



## Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force News Bulletin No 17 · April 2017



### Contents

Foreword from the Editor .....	3
Guest Editorial by Minister Min Kyi Win .....	4
Workshop on SBS National Action Plan in Mawlamyine, Myanmar .....	5
11th SBS Task Force Meeting in Mawlamyine, Myanmar .....	8
Gulf of Mottama Survey – a personal account .....	13
New Wintering site in Tanintharyi, Myanmar .....	15
China-Russia Bilateral Meeting and field Survey in Jiangsu Province .....	17
Spoon-billed Sandpiper in South China – update .....	20
Results from Satellite tagged Spoon-billed Sandpiper .....	22
China adds critical sites in the Yellow Sea to the World Heritage Tentative List .....	25
Survey of southward migrating waders Kamchatka late summer 2016 .....	28
SBS and People: Pyae Phyo Aung .....	30
SBS and People: Saw Moses .....	32
How many Spoon-billed Sandpipers are there? .....	34
Two new major donors from America .....	35



Satellite tagged SBS 'HU' in Xitou, South China, Dec 2016

*Jonathan Martinez*

© EAAFP SBS Task Force

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

*Mission:*

*The East Asian and 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. The key implementing organisation for the SBS TF is BirdLife International through its partner Birds Russia. It is chaired by the Government Partner of Russia. Task Force members consist of the EAAFP Government Partners of key range states for the species and international conservation organisations. These are: the Russian Federation, Japan, People's Republic of China, People's Democratic Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Vietnam, Union of Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India, the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT), Wetlands International, a representative of the EAAFP Shorebird Working Group, Fauna Flora International (FFI) and experts and conservation organisations from principal range states and other partners. We are grateful to the RSPB, NABU and the Manfred-Hermesen-Stiftung for their continued support of the SBS Task Force and Spoon-billed Sandpiper projects across the range states.*

*Chair: Dr Evgeny Syroechkovskiy*  
[ees@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ees@yahoo.co.uk)

*Coordinator: Dr Christoph Zöckler*  
[cz@arccona.com](mailto:cz@arccona.com)  
[christoph.zoekler@m-h-s.org](mailto:christoph.zoekler@m-h-s.org)



## Foreword from the Editor

Dr Christoph Zöckler · Coordinator SBS TF · April 2017

Many people recently ‘accused’ me of being too optimistic, when it comes to the survival of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and I even began to doubt my own optimism. However, when seeing all the latest activities on protecting key sites and mitigating illegal hunting I must say that our optimism is justified. Especially the efforts of the Myanmar government in designating two large coastal Ramsar sites have been very encouraging. Both are important for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. In the Gulf of Mottama the 40,000 ha new Ramsar site is only the first step of several, protecting the main wintering grounds for the species and securing more than 150,000 ha in the global list of wetlands of international importance. We celebrated these achievements together during our 11th Task Force meeting in Mawlamyine, Myanmar and this newsletter has a little focus on Myanmar with also updates from a National Workshop on the species Action Plan.

Myanmar is still the only country that achieved this, but we hope many other countries will follow the example and draft National Species Action Plans. China has indeed stepped up its conservation efforts with nominating 14 sites in the Yellow Sea for the tentative World Heritage list. At least two of them are crucial for the survival of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. This is very encouraging indeed and huge praise for the Chinese government and many thanks to the many organisations, including BirdLife International and our local partner ‘SBS in China’ to help with this effort.

Big progress has also been made in the hunting mitigation in South China and it was actually the satellite tagged bird HU that alerted our local team to the hunting issues in the region near Xitou. The satellite tagging of three birds in China has been a huge success and a continuation of this project at the spring stop over is under way as I am writing these lines. You find a summary of this story in this newsletter and hopefully updates in upcoming issues.



Last not least we like to thank the many people who have been serving for the protection of the species. In fact the global community of supporters is growing steadily, but we like to acknowledge at least some of them more regularly in a special series within our newsletter, introducing profiles of those people who have been specifically active in support of our conservation goals. In this issue our long-term supporter Karin Eberhardt features two activists from Myanmar, but many more need to be highlighted and we aim to introduce more ‘spoonie’-activists in the future.

We also like to thank our long-standing supporters, but specifically highlight two new donors, both from America. We are very grateful to receive regular funds from the International Canadian Fund for Conservation (ICFC) and the Californian-based Bird Conservation Fund (BCF). Both have been instrumental in filling gaps in our work in Bangladesh and Myanmar. We are very grateful for them and many others who continue to support us throughout the past year. I hope you enjoy reading a new issues of our newsletter.

