentially suitable. Most of these sites had not been surveyed by professional biologists in the past, especially during the month of June when SBS would be breeding. However, single observations of SBS had been observed some 40 years ago along the coasts of Alaska. These facts suggested that some part of the SBS population could live in small numbers in Alaska. After long discussions under the EAAFP and Arctic Council's CAFF framework (as part of the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative [AMBI]), the project was funded in 2017 and carried out in June of 2018.

The primary objective of the expedition was to survey suitable coastal regions for evidence of breeding SBS using a variable circular point count survey methodology. Field crews also documented the occurrence, habitat use, breeding status, and distribution of other waterbird species at survey sites. Field surveys were conducted on foot after being transferred to pre-selected sites using a Robinson 44 helicopter or a Cessna 206 aircraft. Russian experts evaluated sites both from the air

The main transport of the expedition – the Robinson 44 helicopter *Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*

and ground for SBS suitability prior to conducting surveys. From 5 – 12 June 2018, 25 sites were visited and 175 point counts were examined within 100 km of the village of Kotzebue, including coasts of Kotzebue Sound; Selawik Lake; lower reaches of the Selawik, Noatak and Kobuk rivers; and near Cape Krusenstern. Unfortunately, field crews were unable to locate any SBS in Alaska in 2018. However, a total of 1,174 individuals belonging to 18 shorebird species were counted, and an additional 60 other waterbirds or landbirds were documented as being present in one or more sites.

Despite not locating SBS, it is still possible the species breeds in Alaska, as our work in this poorly studied area was quite short, and other areas thought to be promising for SBS were not visited. Objectively, the chance to find this rare species in Alaska is small, especially considering that even in its optimal nesting sites in Chukotka it is quite rare. Further, it is unknown how the earlier phenology of the vegetation in the potential breeding habitats in Alaska compared to sites in Chukotka may influence the occurrence of the SBS. Despite these issues, we remain hopeful that SBS will be sighted during future work in northwestern Alaska.

This study also supported an AMBI objective to increase the exchange of experiences between Russian and American experts on the SBS and other Beringian shorebirds. E. Syroechkovskiy, R. Lanctot, and L. Phillips conducted an interview for Alaska Public Radio while in Kotzebue, and E. Lappo also gave a lecture to American colleagues and local residents on conservation measures and studies of the SBS in Russia at the Northwest Arctic Heritage Center there.

View of Kotzebue Sound from the inside of the Robinson 44 helicopter *Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*

Funding / Acknowledgements:
NPS and Manomet Inc. provided funding to charter a helicopter and pay for food and supplies, and field personnel to conduct this study. The USFWS provided staff to organize, plan and conduct the surveys. WCS funded Elena and Evgeny's travel to Alaska and provided survey personnel. The Selawik National Wildlife Refuge and the Western Arctic National Parkland office of the NPS provided housing and/or other logistical support for the crew in Kotzebue. Metta McGarvey, Mary Hake and Brad Winn gathered logistical supplies for the study and/or conducted surveys. Zach Elkins from Pollux Aviation and Eric Sieh from Arctic Backcountry Flying Service safely navigated us to our survey locations.

Elena Lappo *(Institute of Geography Rus. Acad. Sci., BirdsRussia),* ***Laura Phillips*** *(US National Park Service),* ***Richard Lanctot and Sarah Saalfeld*** *(US Fish and Wildlife Service;),* ***Stephen Brown*** *(Manomet Inc.),* ***Jonathan Slaght*** *(Wildlife Conservation Society),* ***Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*** *(Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment)*

Elena Lappo giving a lecture on the conservation and studies of SBS in Russia at the Northwest Arctic Heritage Center in Kotzebue, Alaska for local people *Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*

Searching for Spoon-billed Sandpiper with Heritage

Christoph Zöckler

For the eighth time, Heritage Expedition, the New Zealand travel company invited the SBS Task Force to join its cruise through the Bering Sea in search for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the summer 2018. This time under the new leadership of Nathan Russ. The son of Rodney took over in spring and is now running the company together with his brother Aaron. We were lucky and blessed with fantastic calm and sunny weather, unusual for this part of the world.

In gorgeous sunlight we witnessed the eruption of the 4.800 m high Kluchevskoie volcano in an amazing setting of snowy mountains (see photo below), lush green forests and the most amazing Steller's Sea Eagles flying about. Once the zodiac motor was switched off we even heard the enigmatic song of the globally threatened Yellow-breasted Buntings.

Very special at least for the birding community and the Spoonie-enthusiasts was the encounter with the breeding male Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Part of this year's cruise was also to revisit some coastal sites previously visited with known territories of Spoon-billed Sandpipers and fortunately the calm weather conditions allowed to check on site that we have visited in 2011 the last time. Three teams of 10-12 people each searched the huge spits for any sign of the rare wader, but sadly this site is no longer occupied.

Nathan Russ in Kamchatka, June 2018 Heritage Expeditions

This has been Nathan's first cruise with us and he likes to continue to work with us and hopefully many more excursions with Heritage Expeditions will help and foster our truly magnificent win-win relationship, a textbook example of cooperate support for conservation. Thank you Nathan, thank you Heritage Expeditions! Like in the previous year also this year one of the clients came forward and donated 15,000 € for the Task Force work in Russia. We are very grateful and thank Heritage Expedition to have made this happen and we are looking forward to continue our work with its dedicated team.

Heritage cruise guests searching for nests at the Koryak Coast, Northern Kamchatka, July 2018 *all three Christoph Zöckler*

World first! Rare Spoon-billed Sandpiper fledges in captivity – leading to new hope it can be saved from extinction

Baz Hughes and the Conservation Breeding Team

One of the world's rarest wading bird has been thrown a lifeline after a Spoon-billed Sandpiper successfully fledged for the first time at WWT Slimbridge in Gloucestershire.

It belongs to the only captive flock anywhere in the globe, established in 2011 in case time ran out to save the dwindling wild population in Asia.

After eight years of toil, conservationists have finally managed to breed a chick that has survived beyond a few days. This breakthrough for conservation breeding could potentially be used to help other threatened waders in captivity.

WWT Head of Conservation Breeding Nigel Jarrett said: "*We've been waiting for this moment for a long time. Playing Cupid has finally paid off! The significance of this is only just starting to hit home. First we had this fuzzy little chick – with its unmistakeable spoon-shaped bill – feeding, preening, napping – and now it's flying. I still have to pinch myself. This bird belongs to one of the rarest species in the world and its survival is a huge breakthrough that hopefully ensures that we'll never lose this marvellous wader forever.*"

Just four pairs have nested since a back-up flock was brought to Slimbridge. Two chicks hatched in 2016 but sadly died soon after.

In the wild, only around 100-200 breeding pairs are left on the Asia Pacific coast, following declines of up to 26% each year throughout the 2000s.

Hatchling from 2018 in its first days *WWT*

The birds hatch with their distinctive spoon-shaped bills fully formed, making it unique in the bird world. The fact they've never been kept in captivity before combined with their extreme lifestyle in the wild has posed a huge challenge for Mr Jarrett and his team. He said: *"In the wild they migrate from tropical Asia to Arctic Russia to breed, experiencing huge differences in temperature, habitats and daylight along the way. Each of those factors could play a part in getting the birds' hormones surging, so we've done our best to recreate that experience in aviaries in Gloucestershire. I'm glad to say that, with the help of special lightbulbs and timer switches, and a lot of diet analysis, we seem to have finally pulled it off."*

Since the flock was established in 2011, there are signs that the wild population may be starting to recover thanks to conservation organisations working across the birds' range from Russia to China to Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Unfortunately one clutch was infertile and from the other clutch two birds hatched. One only survived the first few days, while the other became a star – the very first captive bred Spoon-billed Sandpiper that grew up and fledged in late June and was integrated into the flock. This was a major breakthrough in the complicated conservation breeding project.

