



Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force News Bulletin No. 6, August 2011

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

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- 8) New threats on mudflats in the Inner Gulf in Thailand



SBS chick in Meinypilgyno July 2011

Gerrit Vyn

In figures:

12 birds on Nan Thar in late April, 10 first-year-birds
4 first-year-birds on Sonadia
37 bird hunters were identified on the West coast of Martaban
21 of them trapped a total of 84 Sbs over the last 12 years
30 hunters already ceased hunting and 7 signed agreements and received support
1 new breeding site at the Koryak coast in North Kamchatka
18 chicks hatched in captivity
16 chicks survived and board a plane to Moscow
0 Sbs recorded in North Chukotka
Almost 50,000 USD raised by private donations
2 birds arrived in Rudong on 6 August

Foreword from the Editor - Dr Christoph Zöckler, Coordinator SBS TF, August 2011

Dear friends and colleagues,

While I am writing these lines, the last field workers leave the Russian tundra, 16 fledged chicks are about to board a plane from Anadyr to Moscow and the first two wild birds have arrived in Rudong north of Shanghai.

We have had a very busy summer with 5 different expeditions in the Russian Arctic and the ambitious and courageous conservation breeding programme. But we also have had a busy winter and spring with lots of success stories, mostly from Bangladesh and Myanmar. In this newsletter, you will hear brief summaries and personal accounts from all these different places and other parts along the flyway. The 6th issue of our newsletter is much longer than the previous, maybe a reflection of the increasing activities of our Task Force. The reports often only provide a brief spotlight and do not fully reflect the hard work behind all the stories.

We have had tremendous support from our support teams, namely the UK support team, who initiated the conservation breeding programme, the incredible support from the teams in Sweden, Denmark and Germany, which generated almost 50,000 USD in donations! Minoru Kashiwagi, our partner in Japan secured 32,000 USD for our work in Myanmar. The EAAF Partnership sponsored our work in China in 2011 with 5,000 USD. Audubon California, who chairs the US support team, helped with the fundraising proposals for Bangladesh and China and the latest news is that we passed the first hurdle in our bid for Darwin Initiative funding. This is largely due to the efforts of the RSPB, who also stepped up in supporting Birds Russia and the conservation breeding programme alongside the experts of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT).

The number of donors also increased. BirdLife Species Champions supporting the Task Force – WildSounds, Dutch Birding Association (DBA), Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN) and Ed Keeble have been joined by Heritage Expeditions thanks to efforts by BirdLife International. BirdLife also secured another grant from the Packard Foundation for our work in the breeding area and many other proposals are in the pipeline. All this support is badly needed.

This summer we realised that our population estimates were still too optimistic. There is no report at all from the northern part of the range and despite the new breeding site on the Koryak coast with three or more territories we believe there are less than 100 pairs in the wild left. This confirms the need to venture into the conservation breeding and the first results of hard work by Birds Russia and WWT are very promising. But all these efforts would be in vain if we had not advanced with our progress in mitigating the threats along the flyway before releasing birds into the wild again. The observations of 4 and 10 first year birds in Sonadia and Nan Thar respectively may well be the first indication that our efforts in stopping the wader trapping may partly have made some progress already. This and the findings of new breeding sites gives new hope, excitement and the necessary courage to carry on, but enough of talk, enjoy the reading and the pictures.

2) Breeding Season 2011: Summary of results in Chukotka and Kamchatka 2011

(sponsored by Packard Foundation via BirdLife International)

a) Survey for potential breeding grounds and awareness and education work with hunting communities at Oliutorskiy coasts of Kamchatka – preliminary progress report.

Kamchatka used to be important part of SBS breeding range and last pre-breeding stopovers for the species are located there. SBS also use these coasts on their return migration though distribution of the species in July-September is still rather poorly known. Surveys of 2008-09 funded by Packard foundation through BirdLife International had shown the disappearing of the species from several hundreds of km of its most southern part of the range. This work had also shown that shooting of small waders might be an important factor, which could contribute to the decrease of SBS in Russia. The work of BirdsRussia in Kamchatka in 2011 had the aims:

- survey of potential breeding grounds of the species along the northern part of Oliutorskiy coasts of Kamchatka;
- run awareness and education work in local communities focused on children and hunters in several locations of NE Kamchatka to decrease the pressure on migrating SBS, particularly in spring;
- to arrange the evaluation of level of hunting pressure on small waders and SBS among them in different parts of the whole Kamchatka region.

Last two components were arranged in cooperation with local Game Management State Authorities. Social survey component was run under supervision of Prof. Konstantin Klovov from Saint-Petersburg University.

The focus of the activities in summer 2011 was the coasts of the Oliutorskiy region in Kamchatka. The biggest spit with promising habitats in North Kamchatka is located around Pakhachi village. It was surveyed during June 2011 but no SBS were found there. Habitats look good, some of them are a bit dry but obviously with enough potential habitat for dozens of pairs of SBS (photo). About 30% of potentially good habitats of the spit are forever lost for SBS being modified by humans either by construction work or for growing crops to feed cattle (photo). The production of crops was never too good and cattle are gone 20 years ago. But crowberry habitat has changed in 1980s and is no longer suitable for SBS due to higher vegetation. Another threat to the crowberry habitat is gradual increasing of pine bushes, which grow in the inner part of the spit but increasingly cover the whole area, as was recorded in 2009 further south.



Field observations and interviews of over 50 local people and most active hunters have shown that while being potentially important for breeding in the past, the northern part of Oliutorskiy seems not important as stopover sites. There is only one reliable observation by local people compared with dozens in Karaginskiy region.

Hunting pressure on small waders was discovered to be much lower than in more southern Karaginskiy region due to the higher numbers of bigger game species and less numbers of small waders concentrated next to the village in the areas, which could be reached by hunters. Awareness and education activities were still undertaken in Pakchachi and Apuka.