## Guest Editorial

Dr Min Kyi Win, Minister

Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC), Mon State, Myanmar

The Mon State Government is very proud to have hosted the 11th international SBS Task Force Meeting in Mawlamyine in Mon State, Myanmar and also the first national Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Action Plan meeting in Myanmar with participation from other coastal regions of Myanmar as well as with officials from the Forest Department in Naypyidaw.

The migratory Spoon-billed Sandpiper is a Critically Endangered bird and will be extinct if no conservation actions take place in the near future. At least 50% of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper population is estimated to winter in Myanmar's Gulf of Mottama which shows its geographical and biodiversity uniqueness and importance.

The Government of the Mon State, which administers the largest part of the Gulf of Mottama is committed to its full protection and already formed a State Wetland Management Committee for the management of this future Ramsar site. My Government has requested the forest department in Nay Pie Taw to designate the key northern area as a first step as a Ramsar site and add the site to the global list of important wetland sites. This has now been submitted by the FD in NPT and is awaiting its approval by the Ramsar Bureau.

The Mon State Government is very hopeful that this is a first but crucial step in helping not only the condition of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper but also the livelihoods of the local communities in our region. We are looking forward to continue to work closely with BANCA and the SBS TF to implement the necessary management to enable the long term and sustainable future for both SBS and the local communities. This tiny shorebird has helped us to become aware of the precarious condition of the environment for the birds and people that live in the Gulf of Mottama and I like to thank BANCA and the TF for having raised this to our awareness.



Dr Min Kyi Win, Mon State Minister

## National Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan and other updates from Myanmar

Pyae Phyo Aung (Phyo Lay)

In January 2017 BANCA and SBS TF organized a workshop on the National Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan 2017-2020, and the 11th International SBS TF meeting. These events took place at the Mawlamyine, Mon State between 17 and 19 January 2017 and were co-hosting with the Mon State Government and supported financially by IUCN and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC).

During the national workshop the Mon State Government has shown keen interest to designate Gulf of Mottama as “Ramsar site” for which BANCA worked the Mon State Government since 2015. On 5 January 2017, the Mon State Government submitted an official letter to the Union Minister (Ministry Of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation-MONREC) to

designate The Northern part of Mottama Gulf as “Ramsar site”. The Union Government also submitted Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) of Mottama to Ramsar secretariat in the January 2017 and will be designated soon.

Union of Myanmar had already formed a National Wetlands Committee. Based on the National Wetlands Committee, Mon State Government followed the structure and formed State Wetlands Committee which is a pioneer committee among the other state and regions of Myanmar. A total of 61 representatives from different ministries, organizations and high level authorities participated on the National SBS Action Plan workshop and discussed protecting the coastal regions of Myanmar as Ramsar sites, especially considering the migratory shorebird habitats.



National Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan 2017-2020 workshop at Mawlamyine, January 2017 *Eugene Cheah/EAAFP*



Opening remarks by Dr. Min Kyi Win (Minister MONREC Mon State)

BANCA

This workshop had excellent outputs and strong commitment from the high level authorities for Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation efforts in the near future.

In addition, The Forest Department of Rakhine State, in collaboration with BECAR and BANCA, is working to designate Nanthar Island as a protected area, which is known as one of the most important Spoon-billed Sandpiper sites in Myanmar. The Rakhine state government took back the land from the Veteran Soldiers Organization (VSO) last year, the Forest Department and BECAR already surveyed the area in order to demarcate the Protected Area boundaries. 1,920 acres of the Nanthar Island to be promoted as Protected Area and has been submitted to the State Government for the approval of the cabinet.



Welcome speech by U Min Thein Myint, Director Forest Department (Mon State)

BANCA



Group Discussion

BANCA



Meeting between BANCA, BECAR and Director of Forest Department (Rakhine State) to discuss Nan Thar Island conservation issues

BANCA

## 11th SBS Task Force meeting in Mawlamyine in Myanmar

Pyae Phyo Aung, Biodiversity And Nature Conservation Association,  
and Christoph Zöckler, Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force Coordinator

About every two years the Task Force (TF) members come together somewhere along the flyway to exchange information on their activities and discuss urgent conservation issues. The concept of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS) TF for the biennial is to combine both discussions and field observations; exchange of information, methodologies, field experience, training newcomers and learning from each other as well as summarizing results of two years' work and development conservation plans.