Further good news arrived a few days later when genetic analysis confirmed the bird was female (there are only seven females in the flock of 19 birds). However, in mid-July the bird died in a fluke accident. CCTV footage, injuries and bruises

First successful hatchling on 15 June 2018 *WWT*

near the eye suggest that it was a "night fright" accident. This sad incident shocked and disturbed everyone following the story and of course the conservation breeding team in Slimbridge. After the death of the chick, the team spirit was understandably low but yet undeterred and also encouraged by the successes. Even though it is still very sad, the team can rightly hope that this was a major step forward and they have achieved the breakthrough everybody was hoping for.

A head-starting programme for Spoon-billed Sandpipers has been underway since 2012, involving the collection of eggs from incubating birds in the wild, hatching and hand-raising the chicks in captivity to fledging age, and releasing the birds back into the wild. Skipping the particularly risky incubation and rearing phases helps protect the eggs and increases the chicks chances of survival. This technique has boosted the number of young Spoon-billed Sandpipers bred each year in the wild by a quarter.

Chair of the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership's Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force Evgeny Syroechkovskiy said: *"Seeing how much progress we've made makes all the hard work worth it. Saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper has brought the international conservation community together and as a result we've made huge strides in a very short time. The illegal trapping and hunting has been stopped at several hotspots along their flyway. The authorities in China have cooperated with us and moved to protect the remaining wetlands along their coastline. We have also developed and made an incredible success of techniques to head-start wild chicks on the breeding grounds.*

As well as helping the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, these achievements directly help many other species that share the same flyway and the methods we've honed can be used to help other birds in trouble around the world."

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation breeding programme is a collaboration between WWT, Birds Russia, Moscow Zoo and the RSPB working with colleagues from the BTO, BirdLife International, ArcCona and the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force.

The work is supported by WWT, RSPB, the UK Government's Darwin Initiative, SOS – Save our Species, ICFC – International Conservation Fund of Canada, a legacy from the late Dr Rosemary H McConnell and Leica Camera AG, with additional financial contributions and support from the Australasian Wader Study Group of Birds Australia, Avifauna Research, Avios, Balmain Charitable Trust, Barfill Charitable Trust, BBC Wildlife Fund, Belgian Birding, BirdLife International, British Airways Communities & Conservation Scheme, British Airways Corporate Safety and Security, British Birds Charitable Trust, Chester Zoo, Convention on Migratory Species, Dutch Birding, the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership, Heritage Expeditions, Microwave Telemetry Inc., Mileage Company, New South Wales Wader Study Group, New Zealand Department of Conservation, Olive Herbert Charitable Trust, Oriental Bird Club, OSME, Peter Smith Charitable Trust for Nature, Philips Lighting, Queensland Wader Study Group, WWT Slimbridge Friends, Wader Quest, WildSounds, Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung (MHS), Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU) and many other generous individuals.

The wondrous journey of Super Spoonie Lime 07

Baz Hughes and the SBS Satellite tagging Team

We've known for some years now that Spoon-billed Sandpiper Lime 07 is a Super Spoonie, but until this year we didn't really know how super!

The Birds Russia field team caught the male on his nest, east of Meinypil'gyno, Chukotka, Russia on 23 June 2013 and marked him with a Lime 07 leg flag and metal ring number KS18827. His mate was fitted with Lime 08 and their clutch of four eggs was taken for head-starting, all four of which hatched and fledged.

Although Lime 07 wasn't seen in 2014 in Meinypil'gyno, he was most probably present but not located, as he subsequently reappeared to breed in 2015 along with his mate Lime 08. They only laid two eggs that year, both of which were again taken for head-starting, both of which hatched and both of which were released.

In 2016, Lime 07 and Lime 08 again bred together producing three eggs which were left with them to hatch themselves. All three hatched and all three chicks fledged.

In 2017, Lime 07 was observed in spring with a new unmarked female, but his nest was not found (presumed either flooded or predated).

In 2018, Lime 07 again appeared on the breeding grounds at Meinypil'gyno and this time he was a bird we were very interested in as part of our quest to locate unknown moulting sites as he had never been seen previously at the main moult site in Jiangsu, China. When his nest failed (freshly damaged eggs were found in and around his nest on 4 July) the Russian field team put dummy eggs into the nest which he subsequently began to catch and mark the bird.

Lime 07 started his migration from Meinypil'gyno on 19 July, flying 1,285 km south-west to Magadan, were he staged for 8 days before continuing his migration to northern Sakhalin where he stayed for another 8 days (using 2 sites). He set off on the next (1,981km) leg of his migration on 8 August arriving at Yonan, North Korea on the 11 August where he then remained for 67 days, presumably to moult and fattening for the onward journey.

We then expected his tag to fall off, as we thought that Spoon-billed Sandpipers undergo a complete post-breeding body moult in autumn, which would mean the feathers supporting the tag would have been lost. Undoubtedly most do, but to our great delight, Lime 07 was to prove an exception to the rule. On 17 October 2018, Lime 07 left North

Lime 07, Meinypil'gyno, 11 June 2017 *Nikolai Yakushev*

Marking Lime 07 on the breeding grounds on 7 July 2018 *Pavel Tomkovich*

Screenshot of Lime 07's 9,200km migration from the far north of arctic Russia to the tropical heat of northern Sumatra. The extra shootings over the Sea of Okhotsk and Sachalin are fake values or mirror counts

Korea for a non-stop 51 hour 2,400 km flight to the south coast of Guangdong Province, China, where he settled on 19 October at a previously unknown staging / wintering site on the west coast of the Leizhou Peninsula. Our Chinese friends from SBS in China immediately mobilised the staff of the nearby Zhangjiang NR to help. They checked the area but could not locate the bird in time before it moved on. The good news though was that they did not find any mist nets or other immanent threats to the birds.

So where would Lime 07 spend the winter? He had previously been sighted on 4 February 2016 at Khok Kham, Samut Sakhon, Thailand; 21 November 2016 at Sonadia Island, Bangladesh, and then again here on 17 February 2017, indicating that Lime 07 spent the entire winter in Bangladesh in 2017, possibly in and around Sonadia Island.

As Spoonies are thought to be faithful to their wintering sites (see for example 05 in Khok Kham and 27 on Nan Thar Island in separate report in this issue). However, recent surveys have discovered that there are significant numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers remaining to winter in southern China. Would he stay put or would he move on? Flurries of e-mails were betting he would move on. And they were right.

In the evening (local time) of 28 October, after 9 days in southern China, Lime 07 set off once again. But instead of heading due west towards Bangladesh he headed off south west. As we all waited for the next fix, we expected him to correct his route and thought we'd next find him somewhere over the Thai peninsula heading towards Myanmar and then maybe on to Bangladesh. We waited, and we waited, and we waited until his next fix eventually came in 19 hours later – placing him off the coast of Cambodia! He had continued on his south-westerly bearing and was still flying. And on he

flew, he did not stop in Thailand either, and on he passed the Strait of Malacca, eventually making landfall in northern Sumatra on the morning (local time) of 30 October after a non-stop 49 hour flight of 2,300km – almost the same distance in the same length of time (and thus at the same speed – 47 km/h) as the previous leg of his migration.

