Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force News Bulletin No 23 · Nov 2020

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07, The 'James Bond' among the Spoon-billed Sandpipers breeding again successfully in 2020 *Pavel Tomkovich*

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 of Sayam U. Chowdhury and Dr Elena Lappo. Layout by Matthias Fanck.

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, Democratic People's 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, the Mangrove Conservation Fund (MCF), Fauna Flora International (FFI) and experts and conservation organisations from principal range states and other partners. We are grateful to the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung, Bremen, the RSPB and NABU, MCF and the International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC) 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 · Manfred Hermsen Foundation, SBS TF Coordinator · November 2020

Lockdown and travel restrictions this year have meant little movement for almost all of us. Everything came to a halt, and maybe for some this was a welcome break from our often restless lives? But this was not the case for our Russian team. Against all the odds and in total defiance and utter dedication to the SBS cause, the Russians circumvented the strict Corona restrictions. They were able to send a team of 12 people to Chukotka this summer, spent 14 days in tundra quarantine and carried out the work all by themselves. No foreigners were able to join the team this year. Also Heritage Expeditions did not travel to the area this year. Surveys and head-starting went ahead and were completed successfully. Negotiations about the park with the Chukotka administration and local stakeholders took place almost unrestricted. There were also no foreigners involved in the next stages along the flyway in China. Our Chinese friends managed to assemble three different, but highly able, teams that surveyed the massive mudflats in the Jiangsu Province.

And yet a different pandemic affected our birds in the conservation breeding project in Slimbridge. Sadly, many birds were lost to a fungus infection. It looks like the WWT team has managed to stop the infection for now. Eight birds are still alive and I admire the dedication and perseverance of the conservation breeding team at WWT.

But the birds in the wild are also still declining, although the rate of decline has slowed. The news from the breeding grounds and also from other sites along the flyway is not very good. Despite all our conservation efforts and increased site protection over the past twenty years, we seem to have missed some major issues that are still driving the decline. The hunting pressure in the Russian Far East might be more severe than we had assumed. Disturbances on the key stop over sites in China and the ongoing reclamation of key coastal areas in North Korea might all play a role. But the gradual continuing decline makes me wonder whether something much bigger might be at play. Are we prodding in the dark? Is climate change a major factor and has it already been impacting the fragile population for a while? These are big questions but despite the ongoing decline I am confident that our ever growing conservation community including our many donors, to whom we are very grateful, will face up to these challenges. In this respect it is very good to welcome our two new species ambassadors from China and Myanmar. You can read about them and their activities and about all the other news in this latest issue.

Guest Foreword

Dr Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Director General, Forest Department, MONREC, Myanmar

Now is the time for migratory birds coming to winter in southern spheres like our country Myanmar. Each year, billions of migratory birds, bats and many other animals are migrating south on different flyways. Due to the pandemic, humans are restricted in traveling, but migratory birds have to travel for their survival and continue to migrate to different destinations across the world. Among those, the Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper is regularly migrating to Myanmar to stay in the winter. The most important wintering areas of this species are in Myanmar, as discovered by pioneers of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force in 2008. That year, the Gulf of Mottama and Nanthar Island were identified as key wintering sites for Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Efforts of many conservation organizations and agencies, particularly the International Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force raised awareness for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other migratory birds, and wintering sites along the coastal region.

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar recognizes the importance of these sites and as a party of the Ramsar Convention, prioritized the conservation of important coastal wetlands. Forest Department under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC) is responsible to implement and oversee conservation of wetlands in collaboration with other stakeholders. In 2014, Myanmar became a member of the East-Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) to conserve migratory birds and their habitats for people. As of November 2020, Myanmar has designated six important wetlands as Ramsar and Flyway Network Sites, including Gulf of Mottama, the Ayeyarwady Delta and Nanthar Island, comprising over 300,000 ha. Moreover, the Government of Myanmar formed a Central Committee on Management of Natural Resources in Coastal Areas and a National Wetlands Committee for wetland conservation and human wellbeing to contribute to global conservation targets.

Migratory bird conservation is very important for many reasons. They are one of the indicators for healthy wetland ecosystems and provide many benefits for human such as food, purification, buffering storm surges, recreation and spiritual values. The EAAFP and its SBS Task Force have created a network of like-minded and active people. They share their knowledge and capacity, collaborating with neighboring countries to strengthen cooperation on protection of bird habitats, reducing poaching, and creating alternative livelihoods for local communities for sustainable conservation and wise use of important wetlands.

The Government of Myanmar is very proud to have designated the Gulf of Mottama as a Ramsar Site. It is one of the largest inter-tidal mudflats in South-east Asia and not only important for shorebirds but also for the local communities. Together with Nanthar Island and the Ayeyarwady Delta, Myanmar provides its contribution in safeguarding key milestones for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and many other migratory birds along the flyway. More important areas are planned for future Ramsar sites along the coast in Myanmar. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with the SBS Task Force, national and international conservation organizations and agencies to protect migratory birds and wetlands in Myanmar and elsewhere along the flyway.

Chukotka expedition during COVID pandemics 2020 recording new declines in breeding Spoon-billed Sandpipers

Evgeny Syroechkovskiy, Pavel Tomkovich, Egor Loktionov, Nikolay Yakushev, Elena Lappo

Despite the pandemic BirdsRussia managed to organise another annual expedition in 2020 to the South Chukotka Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS) breeding grounds. This was possible after long and complicated negotiations with the administration of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug and the promises to reduce contacts with locals in Meinypil'gyno Village. All expedition members arrived in Chukotka with fresh health certificates, wearing SBS branded face masks and also using UV-air disinfectors, which were hard to buy in Moscow in the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, in areas of communal use at our biological station. Due to the lockdown and termination of international flights, sadly no foreign participants were able to join the expedition. The Russian survey team started activities in Meinypil'gyno on 20 May and finished by the end of August. Spoon-billed Sandpipers arrived around average dates with first migrant recorded on 31 May and local breeders were found in several places only on 3 June with some birds already in pairs.

After many years of decline local numbers of SBS stabilised at the level of 11 breeding pairs in 2012-2014, and then due to Head-starting Programme increased up to 16 pairs in 2018. A decline to only 12–13 pairs in 2019 was thought to be part of natural fluctuation, but only 10 pairs in 2020 in the same monitoring area confirmed the reality of a decline of 37.5% in total over the past two years. Estimates of numbers of SBS breeding pairs in wider area, including other distant areas around Meinypil'gyno, which were visited less regularly, had shown a smaller decline to only 6 instead of 7 to 8 breeding pairs. Overall decline in the Meinypil'gyno population of SBS across all sites was at 33.3% in two years. This trend is alarming and indicates that another period of a sharp SBS population decline has started by 2019. Head-

Pavel Tomkovich

Some of the expedition members in Meinypil'gyno under severe COVID-19 restrictions, summer 2020 *Yulia Darkova*

Predators had a great breeding year in 2020 and shorebird chicks had hard times *Yulia Darkova*

Just hatched SBS chicks near Western Oil Drill *Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*

starting is not any more able to compensate the ongoing loss of birds even at the local scale in current conditions. The analysis of return rates of individually marked birds had shown that the main reason is a lower recruitment of young birds (both locally hatched and immigrants) into the breeding population compared to previous years. Such decline is applicable to both wild and head-started birds. So we can't blame changes in efficiency of head-starting. A preliminary analysis of the available data on individually marked birds had shown that the first 6 months of young SBS are critical for its survival. Since median age of the first observation is 6 months, the fraction of birds who

reached maturity among all observed is similar to the adult's 1-y survival of 68.8% in our study area. It seems that something has changed in recent years causing strong reduction of survival of young birds. See Fig. 1 and 2.

The most recent decline was completely unexpected, as we were so proud that our international team managed to change the trend of recovery of the species at least on the local scale, in Meinypil'gyno but also at many sites along the flyway. Reasons for this new decline are not clear. However, it is clear that reasons for the low return rate to Meinypil'gyno of birds are likely somewhere on the flyway, not on the breeding grounds. We can't exclude some factors on the breeding grounds but to test these we would need to study food availability and climate change effects. Currently we know close to nothing about it.