There are though still several important lagoons around Geka Bay and Korf Bay left, which potentially host important concentrations of waders in spring and autumn, but were never surveyed neither for SBS nor assessing the hunting pressure on small waders.

Wider scale awareness and education work in Karaginskiy and Ust-Kamchatkiy region as well as a questionnaire survey among game managers of different regions of Kamchatka peninsula are still on the way, organized by Kamchatka branch of BirdsRussia. The evaluation of hunting pressure on small waders in different regions of Kamchatka will be finished in October and will help to identify the regions where potential hunting pressure on small waders and SBS among them will be addressed on the next stages of Packard project.

While interviewing the older experienced generation of ornithologists in Kamchatka's capital previously unpublished breeding sites of SBS in Oliutorskiy region was described by Dr. Peter Vyatkin. The nest was found by him during his seabird surveys in early 1990-s in a small river mouth in rather unusual habitat.

Together with Heritage Expeditions the Packard-funded survey along the north Koryak coasts managed to cover a serious part of the potential breeding range of SBS both at the very southern and most northern ends of its breeding range. Unfortunately less and less sites in North Kamchatka remain unexplored. It might be only very few locations of SBS left in Kamchatka now. The lack of SBS in most of locations of both regions will sadly bring us to the need to revise our total estimate of the remaining breeding population. It will be presented in the next issue of the newsletter after the analyses needed will be completed.

Preliminary results of the part of Packard project work in North Chukotka are described in separate article of this newsletter by F. Kondrashev and T. Noah. Information about monitoring work in Meinypilgyno and surveys on Sakhalin Island on migration will be presented in the next issue of the Newsletter as the materials are not processed yet.

Elena Lappo, Evgeny Syroechkovskiy (Birds Russia)

b) Expedition 2011 to Meinopyl'gino (South Chukotka)***A personal account from Jochen Dierschke, German SBS Support Team***

The area around the small village of Meinopyl'gino holds the largest known breeding population of Spoon-billed Sandpipers in the world. Since several years ornithologists visit the place to survey the area. In 2011 an international team of Russian, British, German and American ornithologists stayed for two months in the area.

We had to wait for almost two weeks in Anadyr until our cargo arrived and the weather allowed a helicopter flight. Finally, on May 27th, the helicopter brought us to Meinopyl'gino, our final destination. Being renovated in 2005, the village is by far the nicest I have seen in the Russian Arctic. The logistics were perfectly organized by Liza from Birds Russia : We stayed in two houses and one flat with heating and a warm shower. Breakfast and dinner was prepared for us as well as a small lunch packet – much more luxury than you can expect on an Arctic expedition!



J. Dierschke

The village of Meinopyl'gino at our arrival on 27 May.

Next day, Pavel Tomkovich showed us the key breeding sites in the moraine hills, still covered largely by snow. Lakes and rivers were still frozen. However, that day was one of the warmest of our trip with 31°C measured in the sun.

On May 31st three of us heard the display call of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the moraine hills. However, we failed to see it and as Skylarks can imitate this call, it was not safe enough for the log. Having heard now many Spoon-billed Sandpipers and Skylarks trying to imitate the calls, at least Gerrit and I are convinced that this was the first bird of the spring.

However, for the first safe record we had to wait until June 3rd, when Pavel and Egor spotted a male Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Harsh weather made it impossible to survey the breeding sites next day, but on June 5th we found two more pairs. One male was on aerial display above the female, while the other pair was in active display on the ground. More territories were found during the next days in the moraine hills, but the more distant breeding areas of the last years were either still covered by snow or flooded.

On June 10th I visited the eastern part of the spit and located 3 pairs (2 of the males in aerial display) and a single male. However, warm weather triggered the snow to melt and the whole area was flooded again. When the water disappeared we failed to relocate these birds, but several sightings of single birds indicated that at least some birds were still in the area. The western part of the spit was also flooded for a long time and as far as I know there were no sightings in the former breeding areas. Along the shore of Lake Pekul'neyskoye I found a displaying pair of White-billed Divers and a singing male Spoon-billed Sandpiper near by on June 12th, joined by a female the next day. However, there was a mixed flock of skuas around, occasionally chasing waders, and we did not relocate the birds afterwards. Further north along the lake shore several sightings of single birds might indicate of further territories, which were not reachable during display time due to too much snow and ice.



J. Dierschke
Male Spoon-billed Sandpiper at ground display.



J. Dierschke
The big shock: A dead female beside a predated nest.

The 16th of June came with a big shock for all of us: A predated nest was found – and the dead female was laying directly beside the nest. We did not find out any details about the predator, but finding the first nest with such a result left us rather sad. Fortunately several more successful nests were found the following days, so the permitted 20 eggs for the captive breeding program could be collected allowing still some birds to hatch in the field.

In late June we visited one area which hasn't been surveyed the last years and found 2 nests (3 eggs each), indicating that a proper search in other areas might reveal more breeding pairs.

On July 7th the Heritage Boat with almost 50 passengers arrived in Meinopyl'gino and was greeted by the locals with a dance performance. Many of the passengers were keen to see Spoon-billed Sandpiper and we carefully guided them to the breeding sites, where they could be watched through the telescope from safe distance. As in the meantime some of the collected eggs had hatched, we needed mosquitoes to feed them. This sound like an easy task in the arctic, but we had windy weather and therefore mosquitoes were rather scarce. Many of the the Heritage Boat passengers were helpful in catching mosquitoes and probably the first time in their life appreciated their presence!



The passengers of the Heritage Boat enjoy the locals dancing in traditional Chukchi-style.

The boat took four of us – as well as the chicks - back to Anadyr and the cruise team and passengers were extremely friendly and helpful. Special mention deserve the cooks, who tried best to compensate our deficit of vitamins of the last 2 months.