Now you might think the story ends here – after a marathon 3 ½ month, 9,180 km migration from the far north of arctic Russia to the tropical heat of northern Sumatra, passing across nine different countries. But it does not.

After seeing that Lime 07 had made landfall in northern Sumatra, the international Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force swung into action. This was the first ever record of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Indonesia at a site which was not known to be an important site for shorebirds. We needed to find out how many shorebirds and how many Spoon-billed Sandpipers were using the site and, importantly, whether Lime 07 was looking okay after it's marathon migration. Visiting a remote site in northern Sumatra isn't anything like popping down to your local estuary in the UK, or even visiting well known wintering sites along the flyway. Could we manage to find someone who could get out into the field and hopefully find and even photograph Lime 07?

Thankfully the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force has contacts throughout the East Asian Australasian Flyway – including in Indonesia and, it turns out, even in northern Sumatra! Task Force Coordinator Christoph Zöckler immediately got in touch with Chairunas Adha Putra (Nchay) who runs Sumatera Birding Tours and lives a mere 220 km or six hours drive from the site. Nchay immediately agreed to muster a team to visit the site in search of Lime 07. Nchay and his team arrived at the site on Friday 2 November to find over 7,000 waders of more than 20 species, including many Red-necked and Little Stints, plovers and Sanderlings but no Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Sadly, the area was also subjected with mist nets and posing

Lime 07, northern Sumatra, 3 November 2018 *Chairunas Adha Putra*

an immediate threat to Lime 07 and many other waders in the area. The team would keep looking. Then, at 9 am UK time on Saturday 3 November, the news we had all been waiting for came through – Christoph e-mailed us to say that Nchay and his team had found Lime 07! It was looking well and actively feeding on some fishponds together with Red-necked Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Greater Sandplover, and Broad-billed Sandpiper. And then my eye was drawn to the e-mail attachments. Surely Nchay hadn't managed to photograph Lime 07. Click. Oh yes he had! Two stunning full frame photos of Lime 07 Super Spoonie along with satellite tag!

Unfortunately Nchay also discovered two active mist nets. Although he somehow managed to have one taken down the following day, the other still poses a threat to Lime 07. Air softgun shooting is also reported and generally very little awareness about migratory waterbirds, their status and threats in this remote part of Sumatra.

Will Lime 07 remain in northern Sumatra for the winter or will he return to his previous wintering area in Bangladesh? Only time will tell, but we'll all be keeping a close and concerned eye on him and wish him well.

We have now tagged a total of 12 Spoon-billed Sandpipers since October 2016 and the results have been breath-taking: The overland migration route to Myanmar proven; an inland stop over at the Ayeyarwady River, a number of previously unknown staging and wintering and possibly breeding sites identified; two important new sites identified in North Korea, including a site which may turn out to be another critical moulting site for the species; and on the ground action at some sites in southern China and Indonesia (see also separate article on page 31-33) identified through satellite tracking resulting in prompt removal of illegally set mist nets.

I'd like to end by personally thanking Paul Howey and all at Microwave Telemetry Inc. for supplying us with the amazing satellite tags which had made all of this possible. And obviously to all of our funders and supporters, more information about which you can find in this newsletter.

Mist nets in northern Sumatra, 2 November 2018 *Chairunas Adha Putra*

Satellite tagging of spoon-billed sandpipers reveals the importance of intertidal habitats in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for migration and post-breeding moult

Rhys Green, Nigel Clark, Guy Anderson, Ewan Weston & Baz Hughes

Introduction

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* is one of the world's most threatened species of migratory birds and is categorized as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International, 2015). It breeds on coastal tundra in the north-east arctic and subarctic zones of Russia in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug and northern Kamchatka Kraj (Zöckler et al., 2010). During the non-breeding season Spoon-billed Sandpipers migrate through the southern Russian Far East, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, People's Republic of China and Japan to winter in southern China, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia and Bangladesh (Clark et al., 2014; Zöckler et al., 2016). Coastal mudflats, including estuaries, are the main habitat in the non-breeding season. In August – October, adult Spoon-billed Sandpipers pause on their autumn migration to undergo a complete post-breeding moult. It is known that substantial numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers now stopover and moult in autumn on the coast of Jiangsu province, China. Other moulting grounds were important in the past. For example, many Spoon-billed Sandpipers staged and moulted in the Saemangeum estuary complex on the west coast of the Republic of Korea before it was developed in 2010. Currently, the Jiangsu coast is the only autumn moulting ground known to hold large numbers of the species. This note describes new information on this topic derived from satellite tracking.

Methods

We captured adult Spoon-billed Sandpipers and fitted them with solar-powered PTT-100/5/ZE tags (Microwave Telemetry, Inc., Columbia, MD, USA). Each tag weighed 1.6 g with dimensions 18 x 11 x 6 mm (length, width, height) and a 210 mm antenna. The tag was attached to the bird's back via a patch of finely-woven fabric glued to the skin and feathering over the synsacrum, using cyanoacrylate glue (Loctite Superglue 3, Henkel AG & Co.). The combined weight of the tag and attachment was 1.9 – 2.0 g. Contour feathers in the area of attachment were clipped to about 3 mm in length and washed with acetone to remove oils before the tag was attached. Birds were marked with a numbered metal ring on one tibiotarsus and a UPVC leg flag (Clark et al. 2005) engraved with a unique combination of two alphanumeric characters on the other. In most cases, we satellite-tagged birds marked with leg flags in previous years, so that we could use sightings of their flags to determine their likely destinations. 8 Spoon-billed Sandpipers were tagged in China and other parts of the flyway in spring and autumn. Tag fixes were obtained via the Argos satellite. Centroids of clusters of fixes were calculated when a bird had settled in an area for a few days.

Results

Tags of three of 8 adult Spoon-billed Sandpipers stopped working around Kamchatka Peninsula (Russia) during the autumn migration. The other four birds tagged in July moved south from Kamchatka across the Sea of Okhotsk and along the Pacific coast of Russia. All four of these birds paused in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Two birds known from previous sightings of their leg flags to moult on the coast of Jiangsu Province, China, paused briefly in August 2017 at two sites in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Table 1). Both birds stopped first on the eastern coast near Munchon and later moved to the western coast near Yonan. They then left the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and flew across the West Sea to Jiangsu Province, China, where they moulted. Two other leg-flagged birds, satellite-tagged in arctic Russia in July 2018, had never been seen previously during the moulting season on the coast of Jiangsu Province, China. They flew directly to the Yonan site. The tag of one of these (Lime green 21) ceased to function after the bird had spent 37 days at the site. It is most likely that this bird's tag detached during the

moult of the feathering over the synsacrum. The tag of the other individual at Yonan in 2018 (Lime green 07) is continuing to function at the time of writing (22 October 2018). Lime green 07 stayed at Yonan for 67 days and left on 17 October 2018. It then flew for 51 hours and arrived on the south coast of Guangdong Province, China after a flight of 2400 km.

The two adult Spoon-billed Sandpipers tagged in Jiangsu Province, China, in May 2017 initially migrated together, both moving east skirting around the southern coast of the Korean penisula, before turning north. One bird (XT) continued along the Pacific coast of Russia, eventually reaching the arctic in northern Kamchatka. The other bird (CH) turned back and spent a substantial period in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in June 2017 before returning to Jiangsu to moult. Whilst in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, CH moved a considerable distance, but spent two periods of eight days each near Yonan (Table 1). At the time of tagging, CH had attained less breeding plumage than XT, possibly a sign that it was a younger bird, though not a one-year old. Many one-year-old Spoon-billed Sandpipers do not visit the arctic breeding grounds and it is possible that a few second-years may not do so.