It is worth noting that apart from SBS other shorebird species were also breeding in lower numbers in 2019 and/or 2020. These are Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*, Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus*, Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* and Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*.

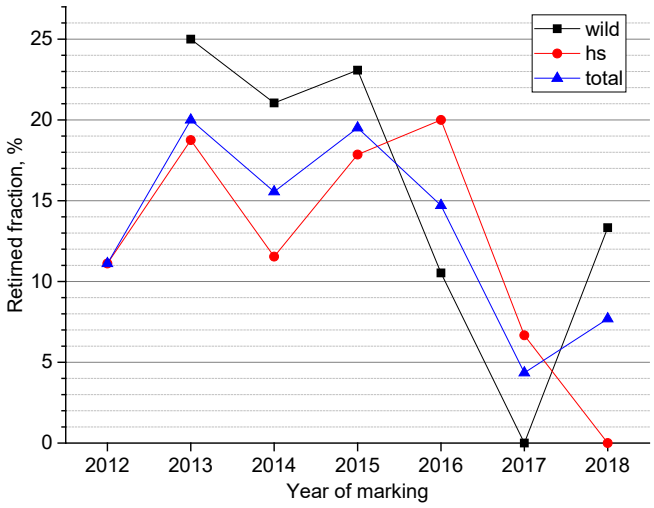


Figure 1. *Proportion of birds marked as chicks and seen in Meinypilgyno in subsequent years – return rate at least halved*

The Head-starting Programme continued in 2020. For the first time Russian headstarting team was operating without the participants from WWT. The training of Russian team by WWT in the UK (see separate article in this issue) was obviously very helpful. Another training in chick rearing would be helpful as currently we are losing more birds at this stage. Three Russian expedition members were responsible for this activity, with additional help coming from other expedition members. However, more assistance is needed during July to support the headstarting team in the future.

Thirty eggs were collected for artificial incubation from eight nests on 16–18 June 2020. Chicks hatched from 27 eggs from 3–8 July, and 22 chicks survived to fledging and were released into the wild after fledging on 28 July. Post-release monitoring of these birds lasted during the first half of August when the last young SBS disappeared from the area. Mortality of released birds was not recorded.

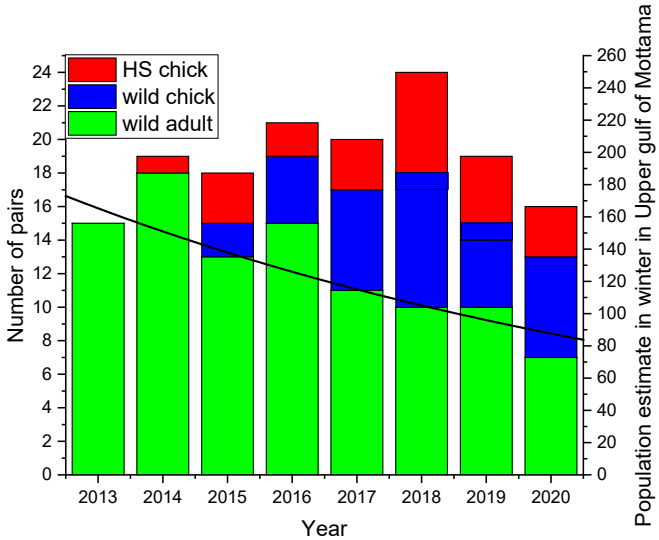


Figure 2. *SBS populations dynamics in Meinypil'gyno and Mottama. Composition of breeding pairs in Meinypil'gyno demonstrate that HS compensated the decrease in adults until 2019. Two-coloured pairs consisted of partners, both of wild and HS chicks. Wild partners were marked as adults or remained unmarked. The Y axis shows the estimated number on the wintering ground in Myanmar (Aung et al. 2018, Aung et al 2020)*

Head-started bird IM ready to go *Nikolay Yakushev*

Nikolay Yakushev at the release pen *Nastya Yakusheva*

SBS in headlines of main Chukotka newspaper "The Far North" on the day of voting for changes of Russian Constitution

Bears patrolling the coast as we search nearby for Spoonie nests *Yulia Darkova*

Of the eight SBS pairs whose eggs were taken for headstarting, at least 6 pairs managed to relay. Two more pairs also might have relaid, but neither their nest nor brood was found. Only four of six replacement clutches were successful, the others depredated.

To learn about predation rate on shorebird nests we controlled 56 nests of eight species. Only 29 (51.8%) of these nests were successful. Small sandpipers, such as Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* and SBS were the least successful (33.3, 42.9 and 46.2% nests hatched, correspondingly) while Pacific Golden Plovers were most successful (75% of nests hatched, n=8), especially their late nests. Of the Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, three out of six known nests hatched, but there were only six broods of this species in the area where at least 16 local pairs were recorded early in the season, which indicates only 37.5% of nesting success. With the help of nest cameras we continued to monitoring predators of shorebird nests. For this purpose we set up such cameras at 15 nests of four shorebird species, but not SBS. American Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus parryi*, Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*,

Common Raven *Corvus corax*, Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*, and Vega Gull *Larus (argentatus) vegae* were recorded taking eggs of shorebirds from their nests. Thus, the predators were rather diverse. Predation by Ravens was increasing. Current numbers of Ravens in vicinity of key SBS breeding locations is five times higher than it might be naturally. Nearest natural breeding cliffs for Ravens are 20-30 km away, but artificial constructions within hundreds of meters of nearest nests were used for nesting. Some Ravens began to specialise and follow ornithologists assessing up to 90% of waders broods. SBS and Red Knots were under particular pressure. A special effort is needed to regulate numbers of Raven, which requires additional resources and discussion with the villagers.

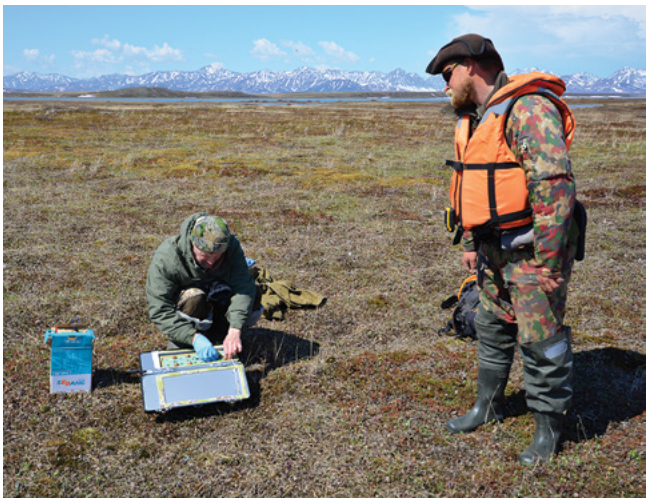
For the first time, all local SBS in the main monitoring area near Meinypil'gyno were colormarked at the start of the breeding season. No unmarked birds arrived. Such increase of percentage of marked SBS in the local breeding population is similar to the situation at non-breeding grounds where percentage of marked birds is also increasing every year. This is a clear indication of a decline across the flyway. This summer we marked two additional adult breeding males in a distant area.

This year, 22 SBS chicks were raised in captivity, and 20 chicks hatched in 5 nests and one additional brood. Thus, in total in 2020 44 SbS were marked, which is the smallest number in recent years.

Blood samples were collected for genetic studies again. A study of invertebrates was initiated for first time on the breeding grounds by Dr. Leonid Rybalov from the Russian Academy of Sciences. Results will be presented in another issue; but preliminary results have shown that densities and diversity of the epigaeic fauna recorded was higher at SBS feeding areas than in surrounding habitats. SBS are feeding predominantly along ecotone areas, which are transitional areas between different habitats.

GIS was created for evaluation of SBS habitat in Southern Chukotka by experts from the Institute of Geography. First stage of detailed satellite images analysis combined with using geological maps and NDVI index were implemented to identify potential SBS breeding habitats in nearby areas for

Andrey Maximov's 7 meters long motor boat – the best transport for big teams to visit remote SBS breeding locations around Meino *Yulia Darkova*



Ivan and Egor collecting eggs at the "Big eggs peninsula" on a sunny day *Nikolay Yakushev*

further more detailed surveys to find new breeding locations of SBS in Southern Chukotka. Extra layers are needed for GIS including vegetation evaluation and this project should be continued.