For me it was a special experience to work in the breeding grounds of one of the most endangered birds of the world in a fascinating, rather unspoiled environment.

c) Undisclosed site in Chukotka

Jens Gregersen, Danish SBS Support Team

The Danish SBS support team by Kaj Halberg, Max E. Nitschke and Jens Gregersen went to explore previously known and unknown sites to check for current presence of Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The caterpillar tour started from Anadyr 13th of June and continued to 23rd of June with a camp at an undisclosed site. The fieldwork was organised by Birds Russia as part of general SBS Task force and supported by Packard Foundation.

At a previously known site one nest found on 18 of June with 4 eggs, only a few meters where the nest was situated in 2010 in a relative limited dry area of short grasses, carex, small willow and crowberry, only 75 meters from the sandy beach. Both male and female were observed on 17-18 of June and one other male did display from an direction from the other side of river. In total 3-4 birds were observed, compared to 6-8 in 2010. The breeding pair did not wear any rings or flags. Details in plumage of the breeding pair are depicted in paintings.



Another site, where in 2010 still one male was intensively displaying, was vacant. In 2007 the site had two nests in that area 2, in 2008 1 nest, but none in 2010. On the other side of the river we did search for more SBS river upstream, including the very good habitats along river to the saltmarsh. On 21st of June we observed a male shortly displaying there, probably the same male heard from camp area.



Weather conditions were not good for observations most of the days and our search for other SBS in central areas on 19-20th of June resulted in no further pairs.

In general, there was a decline in number of breeding birds at the entire spit. We did a few stops along the with rather suitable habitat and previously occupied sites but did not find any more SBS.

d) North Chukotka coast- Cap Schmidt, Chukotka North Coast June/July 2011

Fyodor Kondrachov, Birds Russia & Tom Noah, German Support Team

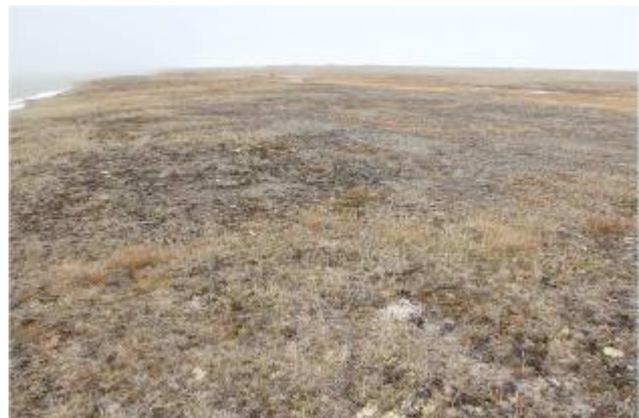
Between June and mid July 2011 Birds Russia sent a small team to survey the shoreline around Mys Schmidta and Ryrkaypiy on the North coast of Chukotka in search of the Spoon-Billed Sandpiper (SBS) and potential breeding habitat. After only waiting for eight days in Anadyr for a helicopter to Mys Schmidta the team of four (two Russian, two Nemzy) arrived on 8 June despite a brief halt of the helicopter engine at 3.500 m safely and optimistic in the potential breeding habitat.

The decision to go to this area was based on a report by Michail Stishov of a displaying male in mid-June in 1970 and based on analysis of potential habitat grounds from satellite data and from an aerial survey performed in August 2002. Portenko (1981) lists the SBS West of Koljushin Bay as occurring only sporadically and more recent data West of Belyaka the most important site in the North are missing entirely.

Disappointingly, the team did not find any SBS, but the team obtained general information important for further study of this species. Firstly, persistent monitoring of the area around the Ekvvatap river, 30 km south-east of Mys Schmidta showed that this area is no longer populated by SBS. This implies that the distribution of the breeding range of this species may not extend as far north as previously thought. Secondly, the team has investigated 90km of shoreline around Mys Schmidta in search of potential SBS breeding habitat, including spits and areas around three different lagoons. The most suitable habitat was found just around the lagoon near the airport of Mys Schmidta. However, this area in general lacks the classic proper breeding habitat.



Habitat SE of Mys Schmidta



Tom Noah

Importantly, the team found that areas that look promising either from satellite or aerial surveys were often found to be unsuitable from the ground. For example, the area identified as the most promising according to August 2002 aerial surveys was flooded in late June 2011. Although it may be that the flooding was abnormally extensive in 2011, according to locals it might not be the case.

In general, the three most widespread habitats found were dry, sandy and gravel covered spits, polygon tundra and tussock tundra, none of which were found to be suitable for SBS even though some patches of these areas looked promising from the satellite survey. This information will be crucial for future satellite surveys looking for potential SBS habitats.

We found two displaying Semi-palmated Sandpiper and we wonder if these birds could have been mistaken for SBS 40 years ago, as their display song is similar to SBS. But on the other hand SBS was much more common and the main breeding area in Belyaka only 300 km away.

Thirdly, the team performed a broad faunistic survey of the area, including other endangered species such as the Snowy and Emperor geese and all four Eider species.

Finally, the team performed education and awareness work on the SBS and its migration patterns and other local birds in Chukotka. The work included raising awareness with the local hunters as well as a lecture at

the local school for children. This area was very difficult in terms of travel and equipment logistics, which prevented the team from exploring more widely.

Mys Schmidta is currently scheduled for closure next year and with the rapid deterioration of the airport field arriving and leaving from to Mys Schmidta was not straightforward. Nevertheless, there are several other areas nearby that may be surveyed, including the Anguema river basin and the lagoons around the Billings Cape.

The project of Birds Russia was funded by Packard Foundation and by SOS funding provided via BirdLife International.

3) Heritage Expedition – Species Champion for BirdLife International

In August 2010, award-winning New Zealand tour company **Heritage Expeditions** became the latest in a select group of Species Champions supporting Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation through BirdLife International's Preventing Extinctions Programme. In addition to providing vital funding and helping raise awareness, Heritage has also been directly benefitting conservation by providing considerable logistical support to the Task Force's work on the breeding grounds this spring.