These results indicate that two coastal sites, at Munchon and Yonan, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are important for Spoon-billed Sandpipers during their migrations. Two individuals paused on their autumn migration near Munchon and then moved to Yonan before flying on to moult in China. Two others flew directly to Yonan to moult. The possible young bird CH spent part of the summer near Yonan. Hence, five of the six satellite-tagged Spoon-billed Sandpipers known to have transited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea paused near Yonan for periods of 3 - 67 days (Table 1, Figures 1 and 2).

Discussion

A recent estimate of the world population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper indicates that the location of about half of the adult population during the post-breeding moult is uncertain (Clark et al. 2018). The results presented here suggest the possibility that some or all of these birds moult near Yonan in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and that the adults that move on to moult in China also pause briefly at sites in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, especially near Munchon and Yonan. Two tagged adults (Light green 07 and Light green 21) almost certainly moulted at Yonan: the period spent by Light green 07 at Yonan matches the duration of primary moult estimated for Spoon-billed Sandpipers on the coast of Jiangsu Province. The flight of 2400 km undertaken by Lime 07 immedately after departing from Yonan indicates that the site provides important resources for moult and for the pre-migratory accumulation of body fat, which is essential for long-distance migration. Hence, conducting counts of Spoon-billed Sandpipers in these areas of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during August and September is a high priority for the conservation of the species. It is encouraging that both sites have been identified as internationally important wetlands (meeting Ramsar listing criteria) in the recently published DPRK Wetland Inventory (Anon 2018): Munchon is Site [42/44] – Kumya River Estuary and Yonan is Site [32] – September 18 Reservoir and its coastal mudflat.

Acknowledgments

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper satellite tagging work on the flyway was a collaboration between Birds Russia, Nanjing Normal University, BTO, RSPB and WWT, with assistance from the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force of the East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership. Microwave Telemetry Inc. provided us with the satellite tags and technical support.

Table 1. *Centroids (in decimal degrees) of fixes of five satellite-tagged Spoon-billed Sandpipers at two localities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Dates are the beginning and end of the individual's stay at the site, except for the record marked with an asterisk. This individual was still present at the site when the tag ceased to function*

Bird code	Start date	Stop date	Stay dur. (d)	Lat.	Long.	Place	DPRK Wetland Inventory site code and name
Yellow CH	01/06/2017	07/06/2017	8	37.755	126.065	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat
Yellow CH	12/06/2017	19/06/2017	8	37.737	126.100	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat
Light green 32	03/08/2017	03/08/2017	1	39.378	127.500	Munchon	42/44 Kumya River Estuary
Light green 32	05/08/2017	07/08/2017	3	37.788	126.158	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat
Light green 43	24/08/2017	26/08/2017	3	39.416	127.490	Munchon	42/44 Kumya River Estuary
Light green 43	28/08/2017	30/08/2017	3	37.822	125.865	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat
Light green 07	11/08/2018	17/10/2018	67	37.801	125.963	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat
Light green 21	25/08/2018	01/10/2018*	37*	37.790	125.976	Yonan	32 – September 18 Reservoir and coastal mudflat

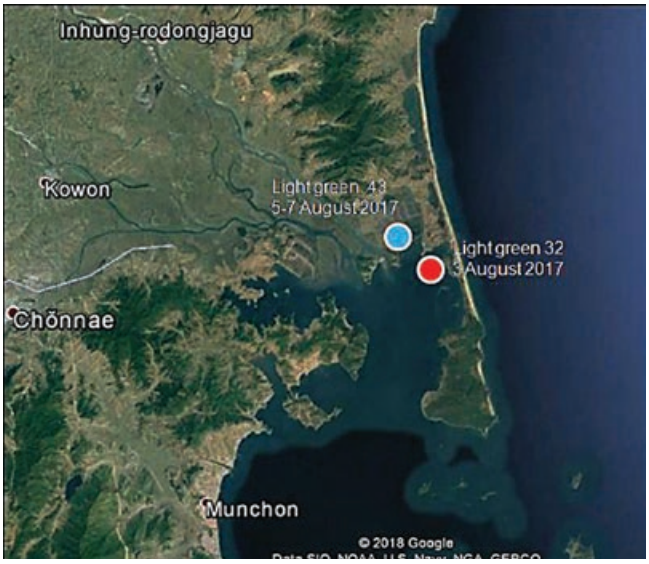


Figure 1. *Centroids of fixes of two satellite-tagged Spoon-billed Sandpipers near Munchon, Democratic People's Republic of Korea*

Figure 2*. Centroids of fixes of five satellite-tagged Spoon-billed Sandpipers near Yonan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea*

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SBS survey and flagging in Jiangsu, China, September 2018

Guy Anderson, Kane Brides, Jacquie Clark, Nigel Clark, Rhys Green, Katherine Leung, David Melville, Ewan Weston and Qing Chang

From 6 to 17 September 2018, an international team joined Chinese researchers to continue the programme of wader ringing and survey work, focussing on SBS, in Jiangsu Province. This was the 4th consecutive year of this research, led by Prof Qing Chang of Nanjing Normal University. The team worked in cooperation with Yancheng National Nature Reserve, Nantong Museum and Nantong Prefecture Environmental Protection Department. We worked at three study sites: (1) Tiaozini in Dongtai county, (2) Yangkou-Fengli and (3) Dongling; both in Rudong County.

The fieldwork had five key aims:

1. Catching and marking SBS with individually coded colour flags, to increase the marked sample of birds in the population.

These marked individuals allow us to estimate world population size, local population size at key sites, annual survival rates and migration routes and timings of individual birds. We exceeded all expectations this September, catching 15 SBS. All were adults – rather few juveniles seem to use Jiangsu in autumn, and those that do usually only start arriving there in mid-September. We added yellow 2-letter flags to the 13 unringed birds. The two which had been marked previously were: White 3K – a headstarted bird in 2017 – seen as a juvenile at Tiaozini in October 2017; and Yellow YE which was flagged in Kamchatka on southward migration in August 2017 (Gerasimov et al 2018).

2. Colour-marking other waders to increase knowledge of migratory connectivity between Jiangsu and other sites along the East Asian Australasian Flyway (EAAF).

As Spoon-billed Sandpipers typically roost with large numbers of other waders at these sites, catching 15 SBS involved catching 1,891 waders of 33 species in total. This amazing variety illustrates

Scanning for spoonies, Jiangsu Province, China in September 2018 *Guy Anderson*

the importance of these Jiangsu sites in autumn for migrating waders. The catches included several other species of high conservation concern in the EAAF: Nordmann's Greenshank (5), Far Eastern Curlew (9), Great Knot (24), and Asian Dowitcher (1). The other species caught in highest numbers were (in descending order of abundance): Dunlin, Kentish Plover, Red-necked Stint, Terek Sandpiper, Lesser Sand Plover, Long-toed Stint and Ruddy Turnstone (all with more than 100 individuals caught). All waders other than SBS received a combination of green over blue (plain) colour-flags to denote that they were marked in Jiangsu (as part of the coordinated EAAF marking scheme). The five Nordmann's Greenshanks received individually-coded engraved blue flags under the plain green flag, as they are a priority for understanding more about their flyway, population status and demography.

3. Catching significant numbers of a variety of species to provide training opportunities for the Jiangsu field team.

The skills and experience required to safely and effectively catch, mark and collect data from SBS and other waders are demanding and take time to acquire. Ensuring a sustainable legacy of such skills within the Jiangsu shorebird research community is an important long-term aim of this international cooperation.