No education or awareness raising was carried out this year in order to avoid unnecessary contacts with local people. Menypil'gyno is still the village with no single COVID event recorded, while Chukotka as a whole is one of most infected regions in Russia during the second wave. For the second year, the Russian SBS film team lead by BirdsRussia Board member Andrey Maximov and professional photographer and videographer Yulia Darkova were filming in the field both in Chukotka and Kamchatka. Three documentary products are planned to be released in 2021-2022.

Activities on the designation of the regional Nature Park "The land of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper", lead by the team of Prof. Konstantin Klokov, Yuliy Dobrushin and Alexey Butorin are coming to the final stage. Many negotiations, mainly distant, but also three working meetings were organised in Anadyr, the Chukotka capital, in June and July, including challenging discussions with some stake holders, such as commercial mountain sheep hunting and increasing pressure from mining industries. Some disputed areas in the mountains may finally be excluded from the Park, but we are aiming for an area of about 2,000,000 ha. Covid has slowed down the process, but did not stop it. Hopefully, final results will be reported in the next newsletter. An increasing recognition of SBS conservation needs and support from the local government and Chukotka inhabitants is clearly taking place. Regular regional newspaper articles about our work and SBS conservation are a clear indication. Three reports during the past summer including one big full page interview plus numerous TV and radio mentioned SBS.

BirdsRussia is grateful to numerous supporters of SBS conservation work in Chukotka including the new donor – Mangrove Conservation Foundation from Shenzhen, China as well as traditional donors Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung, NABU, WWT, WCS, WWF Russia and others. We also like to thank all those many supporters, who contributed to the flagging, flag reading and maintaining the SBS TF database. RSPB had finished being the main supporter of the project but now is assisting

White XC ready to depart for a long flight to Kamchatka and Sakhalin and hopeful to avoid meeting hunters on the way
Nikolay Yakushev

Endless wetlands of Anadyr lowland outside of the window during 1,5 hour helicopter flight to Meino from Anadyr
Evgeny Syroechkovskiy

in generating support from BirdLife Asia, which is going to be a new supporter of the project starting from 2020. BirdsRussia and SBS TF are extremely grateful to RSPB for crucial support for so many years. Without RSPB support head-starting and such detailed SBS monitoring work in Chukotka would never have been possible.

In summary, we conclude that we were able to carry out our work without any major constraint or obstacle by COVID-19.

SBS continue to decline and the decline is increasing. The real risk of extinction of the species is still here and we need an urgent discussion of how can we address this? If things continue SBS would disappear during our life time in spite of all ongoing efforts. We have two trends, both from Mottama, Myanmar and Chukotka agreeing. The low survival of young birds returning to Meinypilʻgyno, which may result in the disappearance of this last core breeding population. The reasons for both should be understood and mitigated. We have an urgent and important task ahead of us.

Evgeny Syroechkovskiy

Spoon-billed Sandpiper flagging on West Kamchatka in August 2020

Yu. Gerasimov, R. Bukhalova, A. Grinkova

From 5–28 August and from 5–9 September 2020 we continued our study of southward wader migration on the West coast of Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia with support of BirdsRussia. These investigations were in the same point as the six previous years – on Vorovskaya River (see SBS Newsletters No 21 and 22). The lagoon is about 40 km long and 1–1.5 km wide. We investigated only the southern part of the lagoon between Ustyevoe Village and the mouth of the river (54º 11' N, 155º 49' E). The length of this part is about 5 km.

As in 2014–2018 our work included counting of mudflats during low tide, observation of visible migration with counting of waders flying past, and flagging of caught birds. In August 2020 the main part of the work was banding and flagging, so we made only 7 counts on the mudflats. The maximum number of waders – 10.7 thousand individuals – was counted on 26 August 2020. The number of Red-necked Stints was higher than in previous years, up to 5.8 thousand individuals in one count.

As in previous years the prime objective of our investigation was to obtain new information on Spoon-Billed Sandpiper migrating southward. However, we were able to catch only two Spoon-billed Sandpiper out of 1,200 waders caught. Both were juveniles as in previous years. The first bird (yellow XJ) with weight of 29.6 g (with flag) was caught in evening of 22 August, second bird (yellow TE) with weight of 27.9 g was caught in middle day of 24 August. Length of wing of both trapped birds was 103 mm, tarsus 21.3 and 20.7 mm, tail 40 and 42 mm.

In August 2020 we did not record any hunting for small shorebirds in studied area – on sand spit and river lagoon as well as in previous 3 years.

We are grateful for MCF and MHS/NABU for supporting our work this year.

Spoon-billed Sandpiper at WWT Slimbridge

Jodie Clements

The captive Spoon-billed Sandpiper flock are currently enjoying the calm of the early rainy winter months, having completed moult and they left the pressures of the breeding season behind them. As you may remember, the final pairings of males and females in spring 2020 were all new. The captive spoonies have never bred in their first year with a new partner, and sadly this year was no exception. Despite the competitive chorus of song throughout the aviaries and the high drives of the males particularly, no nest scrapes were made and no eggs were laid this year. The flock was reunited on the 24th June, much to their (and their carers) relief.

The yeast infection 'pandemic' that has caused mortality in weaker birds here in the facility at WWT Slimbridge claimed another life in May. Various drugs have now been tested for effectiveness against this infection. The drug that yielded the best results was given daily with insect live food (small crickets) to the remaining six adult birds (3males : 3 females) until they completed moult into winter plumage, as the infection appears to cause significant health issues during times of stress particularly. I'm glad to say we have not lost any more birds to this infection, or any other causes since.

To keep them comfortable the adults have already been given access to their winter accommodation, complete with underfloor heating and a few sprigs of artificial Christmas tree for cover (who says it's too early to put up the decorations!). The two male chicks raised in 2019, who are housed separately, will shortly have their own heated shelter and extra aviary space to explore. Though they are looking very dashing in their adult winter plumage, it remains difficult here to stop referring to them as 'The Juveniles'!

Time to relax! Some of the captive spoonies nearing the end of moult into winter plumage *Jodie Clements*

Visitors at WWT Slimbridge

Jodie Clements and Baz Hughes, WWT

In February 2020, WWT Slimbridge hosted four Russian colleagues from the spoonie headstarting project:

Nikolai Yakushev (Birds Russia), expedition leader.
Ivan Shepelev (Birds Russia), lead aviculturist of the headstarting team.
Fyodor Kondrashov, Professor at the Institute for Science and Technology, Austria, undertaking genetic research on Spoon-billed Sandpiper.
Egor Loktionov, Professor at Bauman Moscow State Technical University, previously surveying known Spoon-billed Sandpiper breeding populations but more recently in search of the unknown.

The trip was organised for many equally important reasons – as you read you will notice that 'many' is an understatement…

On arrival in the UK, our Russian colleagues were driven straight from the airport to the Conservation Breeding Unit at WWT Slimbridge. After visiting the spoonies, we shared our thoughts on their management and all four of our Russian colleagues agreed to become advisors to the captive breeding programme.

Our guests also gave WWT staff presentations on their work. Nikolai spoke of spoonie headstarting and its challenges and methodology. Egor gave an overview of the impacts of headstarting with a focus on return rates of wild and headstarted birds. And Fyodor gave us an insight into spoonie population genomics in the hope of answering some conservation questions. After a long first day they were taken to the favourite local pub The Tudor Arms in Slimbridge village.

The following day, we made an early morning excursion to Salisbury to meet David Waters, Director of the Great Bustard Group. David is a larger than life character with an infectious enthusiasm for Great Bustards which we could all relate to

The headstarting team closely examining embryonic development (left to right: Nikolay, Ivan, Fyodor) *Nigel Jarrett*

as it mirrored our own feelings for spoonies. We were shown around the breeding facilities and learnt of David's history with the project. Ivan had previously met David in 2013 in Дьяковка, Saratov region, when he was collecting Great Bustards' eggs. We were also able to the see the fruits of their labour, spotting two flocks of Great Bustard (one of males, one of females) on the famous, but rather windblown, Salisbury Plain, before heading off for a pub lunch at The Dog and Gun Inn in Netheravon.