Heritage had been developing a new route to the Russian Far East, which would explore the wildlife and scenery of the remote coastline of the Kamchatka and Chukotka coast. Spectacular wildlife encounters were guaranteed. Grey Whale, Beluga and Walrus were among the marine mammals and huge numbers of auks including the Critically Endangered Kittlitz's Murrelet and many other seabirds would be seen. But the star bird that the expedition hoped to encounter was, of course, Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

Working closely with BirdLife, Birds Russia and ArcCona Consulting, the expedition itinerary was carefully developed to avoid visiting highly sensitive IBAs where breeding Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other sensitive species might be disturbed. Instead, a plan was developed to enable passengers to see the species at the main study site under 'controlled conditions' where risk of disturbance could be minimised.

In developing the new route, a significant opportunity arose - the chance to survey previously inaccessible areas of remote coastline where Spoon-billed Sandpipers were thought to breed. In addition to providing berths for Drs. Evgeny Syroechkovskiy and Christoph Zöckler to travel with the expedition and lead the surveys, a plan was developed for Heritage staff and passengers to participate too - adding valuable resource and enabling a much greater area to be surveyed. The upshot was an outstanding success, with a new breeding site with at least three territories of Spoon-billed Sandpipers confirmed.

As plans evolved for the new conservation breeding programme, Heritage stepped in to provide further support by affording "safe passage" to eggs, chicks and conservation staff travelling to Anadyr.

"Throughout the planning and execution of this trip Heritage Expeditions has been extremely sensitive to conservation requirements and demonstrated exemplary standards of responsibility and professionalism in their enthusiastic and flexible support to the project. We thank Rodney Russ and his amazing team for delivering such a high level of responsible tourism and always going the extra mile to insure success. We applaud their contribution and are proud to count them as valuable partners in this extraordinary conservation effort."

Jim Lawrence - Preventing Extinctions Programme Manager - BirdLife International



Professor Khromov near Tintikun Lagoon North Kamchatka

C. Zöckler

Searching for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper with Heritage Expeditions

A personal account by B. Scampion.

I had already been in Kamchatka birding for a week when on 27th June I returned to Petropavlovsk Kamchatski to join a potentially exciting cruise with Heritage Expeditions 'In Search of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper'. I boarded their ship The 'Spirit of Enderby' (Professor Khromov) and after a few hours we departed the picturesque Avancha Bay, we were destined to visit some amazing and remote areas of the Bering Sea, Kamchatka the Commander Islands and eventually Chukotka. Many of these destinations are very remote and virtually impossible to get to without participating in such a trip with Heritage Expeditions. Some of the sites we planned to visit would either rarely or never have been visited by Russian or Western naturalists/birders of any description, so it was all very exciting. We headed North along the Kamchatka coast visiting the Zhupanova River which is rich in wildlife, its speciality is the nesting Steller's Sea Eagles in the riverside Birch and Alder Forests. We had some terrific views of nesting birds and over 20 non-breeding individuals. A good start!

We then sailed overnight Eastward into the Bering Sea to the Commander Islands, these are the Russian owned islands at the western end of the Aleutian Island chain. I had visited these islands two years before with Heritage and was excited to be going back. Having crossed one of the deepest oceanic trenches in the world the rising shelf at the islands is excellent for cetaceans, we were welcomed by numerous Humpbacks and a pod of Baird's Beaked Whales and a distant view of a bleak and partially snow covered Bering Island. Over the next two days we visited Medney and Bering Islands. We encountered some spectacular wildlife with bird specialities including Rock Sandpiper, Grey-crowned Rosy-finch, Red-legged Kittiwake, Whiskered, Crested and Parakeet Auklets and other North Pacific sea birds including Fork-tailed Storm Petrel and Laysan Albatross.

We then headed back towards Kamchatka and Karaginskiy Island where our search for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper would begin. We landed on the island early afternoon on the 1st July 2011, splitting into about five groups all working potentially suitable habitat for this critically endangered species. We all searched and walked some distance over the afternoon but all groups drew a blank, however some good birds were found including Red-necked Stints breeding Dunlin, Red-throated Pipits and Long-tailed Skuas. This was potentially a very southerly site for 'Spoonies' and was really a trial run, and a chance to learn about the habitat requirements for when we reached more suitable areas, further North. After a few days of more fantastic wildlife watching, particularly the amazing seabird colonies of Verkhoturova Island and the surprise of over one hundred Steller's Eider and the many Brown Bears and stunning male King Eider around the Koryak coast of Cape Primetny, we arrived at Anana Lagoon. This was thought to be a very promising site by Christoph and Evgeny from Birdlife/Birds Russia and the habitat looked potentially very good. The desired habitat is primarily short arctic tundra vegetation, with a good mix of species including low short Willow *Salix arctica* and Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*.

We again split into four groups and headed to our designated survey areas of the tundra along the Anana River, on the way getting some very good views of a couple of Great Knot. Again, after a long day 'on the hoof' walking, we all had some good bird sightings including breeding Red-necked Stint, Dunlin and Mongolian Plovers and some Sandhill Cranes, but failed to find our target bird the elusive Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

We sailed further North along the Koriak/ Kamchatka Coast. The following morning on the 5th July we were at our next potential site. Again we split into four main groups, using Zodiacs and on foot headed to specific areas to spend the day surveying. I was in a small group of six with Chris, Jan, Roger, John, and Helena surveying a long thin peninsular of tundra a couple of kilometres inland along the river. After a fairly slow and eventful walk to our start point, including some observations of Long-toed Stints, Red-necked Phalaropes and a close encounter with a large Brown Bear in a hurry to get off the spit we were about to survey. We surveyed a bit of possible habitat which seemed a bit dense before reaching the main spit where the habitat was looking much better. The habitat here had a low but reasonable covering of Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* and Willow *Salix arctica* without being too dense with a good mix of alpine plants such as the Siberian Iris *Iris setosa*, Alpine Azalia *Loiseleuria procumbens*, Wedgeleaf Primrose *Primula cunifolia* and Small Avens *Sieversia pusilla* amongst others.