4. Carrying out a standardised scan survey methodology on intertidal feeding areas and at roosting sites to estimate the proportion of individually marked to unmarked SBS present.

A good dataset was collected (mostly from Tiaozini) which will allow estimates of both local and global population size to be made. An initial look at the data suggests a local staging/moulting population of around 200 individual SBS at Tiaozini in September 2018. Not enough data were collected from either Yangkou-Fengli or Dongling to carry out similar site-specific analyses at these sites. An absolute minimum of 30 individuals were recorded at Dongling, but only a very small

The Jiangsu field team *Guy Anderson*

number at Yangkou-Fengli; a maximum of 4 on any one day. This puts the estimated Jiangsu SBS population in September 2018 at a minimum of 234 individuals. The estimate of world population size from 2014 (Clark et al 2017) suggests that a significant number of SBS must be staging and moulting elsewhere, at sites that are currently unknown. However, satellite tagging in 2018 (see page 27), suggests where at least some of these 'missing' birds may be in autumn. A second mark-recapture-based estimate of global population size will be possible using the flagged vs unflagged ratio data collected in September 2018 (using the same method developed by Clark et al 2017), but this will require additional confirmed sightings of marked individuals from along the flyway over the next year.

5. Assessing the condition of key wader sites, and monitoring any threats present.

At Tiaozini, the single most important site for SBS, certainly in Jiangsu, and possibly in the world, changes in the distribution of SBS on intertidal areas over recent years was noticed – probably due to changes in coastal processes affecting suitable sediment distribution – an ongoing effect of past land claim changes to the coastline.

Dangerous fishing nets were again recorded on intertidal mudflats at Tiaozini on several days. One line of nets was checked after fishermen had emptied it at dawn. Approximately 40 dead small and medium waders were found, discarded next to the nets, thankfully without any SBS on this occasion. These nets were again reported to the local authorities. Better monitoring of this threat, and work to deploy bird-safe alternative fishing methods is needed urgently.

Spartina continues to spread on the intertidal mud at Tiaozini, and a large number of small shoots are now present on the mudflats south of the parking area. This will need addressing as soon as possible, to prevent this invasive plant from covering important SBS foraging areas. Spartina already covers significant areas of mudflat at Dongling, and we recorded continued spread and consolidation compared to previous years. After land claim, Spartina is certainly the next most serious threat to SBS foraging habitat in Jiangsu.

Yellow AU in the hand – caught and flagged September 2018, Jiangsu, China *Guy Anderson*

Close up head shot of Yellow HT, September 2018, Jiangsu, China *Guy Anderson*

The Yangkou-Fengli area now appears to hold only small numbers of SBS in autumn. This is in

contrast to the significant numbers recorded there a few years ago; maximum simultaneous count of 103 recorded in October 2011 (Tong et al 2012). The change in SBS numbers here appears to coincide with changes in intertidal sediment structure over recent years, although we have no data to back-up this suspicion. The site does however still support large numbers (tens of thousands) of other waders during autumn staging, including internationally important numbers of Far Eastern Curlews, Nord-mann's Greenshanks and Saunders's Gulls, and remains a very important coastal waterbird site in Jiangsu Province.

Similar to previous years, Dongling held approximately 50,000 waders during our fieldwork period; it is also a key coastal waterbird site in Jiangsu. An area of Spartina-dominated mudflat (approximately 200 ha) has been claimed and enclosed by new seawalls in the last year. This area included a patch of open mudflat frequently used as a high tide roost by small waders in previous years. We observed waders roosting in the same location this year, although the area is now a series of bunded aquaculture ponds awaiting development.

Opportunities for identifying and managing safe roosting sites for waders within bunded aquaculture pond areas at both Dongling and Yangkou-Fengli are emerging through engagement with local authorities and land managers.

Tiaozini will hopefully be included within the boundaries of Yancheng National Nature Reserve in the near future and hence will become part of the area to be considered for Natural World Heritage Site designation. Yancheng National Nature Reserve staff are already engaged in managing an area of claimed land at Tiaozini for an 'ecological water-park' – an area being used as a roost site by approximately 50,000 waders during our fieldwork. The reserve is also embarking on its

Close up head shot of Yellow HT, September 2018, Jiangsu, China *Guy Anderson*

own programme of wader tagging. It is hoped that members of the Jiangsu SBS research and survey team will be able to act as advisors to Yancheng National Nature Reserve on both research and monitoring and reserve management methods to benefit both SBS and other waterbirds in the future.

Several members of the team, and representatives of associated conservation organisations plan to attend the second international conservation symposium being held at Yancheng in November 2018. Managing coastal wetlands for SBS and other waterbirds will again be the primary theme of this meeting.

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Nan Thar Island will become a Protected Area

Ren Naung Soe (BECAR) & Pyae Phyo Aung (BANCA)

Nan Thar Island is one of the important wintering sites for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Myanmar. Regarding the Spoon-billed Sandpiper National Action Plan 2017-2020, BANCA and local partner BECAR organized a State level consultation workshop for the conservation of Nan Thar Island in Sittwe on 8th September 2018. In total 40 participants attended this workshop and there were excellent outcomes. The Forest Department of Rakhine State will lead on the process to designate Nan Thar Island as a Protected Area in the coming year. After the National Flyway site workshop in Yangon funded by Asian Japan Integrated Fund (AJIF), the Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division of the Forest Department proposed Site information Sheet to EAAF secretariat to designate Nan Thar Island as EFN site. If designated Nan Thar Island as Protected Area, this site will become the first PA in the coastal region of Rakhine State.

With support of ICFC two site guards were assigned to monitor illegal hunting and fishing around Nan Thar Island, which has been a problem recently and hunting resumed occasionally in the past 5 years. Regarding the socio-economic survey results, the team provided twelve hand water pumps in four villages near Nan Thar. Also two local conservation groups were formed with active members incl. university students. BANCA and BECAR ornithologists provided basic bird watching training course for LCG members.

We like to thank ArcCona Consulting, the Lighthouse Foundation, ICFC, RSPB, Disney Foundation, TOYOTA and BirdLife International for their support in conserving Nan Thar Island.

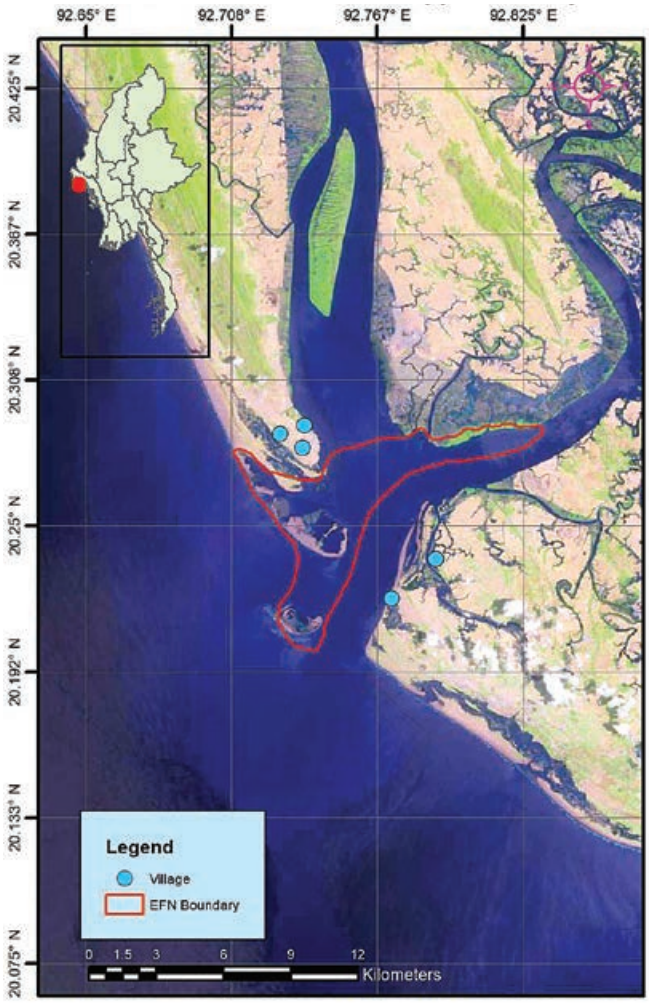
Birdwatching training by BANCA *Pyae Phyo Aung*