The next day was a little more relaxed – a tour by Simon Matthews (Living Collections Manager) of the Duckery. We then got a bird's eye view of the site from the Sloane observation tower before wandering round the grounds and reserve. The day was rounded off by a trip to Wales and the Forest of Dean with former colleague and headstarting mentor to Nikolai and Ivan, Roland Digby.

The team then attended the 5 day Avian Egg Incubation Course at the International Centre for Birds of Prey, Newent, presented by Susie Kasielke, Avian Biologist at Toledo Zoo & Aquarium, and Colleen Lynch, Riverbanks Zoo and Garden. Designed to give a firm understanding of artificial incubation through both practical and theoretical study, Nikolai and Ivan attended this course as part of the handover over of the spoonie headstarting project. We were fortunate enough to have Fyodor attend to translate. This workshop received high praise from current WWT staff who had previously attended the same workshop hosted by Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

On the last full day with Nikolai and Ivan, we took a cultural trip to Bath, Somerset. Managing to avoid the cathedral in Salisbury (!), we took a tour of the spire at Bath Abbey instead. After a local pub lunch at The Old Green Tree in Bath, we toured the Roman Baths themselves – an amazing experience given the baths were created by the Romans over 2,000 years ago. We rounded the day off with dinner at The Old Fox pub, Coaley, and an early night before the flight to Moscow in the morning.

This trip had many practical purposes, but what was felt most heartily was the rapport and relationships it strengthened and created between international colleagues and friends past and present. It also allowed future collaborations to be discussed. We hoped it would be followed by a month-long visit to WWT by Ivan in spring 2020, to join the Project Godwit headstarting team but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this was not to be.

We hope this visit was as enjoyable and memorable for our Russian colleagues as it was for us and look forward to seeing them again here soon.

This is the final message and apology from Baz: *It was wonderful to eventually meet you guys, and somewhat emotional too. Even though we had never met, I felt as if I had known you all our lives. I hope you enjoyed our English pub tour – there are Trip Advisor weblinks above for anyone who wants to follow in our footsteps! Finally, I sincerely apologise for not drinking copious amounts of vodka with you. That can be something for us to look forward to next time we meet. Наздаровья мои друзья*

The Spoonie headstarting team at Slimbridge: Jodie Clements, Egor Loktionov, Ivan Shepelev, Fyodor Kondrashov, Nikolai Yakushev, David Waters, Baz Hughes *Nigel Jarrett*

Chinese famous actor Mr. Wang Kai promotes the conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper as "Global Ambassador for Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation"

Kaiting Yang and Lili Sun (Mangrove Conservation Fund)

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* is one of the most endangered and rarest bird species in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and even on the planet. About 100-200 pairs of mature Spoon-billed Sandpipers are estimated to be left in the world, much fewer than the total population of the Giant Panda, and they continue to decrease at an annual rate of appr. 8%. In 2008, the IUCN Red List upgraded its conservation status from endangered (EN) to Critically Endangered (CR), the highest threat level. It is listed by the East Asian-Australian Flyway (EAAF) as a flagship species for coastal wetland conservation, with great conservation and symbolic significance. Under the EAAFP the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force was established in 2010 to promote the collaboration of the conservation for this globally threatened species.

On 5th September 2020, Mangrove Conservation Fund (MCF) based in Shenzhen, China, appointed the famous Chinese actor Mr. WANG KAI as the "Global Ambassador for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS) Conservation", with EAAFP. Mr. Wang is very interested in the SBS project and is willing to make contributions by raising public awareness on the conservation of migratory waterbirds. Mr. Wang will join hands with MCF to speak for the SBS and safeguard the 50 million waterbirds in our flyway.

A Weibo message has been read by over 40 million people and related videos have been forwarded over 100.000 times.

Species Ambassador from Myanmar

Pyae Phyo Aung

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) is an annual awareness-raising campaign highlighting the need for the conservation of migratory birds and their habitats. It has a global outreach and is an effective tool to help raise global awareness of the threats faced by migratory birds, their ecological importance, and the need for international cooperation to conserve them (Source: WMBD). The East-Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) is supporting the education awareness activities of WMBD for flyway partners to promote migratory bird conservation.

During the pandemic crisis, formal massive public gathering is not possible, and the people are having to follow the national government health care guidelines. During lockdown in many cities of Myanmar, most people are relying on accessing the internet for different purposes include education and awareness. Taking this opportunity to celebrate WMBD event in Myanmar online, we appointed the young and famous vocalist "Kaung Kaung" as the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Species Ambassador in Myanmar. With the support of "Kaung Kaung" the conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper can reach the attention of a much wider public. He is a pioneer ambassador for conservation from the celebrity society in Myanmar. "Migratory birds are facing many threats for their survival along the flyway such as hunting. Our new ambassador is requesting to conserve the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper which is regular wintering in Myanmar." says Kaung Kaung.

https://fb.watch/1l5SdFBoHJ/ https://youtu.be/pmASdDefvtk

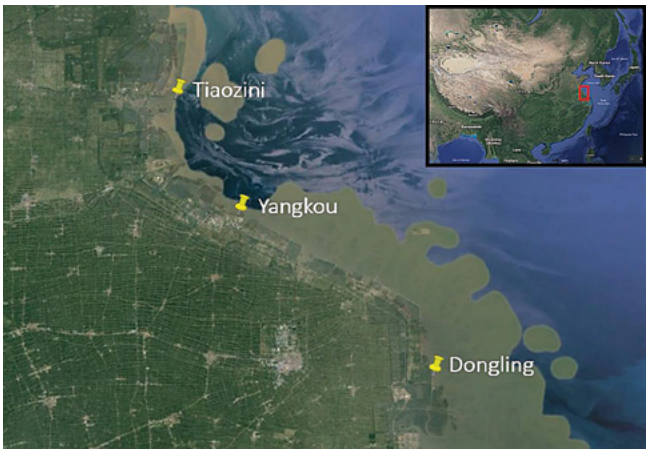
On 10th October 2020, the World Migratory Bird Day, the first-ever migratory bird's conservation song in Burmese language with the Title " Migratory Bird" was launched together with Nature Conservation Society-Myanmar (NCS), the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force member in Myanmar and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership on social media Facebook pages and YouTube Channel, https://fb.watch/1l6Cz0VhuS/ https://youtu.be/D-BTEqLypOU

Surveys of Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Nordmann's Greenshank on the southern Jiangsu coast

Katherine Leung, Lin Zhang, Ziyou Yang

Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China (SBS in China) collaborated with Nanjing Normal University to conduct joint Spoon-billed Sandpiper (hereafter SBS) surveys from September to October.

Besides direct counting, we carried out scan sampling surveys to allow estimation of SBS's world and local population following the method detailed in Chang et al. (2019). We conducted scan sampling surveys at Tiaozini, Yangkou and Dongling along the Jiangsu coast. The number of SBS at the three locations are shown in Table 1.



Locations of the three projects sites along the southern Jiangsu coast

Table 1. *Number of Spoon-billed Sandpipers on the southern Jiangsu coast in September to October 2020*

Number of SBS	Tiaozini	Yangkou	Dongling
1st half of September	38+	10+	30+
2nd half of September	60+	10+	10+
October	61+	-	-

By the end of October, enough scan sampling data has been gathered to allow population estimates to be made for 2020. This is the very first time where local estimates were made for Yangkou and Dongling. Later on, our data will be combined with those to be collected from wintering grounds to estimate SBS's global population size for 2020.

During our surveys, a total of 37 individually marked SBS was recorded (Table 2). Some individuals, such as the second-calendar-year birds Lime 7M and Lime 8X, were recorded at more than one sites, meaning that they were moving between different sites.