This year the 11th meeting was held in Mawlamyine in Myanmar, not far from the Gulf of Mottama to offer support to the most important wintering site for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The meeting was fully packed with 10 days of surveys, meetings and excursions! Prior to the meeting the international team of over 20 experts from Russia, China, Thailand, Bangladesh, Germany, UK and the US conducted a survey of the large mudflats over five days to look for wintering SBS and other

shorebirds together with local experts from our national partner Biodiversity And Nature Conservation Association (BANCA). In total over 70 SBS were observed but the team is sure that many birds were missed in the vast expanses of the Mottama mudflats.

Three days of meetings followed, divided into a National Workshop, developing a National Action Plan for the species and one and a half days for the international Task Force meeting. The purpose of the biannual TF meetings is mainly to provide international support to the local partner. This year the Task Force members came to support BANCA's efforts to secure the Gulf of Mottama (already an EAAFP Flyway Network Site) as a Ramsar site and ensure its best protection. The meeting was co-hosted with the provincial government of Mon State and it was very reassuring and pleasing to hear that the Mon State government requested the national forest department to designate 42,000 ha of the Gulf as a Ramsar



SBS Task Force meeting

Eugene Cheah/EAAFP



Spoon-billed Sandpiper population survey in the Southern Gulf of Mottama, Myanmar

*Eugene Cheah/EAAFP*



Spoon-billed Sandpiper population survey in the Southern Gulf of Mottama, Myanmar

*Christoph Zöckler*

site. This has now been approved by the Ramsar secretariat and it is Ramsar site No 2299! Another important SBS site in the delta region will also receive Ramsar site protection status and several more sites along the coast are proposed for the 2017-2020 timeline within the national action plan. It was also great to see the high level participation in the workshop from all coastal regions to secure the best protection schemes for all SBS sites along the 2,800 km long coast. Myanmar has demonstrated its willingness to be at the forefront of conservation activities by being the first country to develop and implement a SBS national action plan. There is still a lot to do, with management issues needing to be clarified for most coastal wetlands. However, the level of progress has been impressive.

47 experts from 12 countries were present at the TF meeting (plus another 18 persons during National Workshop). All key SBS Flyway countries were represented except DPRK. But during EAAFP MoP9, DPRK participants expressed their interest to collaborate with Russia on possible SBS surveys in the country. There were also many impressive reports from all over the flyway and equally important has been the discussion on hunting and reclamation at many coastal sites in China. Encouragingly, there has been significant progress on hunting mitigation in South China. The biggest threat to SBS still remains the threat of reclamation of Tiaozini but at present the development has been put on hold and a new law in China is requesting the regional developers to launch a new EIA. The Russian-Chinese Bilateral has been conducting a first official autumn survey at Tiaozini, confirming the global significance of this highly important stopover site for

the SBS. This Tiaozini survey can be considered as an official data source for decision making by the government of China. The Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative (AMBI) of CAFF, Arctic Council presented their plans to help in conservation of SBS as the focal species for this project, which is raising Arctic migratory bird conservation work in Asia to the diplomatic level. Cooperation with China on SBS conservation will be a priority for AMBI in 2018-19. These and many other reports together with the good news on the progress of the protection status of Myanmar's wintering sites generated further hope and an upbeat atmosphere among the Task Force members, all are highly inspired to continue their important work at their respective sites.

The strategic direction of further SBS conservation work will combine focusing on systematic implementation of conservation measures in the key known 6-8 SBS locations as well as learning about new locations using various methods including satellite tagging. Intertidal reclamation and illegal hunting are seen as key threats and will be a focus of action for the next two years. Stronger involvement of national governments of key flyway countries is a priority. Cooperation of research and NGO communities with relevant government structures is the way for successful SBS conservation work, and is most advanced in China and Myanmar. Many countries and regional reports will feature in this newsletter and other updates can be found on the Task Force web site.

The next meeting of SBS TF is potentially planned to be held in China during 2018. More information on this will be available later.