State level consultation workshop in Sittwe

Opening speech by Director of Forest Department Rakhine

Water Pumps provided by the BECAR and BANCA team with support from Disney Foundation *Ren Naung Soe*

Lime Green 27 returned for the fifth year to Nan Thar Island *Ren Naung Soe*



Proposed outline of the Protected Area of Nan Thar and Mayyu Estuary

My long, precarious journey for a little, rare bird

Mohammod Foysal

In 2006, an international team visited Bangladesh in search of a tiny bird. I was fortunate enough to meet with the team and was also there during the press conference after the field work. It was here that I learnt about the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. To be honest, before this, I was not aware about Spoon-billed Sandpiper or even shorebirds prior to this survey work.

Before this, I had conducted only one opportunistic study on the breeding behaviour on Little Ringed Plover in 2003. My work with shorebirds truly kicked off after 2006, as I participated in different surveys on waterbird census and such. On one such trip, I came face to face, with my first Spoon-billed Sandpiper or Spoony as I now lovingly call the bird in Cox's Bazar-Teknaf peninsula of south-east coast of Bangladesh.

The little, almost sparrow-sized bird was very busy and I watched spell-bound as the busiest bird in the mudflat, walked around in the soft mud. And I told myself, it should be named Mr/Ms Busy. I was so fascinated by this charismatic tiny friend that after that whenever I had a chance to visit the mudflats I searched for this tiny bird. Almost three years after my initiation into the world of shorebirds, in 2009, Sayam U. Chowdhury, conservation biologist who is now working with endangered species in Bangladesh, established the Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project (BSCP). It was aimed for research work and later for the conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Bangladesh.

In 2010, he gave me an opportunity for volunteer work on the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS)

Md Foysal and Sayam U. Chowdhury at Domar Char, Meghna Estuary, Bangladesh, 2013 *Thouhidur Rahman*

Head-started 3C and 3M at Sonadia Island, Bangladesh – 2018 *both Sayam U. Chowdhury*

in coastal areas of Bangladesh. That was my first intensive work on SBS. In 2011, after completing my MSc. I was offered to join BSCP as a full time staff. I joined immediately and my work on SBS formally began under the supervision of Sayam U. Chowdhury.

Thus began my work in Cox's Bazar, which soon went on to become my second home as I regularly worked at Sonadia Island, the hotspot for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Bangladesh. This island is not only important for SBS but also for other shorebirds and threatened wildlife. I was taught to always look and take note of the SBS plumage, whether the bird was ringed or flagged, if ringed, then what was the position of the ring and flag and so on.

All of this made me very eager to spot a marked bird. But that dream had to wait until almost 2014/15. This is when I finally I spotted a Lime Green 09 ringed SBS at Sonadia. It was a moment of pure exhilaration and it became a really exciting game. Now I had new challenges ahead. I made it my next target to spot a "Head-started" bird.

In 2015, the BSCP team carried out an expedition to the South-Central coast of Bangladesh under the new programme called "SBS NEW AREA SEARCH." And here finally, I spotted another new marked bird "black & yellow", followed by Lime Green and with that BSCP discovered another new hotspot of SBS.

In the following years BSCP team spotted more new flagged birds at this new site and Sonadia. But never a head-started and I wondered if these birds winter in Bangladesh at all or not. On 25 January 2018, Sayam and I were surveying at Sonadia. Suddenly I spotted a flagged bird, it was a new colour for Bangladesh – a white flagged bird. I informed Sayam. He congratulated me and took photos and told me that it's a head-started bird. I was so excited that I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

On the same day I spotted another head-started bird – white 3M and 3C (Table 1). I had always dreamed for one but ended up getting two on a single day. That was a double bonus for me! My dream came true at last but definitely not the least. My incredible journey will be completed when SBS will be downgraded from the threatened category. I want to fill my eyes with tears of joy again and again by new achievements in this conservation battle. And I definitely do not want those tears for losing a single species.

***Table 1**: Details of marked birds seen on Sonadia Island between November 2017 and March 2018*

Flag details	Marked at	First seen	Last seen
Light green 09	Adult female marked on 15 June 2014 on her nest in Meinypilgyno, Chukotka, Russia	24 Jan 2018	9 Mar 2018
White 3C	Hatched on 7 July 2017 in Chukotka, Russia, released into the wild on 28 July 2017, observed at the release area on 4 August 2017. Seen at Yabu Island, Korea on 23 September 2017	25 Jan 2018	9 Mar 2018
White 3M	Hatched on 7 July 2017 in Chukotka, Russia, released into the wild on 28 July 2017, observed at the release area on 4 August 2017	24 Jan 2018	9 Mar 2018
Yellow VE	Flagged on August 18, 2017 in Kamchatka (Russia, Kamchatka, Sobolevo district, Ustyevoe N 54.10 E 155.50) by Dr. Yuri Gerasimov	8 Feb 2018	12 Feb 2018
Light green 31	Adult female marked (with ring KA05213) on her nest on 6 July 2015 north of Meinypilgyno	9 Mar 2018	9 Mar 2018

Migratory shorebirds largely depend on mudflats where they find food, Sonadia Island *Sayam Chowdhury*

Queen of the Flyway meets King of the Flyway in Meinypil'gyno!

Pavel Tomkovich, Phil Round, Ren Naung Soe & Christoph Zöckler

'Queen' of the Flyway at the breeding ground, 2014
Nikolay Yakushev

With the reappearance of our much-loved female Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Green 05, also labelled as the 'Queen of the flyway' (see also https://www.bcst.or.th/essential_grid/queen-of-the-flyway/) at Khok Kham for her sixth successive winter, we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief that she has completed another migratory journey safely. She was first found (as pretty much always) by stalwart BCST observer, one of the Founder Members of the Khok Kham Conservation Club, Suchart Daengphayon on her usual salt-pan winter territory on 27 October 2018.

SBS Lime 05 was already adult when first ringed and flagged on the breeding grounds in Chukotka, NE Russia, 20 June 2013. Her breeding history is:

2013 2 head-started chicks reared to adulthood and released (White JA, PA).
2014 3 head-started chicks reared to adulthood and released (White Y8, E9, J9).
2015 4 head-started chicks reared to adulthood and released (White L7, M7, P7, U7). Her son, P7, from 2015, has been seen the last three winters, **2015, 2016** and **2017** at Pak Thale, Phetchaburi, and we hope he will appear again this year.
2016 4 head-started chicks reared to adulthood and released (White 0T, 0U, 0V, 0X). Green 05 and her mate also fostered a chick (Lime M3) from another nest.
2017 4 head-started chicks reared to adulthood and released. Two more chicks were also produced from a replacement clutch, and were flagged (Lime P6, T6).
From 2014–2017 she was paired with the same male, Lime 10 (a different male from her mate in 2013).
In **2018**, Lime 10 did not return, so she was paired with a third male. In fact this male is Lime 27!