Surveys at Yangkou were mostly conducted in a 450-hectare restoration area. Spartina were removed and native tidal flat vegetation, Suaeda, were planted in the area to create shorebird roosting habitat *Katherine Leung*

Table 2. *Marked Spoon-billed Sandpipers recorded during the September and October scan sampling surveys on the southern Jiangsu coast*

Project site	Flag sightings
Tiaozini (31 individuals)	Wild caught adult from Meino (Lime): 22, 24, 34, 48, 78, 88 Wild caught chick from Meino (Lime): 7L, 7J, 7X, 8M, 9C, E3, M4, P3, U3 Head-started chick (White): 1T, 3V, 5Y, NC, CJ Wild caught juvenile from Kamchatka (Yellow): VE, YE Wild caught adult from Jiangsu (Yellow): 53, AU, EJ, EU, HU, KY, TU, XU
Yangkou (4 individuals)	Wild caught adult from Meino (Lime): 77 Wild caught chick from Meino (Lime): 8X, J0 Wild caught adult from Jiangsu (Yellow): CU
Dongling (5 individuals)	Wild caught adult from Meino (Lime): 76, 90 Wild caught chick from Meino (Lime): 27, 7M Wild caught juvenile from Kamchatka (Yellow): YJ

White CJ, a head-started bird born in 2020 Katherine Leung

Lime 7X, an individual that over-summered at Tiaozini in 2020 Yunfeng Li

Yellow HU, one of the first satellite-tagged individuals at Tiaozini in 2016. It has been recorded at Tiaozini for 5 consecutive years from 2016 to 2020 Yunfeng Li

HK, the Nordmann's Greenshank marked at Chongming Dongtan Nature Reserve on April 19, 2018 Katherine Leung

HTR720, the pond where we recorded nearly 1,100 Nordmann's Greenshanks and many Spoon-billed Sandpipers. This pond is 720-mu (roughly equivalent to 48 hectares) in size, hence its name Yuetao Zhong

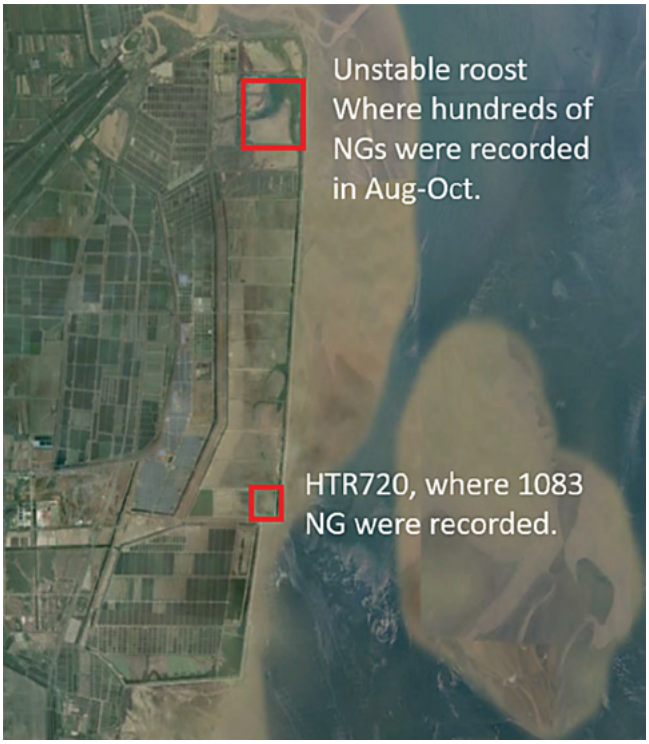
In addition to SBS, we looked at the number of Nordmann's Greenshanks on the project sites. On October 17, we recorded 1,083 Nordmann's Greenshank at a single pond (HTR720), which would constitute 54.2-108.3% of the species' global population estimate, considering that the current global estimate is at 1,000 individuals. This pond, named after its size, is currently rented by the local government to serve as a potential high-tide roost for the waterbirds. We also recorded three of the nine individually flagged adult NGs from the Bay of Schast'ya, Russia, a couple of them were recorded for 2 consecutive years at Tiaozini. Another adult carrying black-over-white engraved flag

(code: HK) from Shanghai Chongming Dongtan National Nature Reserve was also recorded. This bird was wintering in Malaysia in Jan-Mar 2019.

The high record of NG may be celebrated, meanwhile worrying. As we observe, HTR720 is probably the only suitable high-tide roost along Tiaozini's 10+ km seawall. This pond attracts a wide variety of waterbirds from the small-sized SBSs to the relatively large-sized Black-faced Spoonbills.

Such a large population of NG using a single roost together with tens of thousands of other waterbirds can face challenges such as infectious diseases and pollution. Cases of mass death happened before, e.g. at Tiaozini's Wetland Park when it still served as a suitable high tide roost. Concentration at a single site in such large scale does not necessarily mean NG's flyway population is increasing or the threats they face are decreasing. You can read a more detailed account of NG's historic records at Tiaozini at: http://www.sbsinchina.com/nd.jsp?id=362#_np=2_604

Last but not least, threats still exist on the project sites. For example, the invasive Spartina continue to spread on intertidal mudflat at Tiaozini and Dongling, taking over important shorebird resting and especially foraging grounds. Unstable high-tide roosts at Dongling and Tiaozini suggest that shorebirds sometimes have to spend extra time



Locations of HTR720 and another high-tide roost at Tiaozini

and energy to get to roosting ground. We hope the restoration project at Yangkou, and HTR720 at Tiaozini will set good example for many more good actions for these precious waterbirds.

We like to thank Nigel Clark and Rhys Green for their guidance and advise during the entire survey, Jing Li for her support and observations and we like to thank the Manfred-Hermsen Foundation for financial support.

Spoonies and Far Eastern Curlew at Guangdong Province, 4 Nov 2020 *Jie Chen*

The search for the unknown: satellite-tagging Spoon-billed Sandpipers

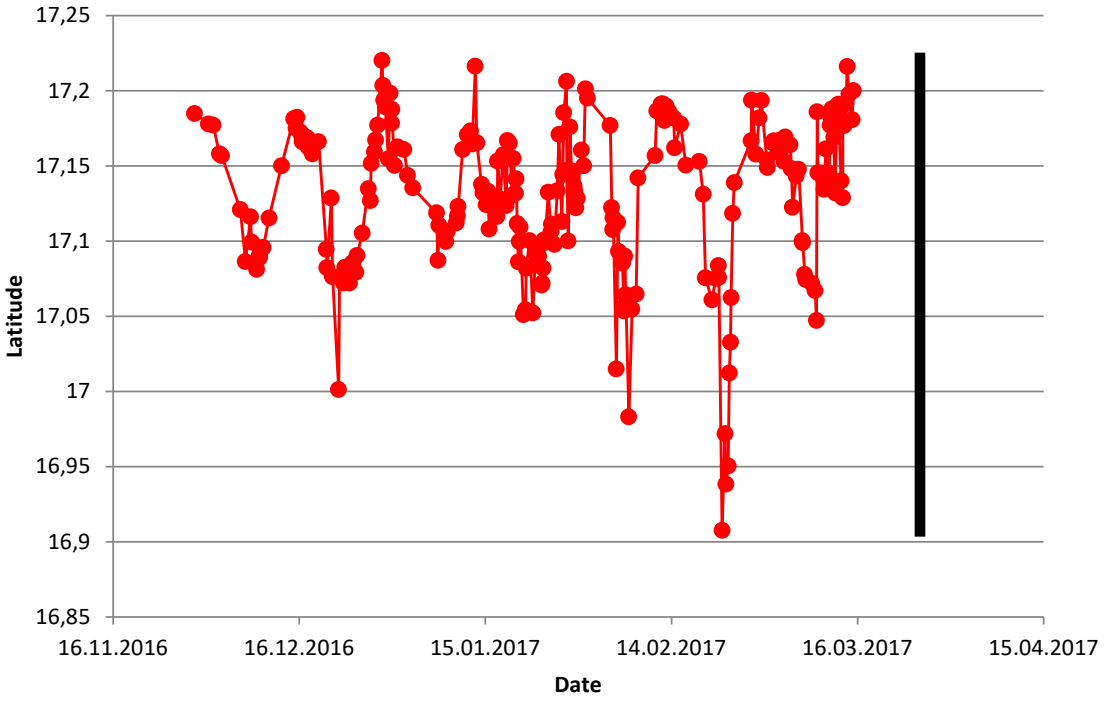
Nigel Clark on behalf of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper tagging team