Task Force meeting

Eugene Cheah/EAAFP

## Spoon-billed Sandpiper survey and workshops – a personal account

Teresa Stehle (BANCA volunteer)

Like at the beginning of every year also this January a detailed survey of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other shorebirds took place in the Gulf of Mottama. Many experts and Spoonie friends joined this event and so we were going with a bus full of people with different backgrounds – from conservationists to founder of a new conservation fund or journalist – and from different countries from all along the flyway of the Spoonie as well as from Europe and the U.S. to the Gulf of Mottama. New friendships were formed on our way to the coast and old friends were happy to see each other again.

It was already growing dark when we arrived near Kotel Su village, from where we would start going with boats. But first our luggage was loaded from cars to an oxcart which drove through the mud while we stumped barefoot along the muddy path, trying not to slip. The friendly people from Kotel Su served us dinner and watched happily how we were eating. Then it was time to climb on the boats. In pairs the small wooden barges were manned and supplied with sleeping bags and for some with a little pot that may serve as a toilet we tried to make ourselves at home. We fell asleep while the water slopped against our boats.

I woke up when the engine of my boat suddenly roared in the otherwise silent night. A glance through the window assured me that it was still dark. But the tide was high so we had to move to our first observation point. I layed down again but soon voices sounding excited woke me up. Some fishing boats were grouped around a sunken one and ducks floated apart. Someone pulled a bunch of dead chicken out of the water. I thought it was somebody's sunken boat but only until later I heard that it was the boat of Moses and Htet, my colleagues from BANCA. Their driver wanted to hurry and used two engines so the boat turned into a vertical position and tilted over. Unfortunately Moses' camera and a telescope from BAN-

CA were destroyed by that accident because they came in touch with water. But Moses took it easy.

After breakfast we divided into several groups for the survey of that day. Loaded with telescopes, binoculars, suncream, drinking water and a snack we spread out in different directions. The sun was merciless and the walk through the mud in which we sank partly up to our knees was tiring but our enthusiasm for birding and the wish to see a Spoonie helped us to forget this inconvenience. Many species were recorded - the near threatened Black Headed Ibis, Painted Stork, Eurasian Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit and species of least concern such as Common Greenshank, Pacific Golden Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Little or Red-necked Stint, Whiskered Tern and many more. Unfortunately only a few of us but not me saw a Spoonie that day. Before the high tide was rushing in we returned to our boats, some more exhausted than others but a cold lemonade helped us to gather new strength.

It was decided to split the group in two, so one would cover the western area of the Delta where the satellite tagged Spoonie "ET" was recorded and the other group the eastern area. Shortly before the water came back we climbed on our boats and observed the amazing spectacle of the tidal bore. Although we were away from the main channel the water returned quickly and the tidal bore could be heard before it was seen. As soon as the boats floated we said goodbye to the ones who left and resorted to the next point where we would stop overnight. On the way the sun went down in wonderful colours of orange, yellow and pink and while we were having dinner on the roof of one of the boats we could marvel at the starry sky which showed so much more stars than the urban places one lingers usually. But another wonder of nature was quick to come. The moon rose amazingly big and in a wonderful orange colour.

The next day we surveyed further south but my group was unfortunate and we saw only a few species that day and no Spoonie at all, just like the other group.

On the third day we were lucky again and saw four to five Spoonies on a mudflat further south while the other group recorded about 50 Spoonies. My group returned on the morning of the fourth day back to the mainland. The kids of our boatmen embraced their fathers happily and sat in their laps while we were having breakfast. With the bus we went to Mawlamyine where the National Spoon-billed Sandpiper Workshop was held the following day. The objective was to work on actions that need to be done in the four wintering sites of the Spoonie in Myanmar until 2020: how to establish national protected areas or Ramsar sites, how to mitigate the hunting pressure and to support and fund conservation actions. Governmental and academical participants, LCGs and NGOs from the affected states and regions were present as well as INGOs and filled the new Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan with contents. The local governmental's acceptance of this action plan and their contribution and commitment marked a significant progress. Later that evening we were happy to see the members of our second survey team again who had returned that day with the good news that they had seen about 70 Spoon-billed Sandpipers the previous day.

The following two days were filled with the 11th Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force meeting. More participants from all along the flyway arrived in Mawlamyine so the group comprised 47 people from twelve countries. From all the flyway countries we heard presentations about their current conservation efforts and threats for Spoon-billed Sandpiper like reclamation and hunting that still have to be tackled.

Unfortunately many members of our group got

sick during the night of that day of the meeting so they couldn't attend the following meeting day and the visit of the education center in Thein Ngu. Also the partition of the survey groups for the following two days of survey had to be changed because it was impossible for some to stay on a boat because of their medical condition.