'King' of the Flyway at the breeding ground, 11 June 2018
Pavel Tomkovich

The new male Lime 27 is almost matching the feat of his new partner Lime 05. Only 3 days later than in Khok Kham local guard Ren Naung Soe found Lime 27 on Nan Thar Island on 30 October 2018, returning for the fifth consecutive winter: The King of the Flyway!! He is an offspring of male 01, the monumental 01 that for so many years accompanied us in Meinypilgyno and also Yangkau at its regular stop over site (see previous newsletters). After being solitary last year 'The King' moved for

7 km from his former territory (the largest ever distance recorded for males) and mated with 'The Queen'. Their first clutch was taken for head-starting (3 chicks White 4C, 4E and 4H released) and from a replacement clutch they hatched two more chicks, receiving lime flags 9V and 9X.

So this outstanding 'Queen', aided by three different male consorts, has produced no fewer than 24 chicks, and fostered one more, in six successive breeding seasons!

Because ringing and flagging enables individuals to be recognized, it adds greatly to scientific knowledge concerning population dynamics and movements (Green 05 has often been seen at Tiaozini, an important Chinese staging area). But more than this – it also strengthens our emotional connection to birds as individuals, our fellow living beings, which is no less important.

While the 'King' seems secured on Nan Thar Island soon becoming a protected area (see page 38-39), the situation in Khok Kham is less than favourable for Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other waders.

In mid-July 2016, the Khok Kham Conservation Club alerted BCST to the fact that a solar farm was in the process of being constructed on 7 ha of land in the Flyway Network Site at Khok Kham, Samut Sakhon Thailand, and asked BCST to intervene. The land was immediately adjacent to the core area of the site which normally supports > 10,000 wintering waders, including 1-2 Spoon-billed Sandpipers. We immediately phoned ONEP (the Office of Natural Resources, Environmental Policy & Planning, which is the focal agency of government for the Flyway Agreement, and were disturbed to find that that they knew nothing about the (then, already ongoing) construction. The land at Khok Kham is a salt-farming cooperative under the Department of Cooperatives,

'Queen' of the Flyway at Khok Kham in 2017 *BCST*

Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries. Apparently it is permissible for a certain percentage of cooperative land to be used for other purposes, and solar farms are considered acceptable in this regard. The land-holder would have benefitted financially from the project.

By the time the project was halted thanks to government intervention, one or two months later, a laterite road had already been built into the salt-pans and concrete bases for solar panels installed into what was previously salt pans. Those concrete bases remain, though the site is still used for roosting by waders.

Unfortunately, salt-farming is a declining industry. It is a sustainable, environmentally appropriate activity for coastal areas of the Inner Thai Gulf, conducted by smallholders, the profitability of which has been undercut by destructive subterranean "fracking" of onshore salt deposits elsewhere in Thailand (in the inland Khorat Plateau of the North-east Thailand). Fracking for salt causes salinization of farmland.

Sripanomyom et al. (2011) found that the best predictors of shorebird numbers and diversity in the Inner Gulf of Thailand were onshore salt-pans

in combination with offshore mudflats. Tantipisanuh et al. (2016) showed that the area of salt pans in the Thai Inner Gulf declined by 20% during 1990–2010, mostly lost due to conversion to aquaculture ponds and urban sprawl. At the Khok Kham Cooperative alone, most of the salt pans have been lost, and converted to aquaculture ponds. In 1937, there were 300 families conducting salt-farming there. By 2016 there were just 28 families utilising less than 2 sq km of land.

Hopefully, many of you may chance to watch her or him once in your life! I am going to visit her tomorrow as I did it for 6 years by now :-)

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Construction works at Khok Kham, Sep 2016 *Phil Round*

Conservationist Profile: Jing Li

Karin Eberhardt

Is Jing Li a businesswoman disguised as a birder, or a birder disguised as a businesswoman? Whatever it is, the marketing skills honed during her former "day-job" in the competitive Shanghai corporate world, serve her well in the fight to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Jing Li is the master of persuading others to see things her way – in effect, the way of whatever is best for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Whether she is on the Tiaozini mudflats debating the impact of spartina grass with shellfish collectors, in the classroom instructing schoolchildren on why the Spoon-billed Sandpiper deserves to be loved and protected, at Rudong's Links Hotel persuading the managers to install a permanent oversized clamshell-constructed exhibit of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, or in the city office convincing recalcitrant officials

Jing Li flagged, Dong Ling, April 2018 *Wendy Paulson*

Spoon-billed Sandpiper feeding on shrimps, Tiaozini, 31 Aug 2018 *Huajin Sun*

to allow a seemingly-suspicious band of international surveyors and scientists to wallow in local mudflats, Jing Li has the charm, smiles and audience-tailored arguments to convince them all.

Born and raised in Nandong – not far from Rudong – Jing Li learned to bird with the Shanghai Wild Bird Society, from friends such Zhang Lin and Yu Shu. But around 2005, she took part in the China Waterbird Census, and the realization that she could turn her hobby into focused action transformed her life. A growing obsession with bird-counting inevitably led to her first SBS sighting at Tiaozini in 2008, and that sighting very quickly turned into another, and another, until it seemed that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper was everywhere on the mudflat that day. Soon after "Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China" formed as a spin-off of the Shanghai Wild Bird Society, and Jing Li was nominated to be the one to do the paperwork, write the proposals and reports, handle the finances and organizational tasks. To the consternation of family and friends, Jing Li finally quit her day job to dedicate herself full-time to bird conservation. Those close to her protested: "Why throw your life away on a cause that doesn't pay real money? and as 'non-governmental,' flies in the face of authority? You're just setting yourself up for headaches!" But the Jing Li who loves birds couldn't help herself, and the rest is history – liberally sprinkled, as predicted, with metaphorical headaches.

The hardest and yet most stimulating part of the job is negotiating that slippery territory between local bureaucratic culture, and the equally confusing cultures of visiting ornithologists and Spoonie-enthusiasts whose worldviews have flown in from all over the planet. She loves the constant learning opportunities and ideas that international experts bring; yet it is the hosting of those specialists, more precisely the bureaucratic hurdles she must overcome, that can make her

life quite difficult. Even her name is symbolic of how she slides like the tide over mudflats between these worlds at odds: Li Jing, Chinese style, with family name first; or Jing Li, western style, with family name last. "Call me Jing Li!" says the pragmatist, and so we do, when anything sensitive and important needs to be done.

The tide seems to be turning for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and all the other waders at the critical molting and staging grounds around Tiaozini. Thanks to the hard work of Jing Li and her colleagues, and with the support of international friends, the area seems to be coming under protection. While she and her colleagues cannot rest yet, they can be immensely proud of what they have achieved.

Businesswoman on the phone in the middle of a mudflat

News in Brief

Sayam Chowdhury in front of the Senate House in Cambridge after the ceremony *SBS TF*

Master Sayam
Our very Sayam Chowdhury has accomplished his Master of Philosophy Degree in Cambridge. The convocation ceremony took place on 21st of July in Cambridge and some reporter of the SBS News Bulletin happened to be there. Congratulations Sayam!

