

Report of the Sbs Recovery Team

By Christoph Zockler on behalf of Evgeny Syroechkovski (Head of the Sbs RT)

Update April 2008:

- 1) Autumn migration
- 2) Korea update
- 3) Thailand
- 4) Vietnam and Malaysia
- 5) Myanmar expedition
- 6) Bangladesh
- 7) CMS Sbs Action plan

After a very eventful winter 2007-2008 spring migration is on the move and we thought it might be useful to provide a brief and most certainly incomplete summary of the events around the activities. Please provide us with update and corrections if you think the information we compile is incomplete or wrong.

Not all of you heard about the successful expedition to Myanmar and very few have heard about the most recent findings in Bangladesh. Unfortunately some Russian managed to shoot a successful breeding male bird on migration in Primorsky Krai and Thailand still hosts about 15 birds in winter. The situation in Korea is devastating after the closure of Saemangeum. Local groups fear that this was not the last reclamation in Korea.

But all the news in sequence

- 1) **Autumn migration** started early with reports from Primorsky Krai, where a bird shot, contained the ring combination of an adult male ringed at Belyaka Spit in the North of Chukotka in 2005 as adult, and observed rearing 4 chicks in 2007!! Unbelievably shot on migration in the southern corner of Russia, near the Chinese border end of August. It still remains mysterious how much we loose by hunting. Several reports from Japan and Taiwan.
- 2) **Korea:** In October we had several press events in Saemangeum. It's quite impressive to see the extent of destruction. No wonder that it will affect many ten thousands of waders, not only Sbs. At the time of our visit there were still 4 birds in Nakdong and other adjacent sites. Maximum flock size was 14! Clearly a strong decline compared with only 8 years ago. Exact numbers and all observations and locations are not known. Further details: Nial Moores
- 3) **Thailand**
Since our workshop in Dec 2006 a lot of activities started in the Inner Gulf area. Some of them involved continued survey work and new research projects, also accompanied and partly funded by the RSPB on the winter feeding ecology of the species. Conservation projects in the Inner Gulf area focus on the public awareness for the species and better observation facilities. Local NGOs promote the protection and local tourism for the species and other globally threatened waders. Further details Phil Round

4) Vietnam and Malaysia

Reports from the usual sites in the Red River Delta, but no numbers available. But also observations from a new site north of the delta sound promising; another spring record from the well known site in Malaysia keeps this country in the headlines of Sbs. Details SBS Database (Gillian Bunting)

5) Myanmar

For the first time, large sections of coastal ecosystems in Myanmar have been surveyed, not only for Sbs but for waterbirds generally. Due to the good networking of Minoru Kashiwagi we managed to establish the first and most important support for the winter expedition to Myanmar. Additional sponsors followed but it was Kei Den Ran that enabled a few members to participate in this important expedition:

The findings of an International survey of the Species Recovery Team raise hopes for saving the species

The observations of a total of 84 Spoon-billed Sandpiper during an international survey of coastal Myanmar in January 2008 not only highlights the importance of these coastal ecosystems, but also suggests that Myanmar hosts important numbers of wintering birds of this critically endangered shorebird. This is equivalent to 10-15 % of the global population and these figures raise hopes for a species in rapid decline in the breeding and non-breeding areas (50% less breeding pairs in Chukotka (Eastern Siberia) from 2005 to 2007!

The international survey team was part of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team with members of ArcCona Consulting, Cambridge, UK, and Kiel, Germany, JAWAN, Tokyo, the BirdLife partners in Russia (RCU) and Thailand (BCST), teamed with and well looked after in Myanmar by local BirdLife partner BANCA and local Wetlands International partner MBNS. The 14 survey members were divided in two teams covering the mudflats of the Martaban (Mottama) Bay east of Yangon near the Thai border and selected coastal habitats in the SW state of Arakan (Rakhine), near Bangladesh.

The experience of previous surveys in India, Bangladesh and Thailand, combined with the interpretation of satellite images allowed both teams to target selected suitable habitats in the Bay of Bengal, such as sandy islands surrounding intertidal mudflats in Arakan, where 35 Sbs were counted at one high tide roost. Among them was one ringed bird with a light blue flag in North Chukotka in the last summer. As there were no birds ringed in 2007 the birds must have been older and not juvenile as assumed at first. None of the ringed birds in 2002 and 2003 returned ever to North Chukotka, it is likely a bird that has been ringed in 2005 and it is the only adult bird observed breeding in 2007. Yet another demonstration of the low juvenile return.