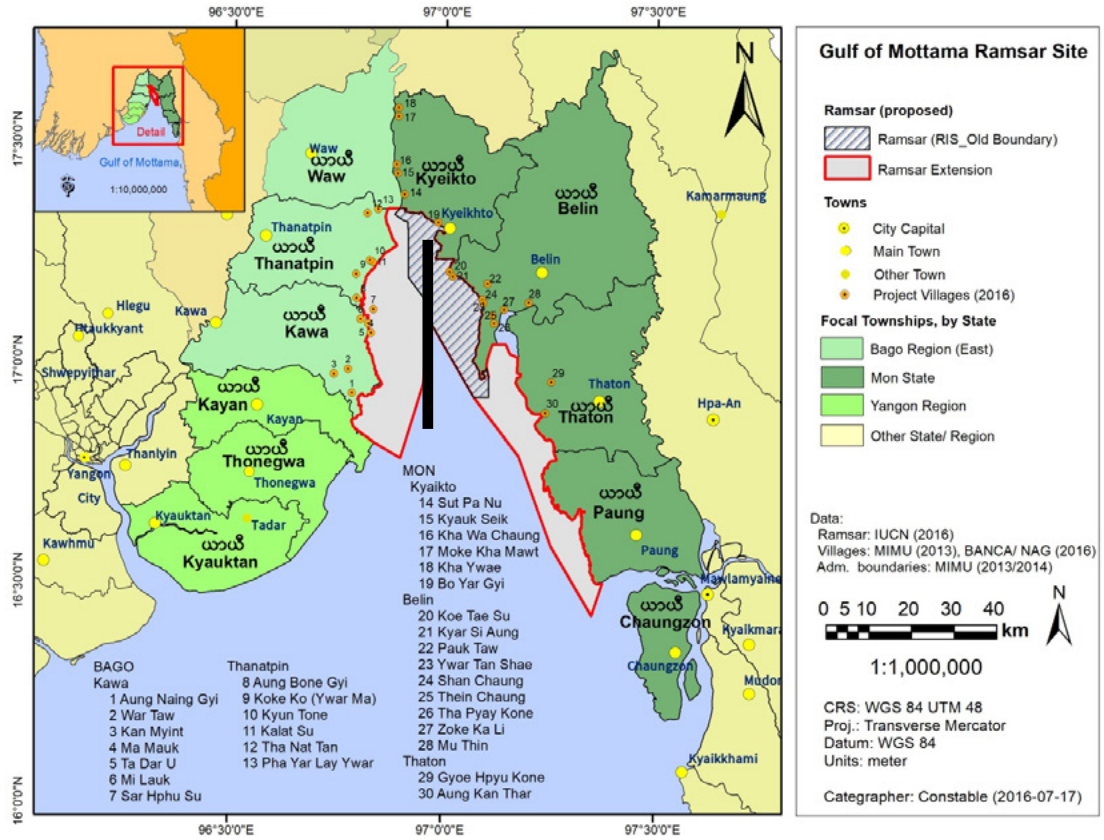
In recent issues of the newsletter we have reported on some of the remarkable findings from the satellite tagging project that we have been engaged in since 2016 when Paul Howey of Microwave Telemetry Ltd produced a special minute satellite tag that we could glue to the backs of Spoon-billed Sandpipers. These tags which are glued to the birds back, give locations wherever the bird is in the world through communicating with satelites . As a result we never need to catch the bird again as the tag falls off after a few months.

Whenever you handle a bird or attach anything to it, you must be certain that what you are doing will help the species. This is even more important when the species is Critically Endangered so, before we started, we set clear goals. These were to find new wintering sites, as well as stopover sites between the breeding grounds, the moulting grounds in Jiangsu and the wintering areas. To achieve this we put tags on a small number of birds on the breeding grounds and the main known moulting site in Jiangsu.

It was with great trepidation that we attached the first tags, although we had done captive trials with Dunlin and assessed the results of the tagging of other small shorebirds, we still did not know for sure how Spoonies would react to the tags. From when the first bird left its moulting area we started to find out what we don't know – and most of it we didn't expect! We identified stopover and wintering sites where Spoonies had never been recorded – and found that many of them had severe conservation threats and we were able to work with the authorities in the area to address them. The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that we have all been at home more than we would have expected and one benefit has been that we have taken stock of what we have learnt so far and what we should consider next. This has resulted in a paper that has just been published in Wader Study. The paper brought together the whole team who have been working together to tag Spoonies and learn more about their movements. As a result the paper has 25 authors from 19 different institutions! The paper concentrates on the south-

Yellow HU which carried one of the first satellite tags in 2016 and has wintered at Xitou Yangxi each winter since photographed in September 2020 by Li Yunfeng in Taiozini





The distance moved up and down the gulf of Mottama by Yellow ET in 2016. A, the latitude of fixes over time and B, The Gulf of Mottama showing the Ramsar site boundaries. The thick black line shows the maximum extent (40 km) in both A, and B

ward migration and wintering areas and showed that the birds we marked stopped at 28 different locations for two days or more (our threshold to designate a site as a stopover). About a third of the sites were used by more than one bird and, given the small number of tags deployed, they are likely to be very important sites for the species. This WaderTales blog (https://wadertales.wordpress.com/2020/10/22/spoon-billed-sandpipers-track-and-trace/), written by Graham Appleton, summarises the results presented in the paper.

In addition to informing the 'big picture' of large-scale movements, the tags have provided some valuable information on the way birds use sites. One of the first birds we marked was Yellow ET which went to the Gulf of Mottama: while it was there it gave locations on most days. We have only been able to find Spoonies in Mottama on the very highest spring tides, but Yellow ET showed us that it moved further down the estuary on the low neap tides, covering a substantial area of the Ramsar site over the spring/neap cycle (see figure). This is incredibly important as it shows that Spoonies need really large areas to winter in this area.

So what should we do next? We could decide that we have learnt all we can from the tags that we have put on, however every tag has provided new insights into the movements of Spoonies and identified threats that we were not aware of. The tags are glued to the backs of the birds so they fall off when the bird next changes its body feathers allowing them to resume their lives without the tag. Although the Microwave Telemetry tags are the lightest satellite tags available, the company continues to work to reduce the weight of the tags and improve their performance. Given this, we believe that we should continue to put small numbers of tags on Spoonies to learn about other stopover and wintering sites, but also what they do on spring passage, a big known unkown! We will continue to report on the exploits of future tagged birds in the newsletter as I am sure that there will be many more surprises from these remarkable birds.

Wader Study reference

Qing Chang, Evgeny E. Syroechkovskiy, Guy Q.A. Anderson, Pyae-Phyo Aung, Alison E. Beresford, Kane Brides, Sayam U. Chowdhury, Nigel A. Clark, Jacquie A. Clark, Paul Howey, Baz Hughes, Paul Insua-Cao, Yifei Jia, Elena Lappo, Katherine K.S. Leung, Egor Y. Loktionov, Jonathan Martinez, David S. Melville, James Phillips, Chairunas Adha Putra, Pavel S. Tomkovich, Ewan Weston, Jenny Weston, Nikolay Yakushev & Rhys E. Green (2020): Post-breeding migration of adult Spoon-billed Sandpipers, Wader Study 127(3): doi:10.18194/ws.00201

Spoon-billed Sandpipers at Nijhum Dwip National Park in Bangladesh

Sayam U. Chowdhury, Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project

Nijhum Dwip National Park is a well-known Spoon-billed Sandpiper site in Bangladesh with an exceptional count of 23 birds in March 2010 (Bird et al. 2010). Since then, the Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project (BSCP hereafter) has conducted regular surveys in Nijhum Dwip National Park in order to understand waterbird diversity, numbers and distribution with special focus on the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (Chowdhury et al. 2020). Nijhum Dwip is located in the Noakhali District in the Division of Chattogram, Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh designated Nijhum Dwip as a National Park in 2001, a Flyway Network Site in 2011 and a Marine Reserve in 2019.

In 2011–2013, BSCP carried out surveys during early, mid and later winter and usually found 1–3 birds. Since the numbers were not significant, BSCP continued only annual monitoring in January during AWC between 2014 and 2018. In 2019–2020, BSCP conducted surveys in Nov-Dec 2019 and February 2020.