OAG Helgoland donates for SBS Task Force
In October 2018 the Ornithological Society of Helgoland was celebrating its 17th Helgoland Bird Days festival with over 300 participants enjoying a three days of events ranging from talks Bird Quiz and a Bird Race of a total of 45 teams and of course a fantastic display of migratory birds falling into the tiny island. Most impressive thousands of Redwing and several thousand of Goldcrests in every corner of the island. The highlight though was a Asian Desert Warbler, the forth that lost its way to Helgoland.

The Bird Race was dedicated in support of our conservation work and in total a massive € 2,695 was raised by all teams. We like to thank all Bird Race participants and especially the OAG Helgoland, which for the second time raised funds for the SBS Task Force!

Vivian Fu taking up a new job as Communications Officer at EAAFP
For many years Vivian Fu from the Hong Kong Birdwatching Society was the focal point for our work in Southern China. She was also instrumental in developing communication tools and raising

More News in Brief

Vivian Fu in the field

awareness of the flyway issues for school children and others. In September she took up the position as communications officer at the EAAFP in South Korea. This way we are keeping Vivian as part of our network and supporter of SBS related work in a key position. Congratulations Vivian and good luck with your new job!

Matinée in Munich – New Friends for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper

The NABU International conservation foundation organised its annual Matinée in Munich this year with the subject "Wilderness of the wide tundra". More than 100 visitors learned about an ecosystem, mostly unknown to them. The event of NABU International was dedicated to the conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

The 15th July 2018 was a hot summer day like so many this year and felt quite unlike the Arctic. The sun was shining strongly on the glass roof of the Botanicum, when NABU was inviting guests and sponsors from all over Bavaria.

NABU Matinée in the Botanicum Munich

The event was opened by the Vice President of NABU Thomas Tennhardt, followed by NABU peatland expert Tom Kirschey and others. Key note speaker was Christoph Zöckler from the Manfred-Hermsen Stiftung, Coordinator of the SBS Task Force. He offered wide-ranging insights into the world of the charismatic "Spoonies", breeding in Chukotka in Russia's Far North East.

Guests of the Matinée could pick up lots of info material about the Tundra and Spoon-billed Sandpiper and could discuss the subjects with experts at specially set up tables. Thoughtful but at the same time full of hope the guests left the Matinée into the summer evening. 'Thank you for a nice and informative day and good luck with the project' wrote one visitor in the guest book. On this hot summer's day in Munich the Arctic Sandpiper gained a few more new friends!

NABU Fundraising Workshop in Berlin

In September 2018 NABU invited the top key SBS conservationist from the flyway countries Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Russia for two days to a brainstorm session on funding needs. Several proposals are in the pipeline. Most promising is the Blue Action Fund from the German Ministry of Development.

More News in Brief

Fake News from the Philippines

The SBS News Bulletin is not free from fake news. Over the years we have been presented with several fake SBS photos, mostly from India but also from Indonesia. And most of the times we have spotted the fault, either in the photo and in some case in Photoshop. The record from the Philippines documented and published in our last issue, unfortunately escaped our attention and is now considered erroneous. We apologise to our readers. The photo (right) shows most likely a Red-necked Stint with a deformed bill or as in many cases mud on the bill. We would like to thank some of our very alert readers including Arne Jensen for noticing this error and request all our readers to stay alert for such cases. This has happened not for the first time and we hope that our Philippine friends keep looking and one day find Spoonie!

Red-necked Stint from the Philippines
Philip Godfrey Jakosalem

Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Sri Lanka

As a huge surprise came to us the news from Northern Sri Lanka where Ravi Darshana found a Spoon-billed Sandpiper on 6 June 2018. This is only the third record from Sri Lanka and the first after almost 40 years! Congratulations! The date is also very interesting and points to an oversummering bird. Despite searches the following days the bird was never seen after the 7 June.

Darshana, T. W. R., 2018. Rediscovery of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* in Sri Lanka after 40 years. Indian BIRDS. 14 (4): 111–112

Spoon-billed Sandpiper in India

Another Spoon-billed Sandpiper was reported from Frasergunge West Beach, West Bengal, India. The bird was sighted on 1 April 2018 by the authors cited below. This appears to be the only recent record from India. Last record from India was in 2004 from Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu.

Chakraborty, A., Tripathi, S. & Bhattacharya, B. B.,2018. Rediscovery of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* on the coast of West Bengal, India. Indian BIRDS. 14 (3): 83–84.

SBS in Sri Lanka, 6 June 2018 *Ravi Darshana*

SBS in "Arts"

Layout and design of this SBS Newsletter has not much to do with arts, I know. But as for this issue no "real" artist addicted to the Spoonies has been found I am grabbing the chance to give you some information about the man in front of the computer keyboard. I am a graphic designer since – oh my god – 40 years and always had the feeling that my work was more craftsmanship than art. Anyway, designations do not matter. Content was more important for me.

A rather big amount of the projects I worked with had to do with nature conservation. I designed brochures, flyers, posters, covers, booklets or exhibitions for conservation NGOs and often in addition to the graphic works wrote all the texts for it (in German which is somewhat better than my broken English). You can imagine that after all the years with these "benevolent societies" my bank account is not by far filled as the treasure chamber of experiences, knowledge, insights or friends I could gather in the "green world". I learned so much, I had so many stimulating encounters and mostly had the impression (or illusion) that I could contribute a tiny little bit in "saving the planet".

Since I was a boy I was always fascinated by birds. As a young guy this interest led me to the German Waddensea where I spent 18 months as a bird warden and – met with Christoph Zöckler. We had a lot of fun there even when times were rather hard living in a small unheated trailer behind the dyke. It was our National Service and we were some of the first people who could combine the status as conscientious objectors with ornithology. Lucky times!

Concerning the Spoon-billed Sandpipers I had the chance to stay for some unforgettable summer weeks at Meinypil'gyno and the surrounding tundra in 2016 and was allowed to be part of the investigation team (see Newsletter 16, Oct 2016).

Designing the SBS Newsletter is always a thrilling journey and sometimes an adventure. It means to find your way through dozens and dozens of Christophs emails and changes and last minute complements and sometimes unclear or not totally understood proposals. It means to struggle with unsharp pics, chinese file names or mysterious diplomatic reserves. So in the end is has to do with art(s) nevertheless.

I must express my deepest respect and admiration to all the precious people working in the sometimes harsh breeding range year after year, along the extended flyway and all political backcountries. Long live the Spoon-billed Sandpiper!

Matthias Fanck

With flooded boots at Vaam'yechgyn Lake *Tom Noah*

The Last Page

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper

Suzanne De Pelsenaire

Wherever are you hiding, oh you tiny birds so rare?
Where are your secret nests? Which shoreline sandspits do you share
with the wild Bering weather, nestled low on tundra sparse
amongst the creeping crowberry and stunted, dried-out grass?

We search for you in line abreast across the tundra bare
tramped many weary miles with eyes alert – you were not there!
Six long years now no sightings – have you found another home
where Spoon-billed Sandpipers feel safe, no longer need to roam?

You lay your precious eggs on soil, a clutch of four the norm,
devoted mother settles down to keep her treasures warm,
exhausted by herculean task, as soon as chicks appear
leaves father bird in charge of them, flies south where skies are clear.

This rare, endangered bird has many enemies to fear,
ground squirrels and rodents feed on eggs – no chicks to rear!
Ravens, skuas sky-patrol to raid unguarded nests,
helpless chicks a tasty meal for these marauding pests.

Much work has been accomplished by recovery Task Force Team
to help the Spoon-billed Sandpiper survive; ongoing dream
is awareness of endangered species' need to be protected –
these special birds have futures in a new reserve protected.

Suzanne is a gardener and poet from Australia (Guest on Heritage 2018)