Being the only observed flagged among 84 birds, the survey results hint to a potentially larger population yet not discovered in the breeding grounds.

The Arakan coast has never been surveyed before and the Martaban coast only marginally in 2003. So it was no real surprise to find so many Spoon-billed sandpiper. Due to restricted access, strong winds and inappropriate transport means only a small section of the promising Arakan coast was covered. The survey team believes that Arakan most likely hosts many more of the globally endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Although small scale reclamation of the mudflats for prawn ponds has been observed the coastal zones are largely healthy ecosystems, which not only provide the crucial habitat for thousands of Arctic waders, but

also livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people in coastal communities, relying on small-scale fishing, shellfish and crab harvesting on the mudflats.

The Martaban team found in total 48 Spoon-billed Sandpiper, which were much more scattered over the huge mudflats of the Bay, which is believed to host more of 50,000 waterbirds with globally significant numbers of Broad-billed Sandpiper, Lesser Sand plovers and Pallas 's Gulls. No reclamation of the highly dynamic coast was observed here. However, as a major threat the hunting and trapping of waders, including Spoon-billed sandpiper, was identified. Local fishermen, who displayed a profound knowledge of waterbirds, which they catch preferably in new moon nights, caught 4 birds only last December.

In direct response to our findings the local authority in Arakan secured the important site temporarily and arranged signs to be posted immediately. A formal protection process will take longer and will also be based on future survey results taking into account the understanding of the entire suitable coastline. The government authorities of Myanmar were very supportive during the preparation and conduction of the survey and indicated further activities to secure the protection of the species in Myanmar.

Follow up expeditions are planned to further survey suitable habitats along the 2,000 km coastline of Myanmar and help promote further conservation activities.

The survey was operated in Myanmar by WATT (Wildbird Adventure Travel and Tours, Dr Htin Hla) and generously funded by Keidenran Foundation in Tokyo with additional contributions by the RSPB, UK, BirdLife Asia, the Manfred Hermsen Foundation and private Russian sponsors. The surveys would not have been possible without the full support of the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism of Myanmar. We are grateful to all of them for their support.

6) Bangladesh

At first, mid winter counts resulted worryingly in zero SBS. Central and Eastern coastal parts had been surveyed in the usual manner lead by our friend Enam Ul Haque. In April exciting news reached some of us, when Enam reported about the finding of a huge flock of migrating waders at one of the chars previously not covered in the surveys. The team of three managed to spot at least 15 Sbs among the huge flock, but guess many more. A subsequent visit a few days later did though not reveal any more Sbs and most of the waders have moved on. This is very exciting as it proves that the vast areas of the delta in Bangladesh still host some significant numbers. If these birds are in some way related with those we met in Northern Myanmar is as unclear as it is how long they stayed and where from these birds are.

7) CMS Single Species Action Plan, launch postponed

As most of you know, we are compiling the action plan for the Sbs since 2006. Since the workshop we completed the external review. We have suggested the World Wetland Day (2 February 2008) and the World Migratory Bird Day (10-11 May 2008) as suitable dates to launch the action plan and activities. However, after Simba Chan from BirdLife Asia consulted with CMS it seems it would be very exceptional if the action plans were to be adopted not in a meeting but by correspondences, so it is quite unlikely that it can be officially launched before the CMS scientific council meeting in end of November 2008.

Simba suggests using another occasion - the upgrading of SBS to Critically Endangered on the IUCN list for the event. However, the official announcement of the new IUCN list will 19 May 2008 to coincide with the CBD conference in Bonn. It would be best not to have activities or announcements on the World Bird Migratory Day, but save it till 19 May when

we have a multinational news release on the situation of the SBS, using the case that this is probably the most worrying change regarding the IUCN bird list. Those range countries that had prepared the launch of the SBS game designed by Barrie can still organize an event to promote awareness to SBS.

In the meantime Simba will contact major range countries (Russia, Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh etc.) to get relevant parts of the action plan translated into their national languages (We believe the CMS scientific council will not make too many suggestions on amendment of the action plans). We plan for a day in late 2008 to have an international launch of the action plans.

We are all very sorry for keeping postponing the date of the event. Simba and we would like to have your suggestions on what else we can do for the SBS this year.

Please send in your observations and details in case you have not (preferred excel table). Please also send us your suggestions for the launch and other activities you plan or we all should do.

Dr Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona Cambridge
Dr Evgeny Syroechkovskiy, RBCU, Moscow