So while one group went with boats to survey around Bilu Island I joined the group which surveyed near Thapyaykone village. The local school was next to our lunchbreak spot in the village and the children soon found out about our presence. As soon as school was over they joined us and were excited to follow us into the mud. So instead of counting birds that day we had a lot of pleasure giving our enthusiasm for birds and some knowledge about them to the kids.

The next and last survey day we got up early to observe the waders during high tide, so they would be near the beach. Soon Nigel found a Spoonie but no one else saw it. So for the following two hours we were watching intensely through our scopes, trying to find the Spoonie among thousands of plovers and stints. Finally after two hours we saw the bird again, although it kept disappearing behind muddy asperities. So in the end we were successful and returned happily but tired to our hotel.

The following day we all had to say goodbye to each other. These days had been very intense and so it was strange to know that one would pass the next days without all these people. As I am a volunteer with BANCA all this was new to me. I was deeply impressed to see how people from so many countries get connected by one common aim, that international cooperations and efforts take place and show success because everyone tries hard. Your work really inspired me and gives me hope. I thank all participants for the great and unforgettable time I had at the Gulf of Mottama.

## New wintering site for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Myanmar

Christoph Zöckler

During a bird and mangrove survey organized by Fauna Flora International (FFI) and the Manfred-Hermsen-Foundation (MHS) two Spoon-billed Sandpipers were observed on 21 November 2016 feeding among a flock of small waders of about 1,000 birds at the River mouth of the Bokpyin channel just north of the town Bokpyin at 11.28328 - 98.746918 (see map on p. 16).

This constitutes the first record of these globally critically endangered birds in the southern Myeik Archipelago and the second site for the southern Tanintharyi Province after in 2014 one bird was recorded at Thetyewar Beach north of Myeik (see also Moses & Zöckler in SBS newsletter 2015). It is also one of the most southern records for the species. Unfortunately the birds could not be relocated the following day and it shows the volatility of the birds and that there might be even more individuals roosting undetected in the vast mudflat areas south and north of Bokpyin. However a visit of the same area on 24 February 2017 by U Soe Naing at the high tide roost near the same location confirmed still two birds wintering in the area. However by March 9th and subsequently no Spoon-billed Sandpiper were located any more.

The area around Bokpyin appears to be suitable for this species. The area is difficult to survey as access is only possible via small boats. Together with the 1-2 birds in Thetyewar Beach north of Myeik, the Myeik archipelago might host an estimated 5-10 wintering birds.

The site also supported at least 23 Nordmann's Greenshanks and is allegedly the most beautiful Spoon-billed Sandpiper site outside the breeding areas!

The entire mangroves and mudflats (see map) between Myeik and Bokpyin in the south as well as north of Myeik including both SBS sites are very important for a host of migratory waterbirds including 8 globally threatened and 12 near-threatened birds. With more than 20,000 waterbirds in the area the mudflats and mangroves deserve recognition and be listed under the Ramsar Convention. A Protected Area is planned and could save over 180,000 ha of mangroves and mudflats.