SBS at the new site on the Koryak coast

B. Scampion

After spreading out and walking slowly together, we soon found breeding Dunlin, Red-necked Stint and a Mongolian Plover, a little later at about mid-day myself and Chris got onto a small wader amongst some Crowberry and Dwarf Willows, we were careful not to be too excited but we both checked it for Red-necked Stint, we then both looked at each other knowing it wasn't. Its beak was partially obscured by vegetation but it was a much richer redder brown on the face and breast!! it then flew about 100 metres and out of site, looking like it went down by the river bank. I hotly pursued it, I peered over the bank and there it was a beautiful male Spoon-billed Sandpiper, it was feeding on the river bank about 20 metres away, I was shortly joined by the rest of the team. To our amazement the bird then flew back onto the spit only about 10 metres away from us and began calling and even singing, we moved away to what we thought was a safe distance so as not to disturb it, keeping a close eye on the bird, after we and the bird had settled down it very casually walked about and sat down amongst some Crowberry vegetation, slightly wiggling about, it was clearly settling on a nest. Our team was ecstatic and Chris was busy relaying the good news to Rodney Russ, the crew on the ship and all the other teams.

The nest was checked and had three eggs present. After our half hour of glorious excitement we all realised we still had about 3 km of spit and good habitat to check so we composed ourselves and carried on, to our amazement after about 400m we were again confronted by a singing Spoon-billed Sandpiper, which from a safe distance we observed similar behaviour to the other bird when again it settled down on a nest. At this point the arctic wind got up and a squall blew through so we all deemed it unnecessary to disturb the bird in order to confirm if eggs were present, it was clearly sitting. Radio's were again buzzing and it turned out that Christoph's group in another area had also observed another bird but found no sign of a nest. We all returned to the ship later having succeeded in ours and Heritage Expeditions goal of finding a new site for this seriously endangered bird and contributing to the knowledge and known range of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The trip continued, checking another site further north but to no avail. We all had a chance to see another Spoon-billed Sandpiper at a known and studied nest site at Meinopyl'gino in Southern Chukotka. Here also this seasons important cargo of 20 Spoon-billed Sandpiper eggs joined the ship to be ferried to Anadyr where they will be raised under controlled conditions. After a couple more days of thrilling encounters with Walrus, Bears, Grey, Killer and Beluga Whales, Emperor Geese and other specialities such as Kittlitz's Murrelets we arrived in Anadyr the main city of the Chukotka Autonomous Region in NE Siberia. Here for most, this wonderful trip ended.



Some of the huge selection of marine wildlife from aboard the cruise

B. Scampion

I however stayed on with Christoph, Evgeny and Elena from Birds Russia to continue some work with the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, finishing the trip with some northern gems such as Siberian Accentor, Pallas's Reed Bunting, Dusky Thrush and Pectoral Sandpipers to mention just a few before the long journey back to the U.K.

Having seen some spectacular scenery, birds and other wildlife I would recommend this brilliantly organised trip by Heritage Expeditions to anyone.



First 'twitch' in North Kamchatka

C. Zöckler

4) The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Breeding Programme

The latest news on the Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation breeding expedition is that we have 16 chicks from 20 eggs collected, a much better result than we could have dreamt of!

Nigel Jarrett and Martin McGill transported the eggs and chicks from Meinypil'gyno village to Anadyr town on a Heritage Expeditions ship (many thanks to them for their kind support). They were then joined by Roland Digby of WWT and Liz Brown, an experienced wader aviculturist from the Department of Conservation in New Zealand. Nigel and Martin flew back to the UK on 20 July leaving Roland and Liz to rear the chicks to fledging before they were flown to Moscow for quarantining in Moscow Zoo in mid-August. They will then be flown to the UK in mid-September for a further 30 day quarantine period at Slimbridge before being moved to their new purpose-built winter accommodation in mid-October.

The 2011 Chukotka expedition was led by Birds Russia and staff from the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), working with colleagues from the RSPB, BTO, BirdLife International, ArcCona, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force and Moscow Zoo.

The project is funded by WWT and RSPB, with additional financial contributions and support from BirdLife International, the East-Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership, the Convention on Migratory Species, Heritage Expeditions and the Australasian Wader Study Group of Birds Australia.

WWT has launched a fundraising appeal to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, which you can donate to here - <http://www.wwt.org.uk/support-us/please-help-us-to-save-the-incredible-spoonbilled-sandpiper>.

For more information see the expedition blog - <http://sbsproject.wordpress.com/>.

Special thanks to Liza Tambovtseva and Evgeny Syroechkovskiy for all their hard work. And to all the members of the expedition to Chukotka and their support team -- Pavel Tomkovich, Nikolay Yakushev, Elena Lappo, Egor Loktionov, Sveta Belogrodceva, Ksenia Bibanova, Mikhail Shkurko, Simon Buckell, Jochen Dierschke, Gerrit Vyn and Christoph Zöckler.

A more detailed account of the expedition will appear in the next newsletter.

Baz Hughes, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)



Nigel Jarrett (WWT) with the precious cargo on the zodiac to board the cruise

C. Zöckler

Liza Tambotseva, Birds Russia

Now we have 17 chicks in outside rearing units but I remember very well how it all began for me. When Christoph, Norbert and Evgeny offered me this job in December 2010 I was very pleased and honoured. But I had no clue of what it would really be like. I was charmed with the opportunity to save such a wonderful bird as Spoon-billed Sandpiper and to do something to reduce the harm peoples do to nature. I was a very naïve person.

When we started the project into life (after several months planning and discussing, and we were planning a lot starting from the organization of the whole process ending with small details like what we would eat for breakfast and how much toilet paper we would need) I understood the reality of my work. It was absolutely different to any ideas I had about it. I felt like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland when you need to move faster and faster just to stay at the same place and to move forward you have to run. It seemed the World around me spinning faster and faster.