A total of 11,196 waterbirds of 40 species were recorded between 30 November and 2 December 2019 at five sites of Nijhum Dwip NP (Fig. 1) and 12,898 waterbirds of 43 species were counted between 19 and 21 February 2020. Aggregate total of peak counts during these two surveys indicate that Nijhum Dwip National Park supported 19,149 waterbirds of 43 species, 10 of which are globally threatened and near threatened including the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper

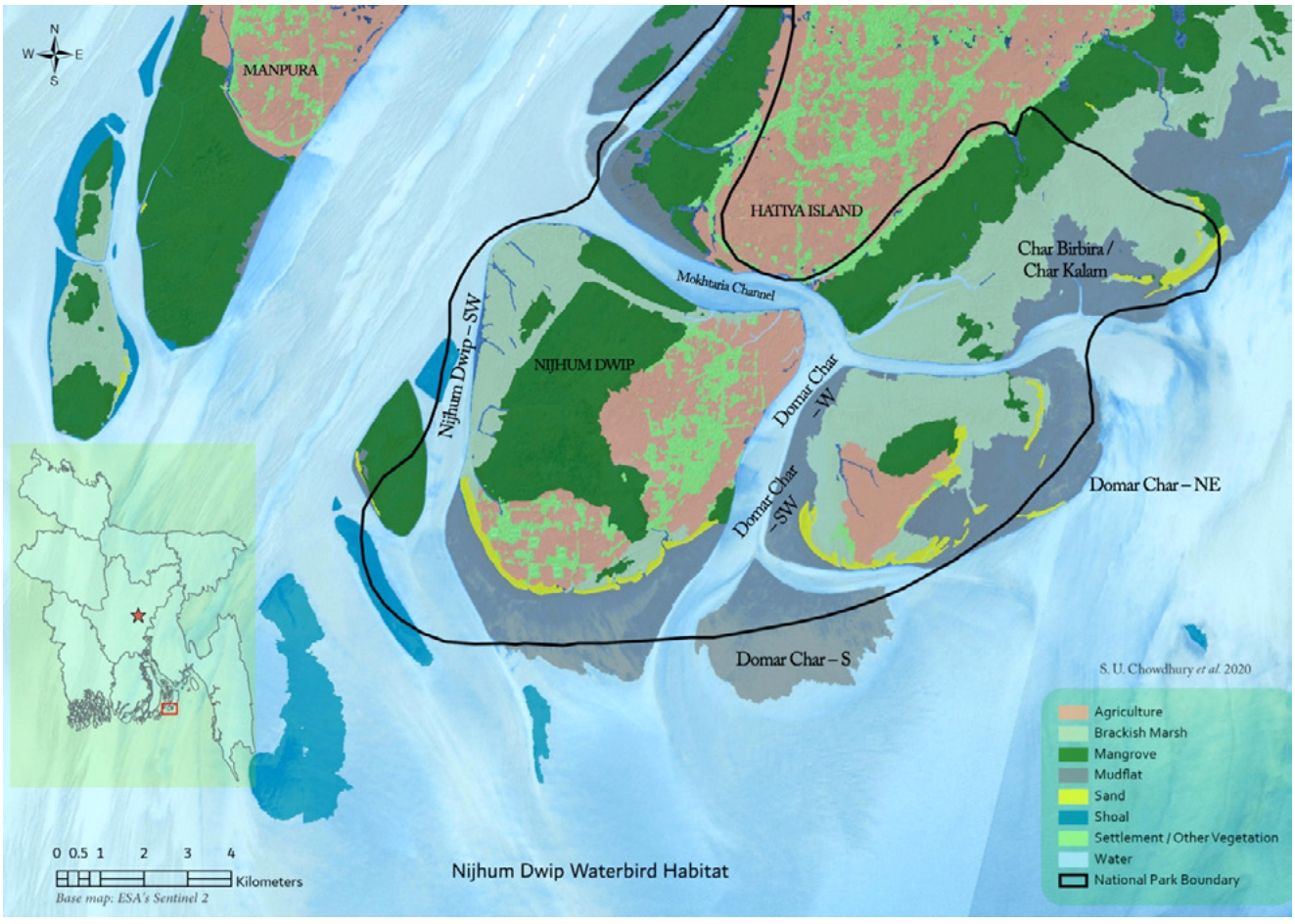


Fig 1. *Map of Nijhum Dwip National Park and waterbird site use. See Chowdhury et al. 2020 for further details*

Yellow PU (left) and Lime 85 (right) foraging at Domar Char – NE *Sayam Chowdhury*

(5 in Nov-Dec 2019 and 6 in February 2020 – highest count at Nijhum Dwip since March 2010), endangered Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (3 in February 2020) and vulnerable Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* (970 in February 2020).

Two engraved colour-marked Spoon-billed Sandpipers were recorded during our surveys at Nijhum Dwip National Park. Yellow PU (first seen on 30 November 2019 & last seen on 20 February 2020) was marked with a yellow flag on 10 September 2018 in Tiaozini, Jiangsu Province, China. This individual was re-sighted at the same location on 20 April 2019. Lime 85 (first seen on 19 February 2020 & last seen on 20 February 2020) was marked as an adult female on 15 July 2019 in Chukotka, Russia. Later seen at Chenghai, Shantou City, Guandong Province, China on 29 September 2019. These observations at Nijhum Dwip National Park are the only records of these birds in the wintering ground.

During these recent surveys, BSCP team encountered bycatch in long-shore fishing net and identified it as a key threat to birds, especially small-size shorebirds and passerines. Two unidentified small Calidris species and three Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* were found hanging on fishing net at Domar Char in February 2020. We only documented bycatch of birds in February 2020, lack of past observations may indicate that bycatch could be an emerging threat to migratory birds in the area.

Accidental bycatch of an unidentified shorebird in a long-shore net *Omar Shahadat*

Survey work at Nijhum Dwip – February 2020 *Omar Shahadat*

The Nijhum Dwip National Park is legally protected. However, protected status alone may not be enough to ensure long-term waterbird conservation in the area. Hence, management plans need to be updated every 3–5 years with support of local stakeholders and strictly implemented by the government and other interested parties (Chowdhury et al. 2020).

Acknowledgements
We thank the Explorer's Club for supporting the Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project's fieldwork in 2009–2010, Save Our Species (SOS) via WWT in 2011–2012, the Bird Conservation Fund, SBS TF and International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC) in 2018–2020. We are grateful to IUCN Bangladesh (2018–2019) and Wildlife Conservation Society Bangladesh (2020) for partially supporting our fieldwork.

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Chowdhury, S.U., M. Foysal, O. Shahadat, N.U. Prince, S. Mohsanin & M.T. Islam. 2020. Globally threatened shorebirds of Nijhum Dwip National Park and management implications. Wader Study 127(3): xxx–xxx. doi:10.18194/ws.00202.