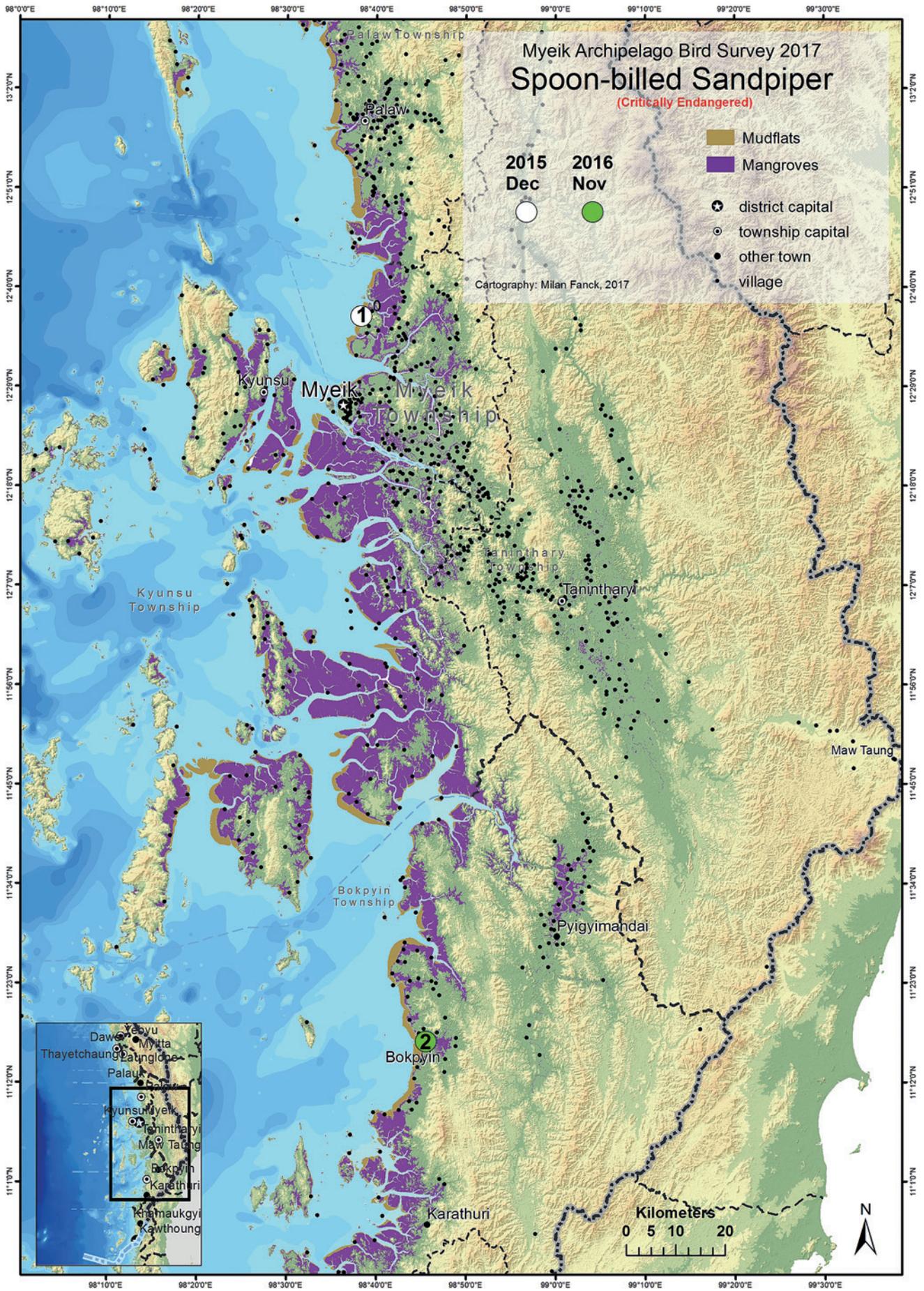
SBS wintering site at high tide

Christoph Zöckler



Nordmann's Greenshank at high tide at the mangrove edge, Bokpyin 22 Nov 2016

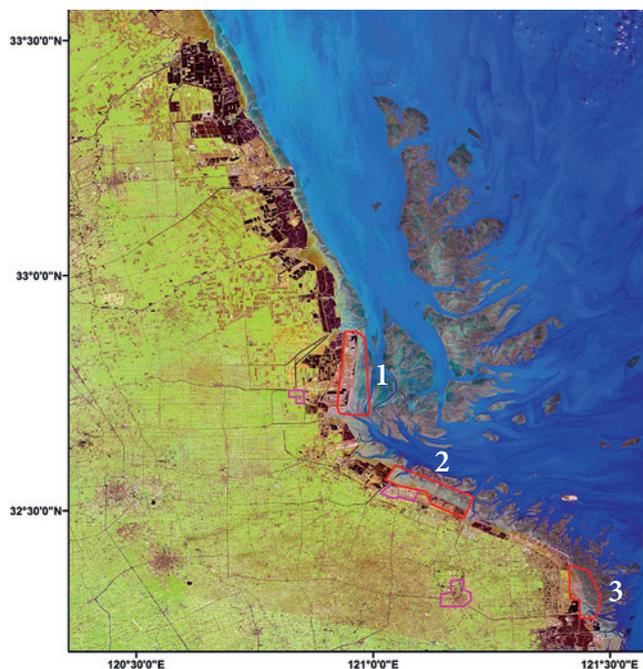
Stefan Pfütze



## First Russian-Chinese SBS survey in China under China-Russia bilateral agreement on migratory bird conservation

Evgeny Syroechkovskiy & Lu Jun

From 13-29 October 2016 the first joint survey of the Russian-Chinese bilateral Agreement on migratory birds (see also SBS newsletter No 16) took place to implement part of cooperation workplan of the Agreement at the prime stop overs sites of the species in Jiangsu and Fujian Province of China. It was organised by the National Bird Banding Centre of China. The main count of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper took place in October between 14-18 and it was the first formal survey of its kind organised by the State Forest Department (SFA) and implemented under the lead of Prof Chang Qing from Nanjing Normal University. The Russian-Chinese survey team was supported by the TF Coordinator Dr Christoph Zöckler, Hilger Lemke and Sönke Twietmeyer from the German Support Group on invitation by the SFA. The three major stop over sites along the Rudong and Dongtai coast of the Jiangsu province were surveyed.



The focus of the survey was on three main areas.

These are from North to South:

1. Tiaozini Sandflats (Dongtai)
2. Yangkau Mudflats (Rudong)
3. Donglin Sandflats (Nantong)

Because of its size and significance for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper the Tiaozini Sandflats have been visited on three days while the two other sites were each visited by separate teams on the remaining two days but by two different teams on consecutive days, enabling two counts for each site.

### Results

In total more than 100,000 shorebirds have been counted at all three sites, with an estimated 50,000 at Tiaozini and approx. 40,000 at Donglin and around 20-25,000 at Yangkau. Huge mudflat areas between the sites were not surveyed and likely host another 10-20,000 shorebirds. This means that the mudflats not only each qualify as a Ramsar site but together are also part of 50 global sites that host 100,000 shorebirds or more at one time in moment (Butler et al. 2001).

The survey was primarily conducted to assess the abundance of the critically endangered Spoon-billed sandpiper (CR) and other globally threatened shorebirds that regularly stop over at this site and will provide a vital baseline for future monitoring efforts by the SFA and also be the base for the future creation of protected areas at this highly important site for the whole flyway. But efforts to estimate the numbers of other shorebirds present were made and compiled in this report.