I have to do a lot of things, starting from translating contracts and agreements to arranging a washing machine for the expedition, I had to communicate with different people whom I had never seen before and enforce them to make miracles. And every day I feel that a pile of tasks becoming bigger and bigger. I lost a half my friends because I had no time to visit them and another half because I used them as hard as possible, using their cars, making them drive me to the endless trips buying equipment for the expedition, asking for help here and there. It was a real challenge was to organize all the expedition. I can tell you for sure that Birds Russia made a horrible effort and succeeded! Without us (Birds Russia) this expedition was not possible! And also it would not be possible without all the others who invested their effort in this project. Thank you all!

After two month of hard work we entered the airplane and start our way towards Chukotka, towards Spoon-billed sandpiper. Here occurs at least one unusual thing. Honestly I always liked English people but never worked with them so tight. I found out that we are working in different modes and it took us some time to get used to each other. First impression was "Liza is too rude to work with", "English team is too slow and cannot work at all". But we respect each other and we learned a lot, so we learned how to deal with each other. And we even managed to stay friends, and I still like English people, English beer and English food. It was nice to celebrate my birthday with these people, I was happy for all them to participate at my party; but honestly speaking they had no escape – it was our dinner as well.

There were several critical moments during the expedition. First one was cargo arrival. I was very nervous about it because all our incubators were in this cargo. It appeared in Moscow at 10th of May and we were flying to Anadyr at 15th. I had to find an airplane for our equipment. The problem was there was no cargo airplane at all to Chukotka till winter, a great battle among delivery companies about the space for shipment in the regular airplane, etc. Who could think that the cargo delivery can be such exciting process! I was asking people, begging them; we had to transfer a part of the equipment from one warehouse to another and to one more in the same day. I had a callus on my tongue telling about Spoon-billed Sandpiper and asking for the help. And I received the help! All our incubators and rearing units arrived in Anadyr! And the first sunny day we fly to Meinypilgyno.

Another exiting moment was a first Spoon-billed sandpiper. We were walking around waiting for birds to arrive day after day and no birds were found. All the team was nervous if it arrives or not. It was a great moment we've heard and seen it. It was one more little step towards the project. Then first nest found. These birds made us too nervous before we could find the nests. We met twice a day all the team at breakfast and dinner telling news and discussing plans. So it was a common sadness when we found a dead bird and a common joy after each nest we've found.

Very dramatic was the last nest. We had a lack of 1 nest for our project. We discussed a lot what to do and the only solution was to find one more nest. And Nikolay made a miracle – he went to tundra and found a nest! It was like an answer of heavens for our great desire.

One more hard but exciting period was our travel by ship “Professor Khromov”. It was the time chicks began to arrive one by one. Nigel and Martin had no time to sleep and to eat. They hatched chicks, they feed chicks, they treat chicks and they deserve all and one hatched chicks. They are brilliant! Every time the chick arrived from the egg it was a small magic. As soon as we have 17 chicks it was still the same absolute happiness with the first chick arrived and with the last one. And I saw a chick coming to life and it was more than a dream came true. I always dreamt to see a hatching. It was no matter what bird it would be, I just wanted to see this miracle – an egg turned to a chick. And on the Heritage boat it happened. Nigel told me – Liza, do you want to see a SBS hatching? And he pointed to the hatcher's incubator. There lied an egg with a big crack. The crack become bigger and bigger and bill showed then the upper part of egg removed. A small silence break and with the last effort the chick hatched. I was overwhelmed. I saw one of the most beautiful things in the world – the beginning of life.



Liza Tambotseva, Birds Russia
holding a chick

WWT

Starting the project like this you never know what will happen to you. There is a “general plan” but things very often go different and this makes a lot of surprise. People often say to me that my job is boring and sometimes taking too much time and efforts and you can never predict your vacations, but for me it's more important to see the whales jumping in the water on the sunset, walruses playing near me, I've seen an owl flying from my feet and an Emperor Goose on the nest. I've seen the birth of bird and the death of bird and this is

5) Spring Survey 2011 in Rudong, China

The Rudong SBS team started 2011 spring survey on March 15th, due to the spread of *Spartina* grass on the mudflat to the North side of Haiying Temple, our main field work site was on the south side of Haiyin

Temple, around 20 Km², where a natural mudflat was still available and waders can be easily observed before and after high tide.

The migration was 10-15 days later than usual due to the colder winter of 2010. The first record of Spoon-billed Sandpiper was on April 11th, 2011, later than 2010's record. The latest record was on May 27th, 2011, similar to previous year. No record during May 31st and July 19th.

During the period, the top two small waders are Dunlins and Red-necked stint, from April 30 to May 22, the number of Dunlins dropped from 4000 to 1000, and the number of Red-necked stint increased from 1000 to 4000. We noticed that the number of Spoon-billed Sandpiper also dropped from 15 on April 30 to 0 on May 16/17, and recorded 1 on May 22 and 27. Spoon-billed Sandpiper may migrate with the flock of Dunlins.

The mounting of Spoon-billed Sandpiper is later than that of Red-necked Stint, and they are relatively obvious in the big flock of Red-necked Stint in April.

Another notable finding is the color flag, the second color flag in Xiao Yangkou of Spoon-billed Sandpiper after the first one in 2010 spring. On April 21 and 22, same individual, non-breeding plumage was observed; it was banded in Sakhalin Island.



SBS at Yangkiau April 2011



S. Buckell

Threats to the site

The 2010-2011 reclamation plans at Xiao Yangkou foresee a massive reclamation project, involving the prime Spoon-billed sandpiper area. The total reclamation area along the Jiangsu Province Coastline is 180,090 ha. Xiao Yangkou (part of the Rudong mudflats) will contribute about 18,006 ha with a 50.6 kilometer seawall approximately while the current seawall is 16 kilometers. The more immediate threat is the overgrowing of the mudflats with *Spartina* grass, which diminishes the feeding area rapidly.

We thank Simon Buckell for his efforts on local survey and conservation activities.