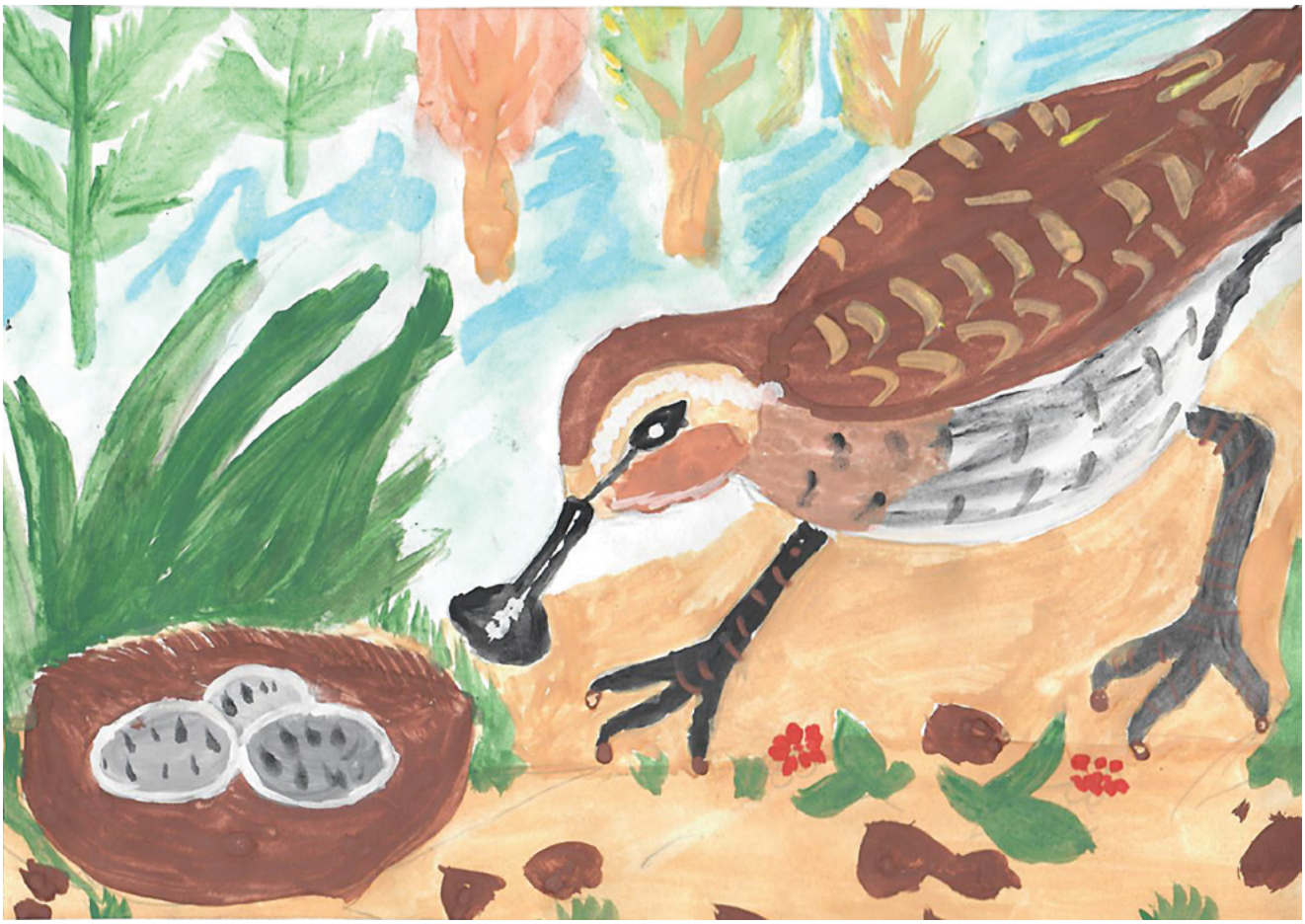
SBS in Arts: Chukotka Children drawing Spoon-billed-Sandpiper

Alexey Yakovlev (Head of the Department of Natural Resources and Ecology of Chukotka AO),
Natalia Rakova (Advisor of the Department of Natural Resources and Ecology of Chukotka AO),
Elena Lappo (Institute of Geography RAS, BirdsRussia, Moscow)

The Chukotka government in recent years is increasingly paying more attention to the protection of Spoon-billed Sandpiper as a symbol of biodiversity conservation in Chukotka and the flagship of international cooperation in the protection of the Arctic migratory birds. The main regional activity in this direction, the creation of the Nature Park "The Land of Spoon-billed Sandpiper", is in the final stages of preparation. It will be the first protected area in the world bearing the name of this beautiful bird. In Chukotka the conservation work on SBS continues and special attention is paid to the environmental education of the human population and the popularisation of the conservation of rare and endemic species in Chukotka.

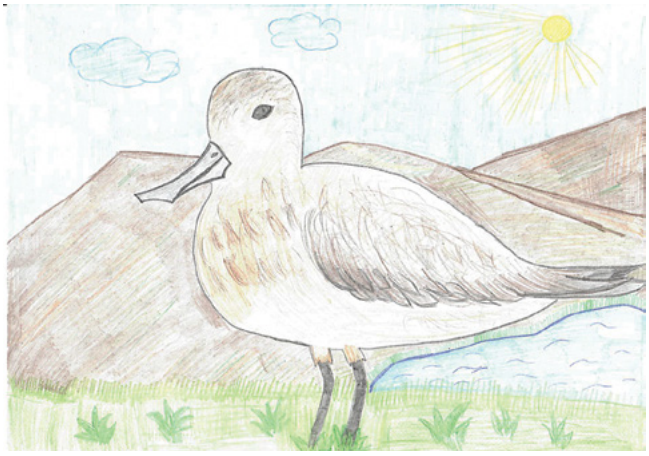
In the autumn of 2020, the Department of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug announced a children's drawing contest "Draw a Spoon-billed Sandpiper!" The competition aimed to rise awareness on the conservation of SBS among children, their parents and school teachers.

From September 10 to October 16, 2020, 150 drawings from primary school students of the age of 7-10 years from schools mainly in Southern Chukotka, within the breeding range of the species were collected. Children participated from Anadyr city, Vaegi, Alkatvaam, Sireniki, Kanchalan, Khatyrka and Markovo village as well as Beringovsky settlement. The children's drawings were devoted to the bird itself, its habitats and conservation issues.



Anna Mumi, 8 years, Sireniki village

Elena Kobeleva, 8 years, Markovo village



Alexandr Zabutyrin, 10 years, Khatyrka village

Polina Melimuka, 7 years, Beringovskiy settlement

Eva Rygtyval', 10 years, Khatyrka village

Ekaterina Deriglazova, 7 years, Markovo village

Violetta Dolganskaya, 7 years, Anadyr city

Roza Pel'nityna, 10 years, Al'katvaam village

Anastasiya Kirokhomtseva, 9 years, Markovo village

In November, a special jury of the Department of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug was appointed, to assess the results of the competition and they chose 10 winning artworks that are displayed below. All ten winners received prizes and the rest of the participants received certificates of honor for their active participation in this competition.

It was the first ever children's drawing competition in Russia dedicated to the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. And we hope not to be the last one. More SBS conservation activities are planned by the Chukotka government for the future.

Dima Mironov, 8 years, Anadyr city

From the Archives

Christoph Zöckler

In 2000 we started our SBS conservation project with an expedition to North Chukotka under the lead of Evgeny Syroechkovskiy (in front of vesdikhod). We travelled from Anadyr by 'vesdikhod' (lit. goes everywhere) to Russkaya Koshka, 2-3 days north. Here we discovered 8-10 breeding pairs. Jens Gregersen and members of the Danish Support Team monitored the area almost annually since 2006 but recorded only 1-2 pairs left in 2018.

Our first nest and first bird caught 20 June 2000!

News in Brief

Chukotka

In 2018 we reported on the iron sculpture of a Spoon-billed-Sandpiper (sculptor V. Kuleshov), which was representing the Chukotka pavilion at the Third Annual Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in 2017 in Vladivostok (SBS Newsletter No 18, 2018, pages 28-29). After the EEF the metal SBS statue was on display at the Chukotka Heritage Museum Center in Ana-dyr (photo by S. Tereschenko). This autumn, the Chukotka Government decided to deliver the SBS statue by ship to the SBS Capital, the village of Meinypil'gyno, where it will be installed in a respected place within the village next spring after snow melt. We will update you where the statue will end up in one of our next newsletters. Elena Lappo

Myanmar

Lime 27 was found on 23 Nov. 20 for the first time this winter on Nan Thar Island by Ren Noe Soe. The male that this summer paired in Meinypil'gyno again with the legendary Lime 05 from Thailand has arrived on Nan Thar for the eighth consecutive winter. This is a beautiful celebration for the new Ramsar site!

Ren Noe Soe & Pyae Phyo Aung

On 26 Nov Shane Thu Lwin and U Soe Naing found one unflagged SBS in Bokpyin!

Russia

A great drawing from Moscow reached the editorial team. 15 year old Snezhana Chernova is the artist.

Thailand

Lime-green 77 at Pak Thale, 7 Nov 2020 Aroon Meechai (Pia)

Ayuwat Jearwattanakanok of BCST reports Lime-green 77 is back in Pak Thale for the third winter, but sadly no news about 05 yet. Currently, at least 1 unflagged bird is at Khok Kham and at least 1 unflagged and 2 flagged birds at Pak Thale (77 and another one with white/yellow flag which the code couldn't be read).

The last Page

The Chukchi dance group of Meinypil'gyno performed this summer without any tourists from the Heritage Expedition cruise but with SBS face masks *Elena Lappo*