A total of 35 shorebird species were recorded in the survey period. In addition numbers of the globally threatened Black-faced Spoonbill, as well as the Dalmatian Pelican were noted.

### Spoon-billed Sandpiper

During the survey period a minimum of 118 Spoon-billed sandpiper were observed. The large majority of 101 birds were observed at Tiaozini with a further minimum of 12 at Donglin and a minimum of 5 birds in the Yangkau region. The total might exceed over 150 birds but accurate estimates are not possible due to the high level of

overlap and double counting. On the other hand it is very likely that 10-20% of birds may have been overlooked even by four teams operating simultaneously.

Among the Spoon-billed sandpipers a number of flagged birds have been recorded. In total 15 different marked birds were resighted. Of these 13 could be identified individually by its engraved flag code and colour. 12 at Tiaozini and one or two at Donglin. 9 marked in Russia and 4 in China.

Six carried a lime green flag and originated from the South Chukotka breeding area of Meinypilgy-no. Three of these were marked this year, whereas the other three derived from previous years. One light blue flag could be identified as a bird from North Chukotka, marked as a breeding adult female in 2005 and at least 12 years old! This bird is known to have bred in the northern breeding grounds in 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014, but most likely in both consecutive years too!

Also four yellow flagged birds were observed. All were flagged in the same site in Tiaozini, two from this year and two from the previous year. One of the yellow flagged bird has been tagged additionally with a satellite transmitter and this bird has been relocated in the northern Tiaozini mudflats on 17th October.

Last not least two white flagged birds from the Headstarting programme were resighted.

### **Nordmann's Greenshank**

The Tiaozini and Donglin mudflats are the most important roosting sites known for the species. A total of 400-450 birds is representing almost 50% of the estimated total world population but falls short of the high counts recorded in 2013 when maximum 940 birds (about 90% of the total population estimate) were counted in Tiaozini. These



Russian Chinese Survey team in action in Dong Lin, Oct 2016

*Christoph Zöckler*



Light blue bird, resighted after 11 years, marked in North Chukotka in 2005

*Luke Tang*

figures have not been repeated or the species declined recently to 617 in 2014 and 470 in 2015, which is much closer to the count of this season. This species is nearly as equally endangered as SBS and the importance of the need of its urgent conservation efforts is underestimated. Tiaozini is critically important for the survival of both species.