Tong Menxiu, Li Jing and Zhang Lin August 2011

6) Spoon-billed Sandpiper update spring 2011 from Bangladesh

Sayam U. Chowdhury

Regular monitoring was carried out at Sonadia Island and all known sites between January and April 2011 in Bangladesh. A minimum of 16 individuals were recorded in January 2011, comprising 10 at Kaladia, 4 at Belekardia and 1 both at Tajiataka and Domar Char. Maximum number was observed in March 2011, comprising 24 individuals at Kaladia and 3 individuals at Tajiataka. In late April 2011, 4 individuals were recorded at Kaladia and 1 at Tajiataka, and all were in winter plumage.

In addition to the known site monitoring, another survey was conducted along the central south coast in March 2011 lead by Enam UI Haque and funded by Oriental Bird Club. The team found 4 Spoon-billed Sandpipers at Tanger Char. This site was previously unknown and located at c.31 km east of Patenga, which used to hold regular wintering SbS and last individual was recorded on 6 January 2000.



Moreover, an oversummering shorebird survey was conducted at Tajiakata of Sonadia Island on May and June 2011, where no SbS were seen. The team could not visit other sites due to bad weather but a local trained volunteer reported one SbS at Kaladia in early July 2011.

To resolve the shorebird hunting issue on Sonadia Island a detailed hunting survey was carried out by Bangladesh Bird Club. All active hunters and alternative livelihood options were identified. Alternative livelihood support is expected to involve providing productive assets as grants to hunters (for example fishing boats or nets, small shops, etc.), or providing training in other occupations. Hunters who take up alternative livelihoods will sign an agreement not to hunt shorebirds as a condition of their participation, discouraged any hunting activities and will pay a small part of their income for use of any assets provided (e.g. boat and nets, for which fishers often have to pay a larger share of catch to the owners of the gear in traditional systems). These payments will go into a conservation-guard fund operated by a local manager and a small conservation committee of local opinion leaders. The conservation agreements with hunters will take place within next few months to secure the key sites before the next winter season. This project is supported by SbS recovery team and further funding is required to support all the hunters.



We would like to thank British Ornithologists' Union, MBZ Species Conservation Fund and Oriental Bird Club for supporting our work on spoon-billed sandpiper survey and conservation in Bangladesh. (sayam_uc@yahoo.com)

Tony Htin Hla & Karin Eberhardt, BANCA

Earlier this year, the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA), the Spoon-billed Sandpiper guardian for Myanmar, surveyed the west coast of Martaban to assess the population status of Spoon-billed Sandpiper along that area. The team recorded three globally threatened species including the Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper, the Endangered Nordmann's Greenshank and the Vulnerable Great Knot. Also in their list were Near Threatened species i.e Black-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Black-bellied Tern and Black-headed Ibis together with 134 species. This survey confirmed that the western coast of Gulf of Martaban is similarly important for conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper as the east coast.

Another BANCA team worked with villages on the west coast of the Gulf of Martaban to provide livelihood alternatives for bird hunters and raise awareness in the communities of the laws protecting wintering shorebirds. Learning from the success of similar initiatives on the east side of Bay of Martaban last year, a six-member BANCA team this year conducted a socio-economic survey in 47 villages in Yangon and Bago Division in February and March, followed by a hunter livelihoods replacement and environmental education campaign in April and May.

The Gulf of Martaban is likely the most important global wintering area for the SbS, harboring an estimated total of at least 220 birds, or about half the global population, and hunting is currently the main threat at the site (Zöckler *et al.* 2010).

The good news for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is that the overwhelming majority, or 30 of the total of 37 hunters identified in the 47 west Martaban villages, had already ceased hunting birds by the time of the survey began. The villages on the west Martaban coast are predominantly Buddhist, and killing birds is considered to be spiritually unhealthy, the main reason these men cited for why they no longer hunt birds. Nevertheless, based on an accounting of their memories, the 37 hunters had collectively taken a rough estimate of 84 Spoon-billed Sandpipers on the west Martaban coast in the period from 1989 to 2011. This figure was provided by the 21 hunters who, having collected it at least once, were familiar with the Spoon-billed Sandpiper; the remaining 16 were not familiar with it. As on the east coast, the Spoon-billed Sandpipers are mostly by-catch when larger birds are targeted with nets and sometimes baited by poison (fertiliser).

Of those seven bird hunters are currently active, four were found to be 'subsistence' or 'professional' hunters, who rely mainly on birds for their income, while three were 'opportunistic', hunting birds only as a sideline. The 'subsistence' hunters are poor, with annual income last year ranging from the local equivalent of USD 317 to USD 800; while the three 'opportunistic' hunters engage in more lucrative activities such as fishing or crabbing, and birds made up between only 10% and 18% of their total income, which last year ranged from the local equivalent of USD 1517 to USD 2470. After the survey, the team worked with the seven hunters and community leaders to obtain shorebird conservation guarantees in exchange for their chosen alternative livelihood assets. These assets included fishing gear and livestock, and were valued at USD 500 for each 'subsistence' hunter and USD 200 for the 'opportunistic' hunters.

The BANCA team conducted environmental awareness raising activities in 20 villages, using media such as posters, pamphlets and slide shows to discuss topics such as the value of biodiversity especially in the Gulf of Martaban, the importance and ecology of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, relationships between humans, birds, the natural environment, the impacts of bird hunting, and the legal protected status of Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other migrating shorebirds. The remaining villages were not yet reached this year with environmental education activities, but will be targeted in future, as local communities expressed interest in and welcomed the educational opportunities.

This year's activities complete the first phase of the socio-economic survey and conservation agreement work by BANCA in the Gulf of Martaban. The activities from this and last year on both sides of the Gulf provide a solid foundation from which to continue to monitor the former hunters and their villages, and to expand on and intensify environmental awareness campaigns.

The next step is to convene a Gulf-wide conservation forum composed of village leaders and former hunters, ministerial line agencies responsible for fisheries and wildlife conservation, and local government

authorities including members of the newly-elected and convened legislative assemblies of Yangon and Bago Division. This forum will be supported by BANCA and local and international partners to work together for the protection of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other wintering shorebirds. Among other activities, this forum can help lobby for the protected area designation of the area.

While one team was conducting the socioeconomic surveys and education programs in Martaban another small team convened similarly a socioeconomic survey around Nanthar Island in Rakhine state. That small team identified four old bird hunters, three from Sittwe township (two from Ohmyepaw villages and one from Khatinpike village) and one from Rathaedaung (Kyaukgyi village) Township. They were not hunting birds at that time and have stopped hunting for 3 years. Even when they were catching birds they were occasional and opportunistic bird hunters. That team also recorded 12 Spoon-billed Sandpipers out of which 2 young adults in their summer plumage together with four near threatened species, Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melamocephalus*), Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and Black-bellied Tern (*Sterna acuticauda*). These records confirm the importance of Nan Thar Island for the conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper as well as other wintering birds.

BANCA in combination with a national tour company is supporting the conservation efforts on Nan Thar island by promoting eco-tourism. We operate a tour each January in cooperation with ArcCona and Bird Holidays. For details of the tour itinerary please check

<http://www.birdholidays.co.uk/myanmar%20bird%20tour%202012.htm>



Surveying the west coast of Martaban

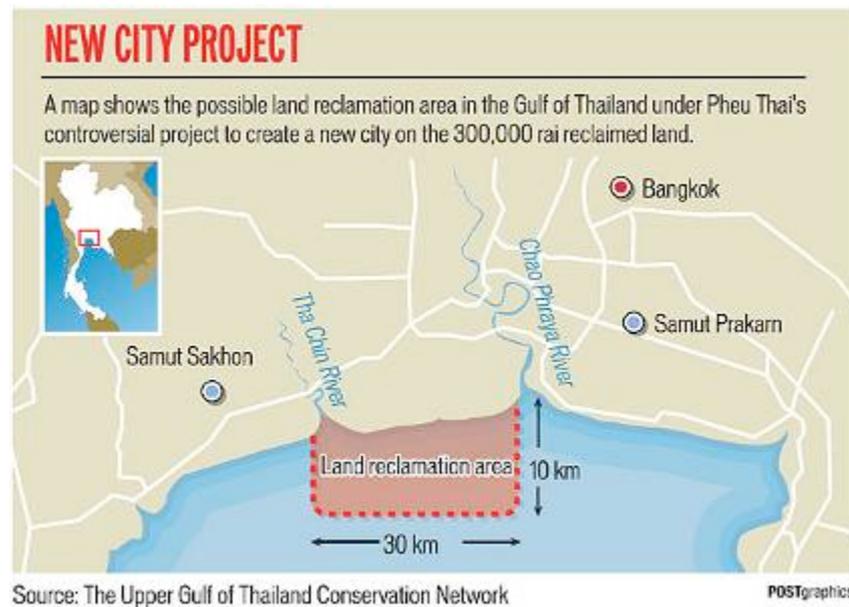


BANCA

8) New threats on mudflats in the Inner Gulf in Thailand

Ian Barber, RSPB

Environmental groups are up in arms against the Pheu Thai Party's ambitious megaproject to build a high-tech town on a huge tract of land to be reclaimed from the sea in the Gulf of Thailand from Samut Prakan to Samut Sakhon.



The environmentalists have every reason to feel worried although few details about it are publicly known besides what was said in the the party's election campaign and bits and pieces of information from Thaksin Shinawatra and the party's economic team.

They claim the project will permanently and irrecoverably destroy all the remaining mangrove forests along the coast and kill off all the marine life such as fish, shrimps, crabs and clams which rely on the forests as a breeding ground.

As a consequence, tens of thousands of fishermen and residents living along the coast will be deprived of their traditional livelihood and a cheap source of food. Alternative jobs to be offered by the government will, at the very best, be as labourers on the minimum wage.

Like its original predecessor, the disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party, which was famous for its big dreams and big projects such as Nakhon Nayok's new hi-tech town which collapsed before it got started and the one million cow and elite card projects which were proven to be a disaster, Pheu Thai has its big dreams, the most controversial being the reclamation project.

Based on sketchy reports from Thaksin and Pheu Thai's economic gurus, namely Suchart Thada-Thamrongvech and Pichai Naripthaphan, a long seawall will be built so that the sea about 10km from the coastline extending about 50km from Pak Nam to Samut Sakhon will be reclaimed. That will produce about 300,000 rai of new land along the coast of which 200,000 rai will be allocated as public land and the rest sold to potential foreign investors at between 20-30 million baht a rai.

According to Thaksin's simple arithmetic, this means two trillion baht in profits. But according to Mr Suchart's calculation, profits will be about three trillion baht.

There is also talk of the dream town being equipped with state-of-the-art energy-saving devices and other conveniences fit for rich investors, the main aim being big and fast money. All the issues about potential ecological disaster, the death of marine life and the loss of income for tens of thousands of fishermen and their families are considered insignificant and marginalised.

Apparently, it was the same mindset and the obsession with quick money which gave birth to the elite card membership project conceived by Thaksin and implemented by his government.

Then Thaksin dreamed of one million wealthy businessmen, including some 300,000 nouveau riche Chinese businessmen, subscribing as members which was supposed to bring in 1 trillion baht in fast money.

As it turned out, the project managed to get a little more than 2,000 members - many of whom might feel regret today for making the wrong decision. It was a total flop and successive governments have had to dish out subsidies to keep the company afloat.

The reclamation mega-project appears to be conceived by Thaksin and probably inspired by The Palm and The World projects in Dubai where he is in residence.

No doubt, he is creative and imaginative. But in reality, the dream project needs to be feasible to be implemented. And, more importantly, the affected people must have a say in it and it must go through a rigorous environmental impact assessment. But if the project was meant purely to attract votes, then it should be immediately swept under the rug.