### **Summary**

The first official government led survey confirms

the huge international importance of the Rudong and Dongtai mudflats for shorebirds with well over 100,000 shorebirds counted and numbers of international significance recorded for globally threatened Spoon-billed sandpiper and Nordmann's Greenshank for which both species these mudflats are essential stop over sites for their species survival.

After the survey a China-Russian workshop was arranged in Nanjing with the Jiangsu Forest Bureau, lead by Xu Huiqiang, the head of the Bureau. Results of joint China-Russia SBS conservation work were presented by Prof Chang Qing and Russian colleagues and also presentations on the Spoon-billed sandpiper TF of the EAAFP and activities in SBS wintering grounds in Myanmar were made by Dr. Christoph Zoeckler. The discussion that followed highlighted the importance of all three sites in Jiangsu for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the need for all three sites to be protected. First steps to safeguard these valuable mudflats in Yangkau for the future as stop over sites are very welcome and the plans for further protecting the other important sites in Tiaozini and Donglin very encouraging. Mr. Xu was reinforcing this view and he also reiterated that at present the reclamation plans were on hold for two years and that the Forest Department is gathering information to make a case for an EIA in

case the reclamation step II and III will continue. The meeting was under a good and constructive spirit and everybody left the meeting with hope and encouragement that key SBS sites, on which survival of SBS as a species depends – particularly Tiaozini were currently over 90% of SBS in the area were found, would be protected and not further reclaimed.

After Jiangsu Province the Russian team continued there exchange and visited Minjiang estuary and Chonming Dongtang in Shanghai are were Russians learned most recent achievements of China experts in invasive *Spartina* grass eradication and traditional methods of catching of birds by nets for ringing by the former hunter changed to become conservationist – good example for all countries of the flyway.

Russian team is very grateful to NBBC of SFA and Nanjing Normal University for warm hospitality and constructive enthusiastic conservation work and is now looking forward to receive a team of China experts in summer 2017 in Chukotka to share Russian SBS conservation experience in the breeding grounds.

#### References

Butler, R. D; N. Davidson, G. Morrison (2001). Global-scale Shorebird Distribution in Relation to Productivity of Near-shore Ocean Waters. *Waterbirds* 24(2): 224-232, 2001



Russian Chinese Survey team waiting at rising tide in Tiaozini Oct 2016

*E.E. Syroechkovskyi*

## Updates of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in South China

Vivian Fu (Hong Kong Bird Watching Society), Jonathan Martinez

After three years of capacity building in South China with the support from The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), we can see the growth of the local bird watching societies and volunteers who can help promoting bird conservation in the area. This year, we conducted the joint international Spoon-billed Sandpiper Winter Census again with the Zhanjiang Bird Watching Society and Zhanjiang Mangrove National Nature Reserve. We were glad to have students from the Sun Yat-sen University to join us this time. The survey was carried out between 13th and 18th January this year. During the six days' survey in Southwest Guangdong, we recorded a total of 23 Spoon-billed Sandpipers:

2 from Xitou, Yangjiang, Guangdong  
 1 from Dong Hai Island, Zhanjiang, Guangdong  
 20 from Leizhou, Guangdong (recorded by 3 teams)

In addition to these results, there was one SBS sighted in Beihai and another one found in Beilun Estuary National Nature Reserve in Guangxi Province. Good news from this trip was that there was no single mist net spotted in the surveyed area in Leizhou area! Although one threat can now be considered as removed in this area, another emerged. We found that there is a sign of invasion of cordgrass *Spartina alterniflora*, which is posing a potential threat to this important mudflat of the Leizhou Bay. We are planning to work with Zhanjiang Bird Watching Society and Zhanjiang Mangrove National Nature Reserve to remove this invasive cordgrass before it is too late.

Leizhou Bay area was also surveyed by Jonathan Martinez (JM), John Allcock and Yann Muzika in mid-autumn to assess arrival time of the first Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the region, on the four usual wintering sites visited (Paisha Island, Anli salt pans, Fucheng area and Houpo) only 2 adults were found at Fucheng on 24th October, including returning flagged individual "U7", it might



Survey at Leizhou mudflat

Jonathan Martinez

indicate that it is the early stage arrival of the main wintering group. Another visit to Fucheng by JM, with Yves Kayser, Jean Pierre Jordan, Mick Villemagne and Dominique Clement, recorded 2 birds on 18th of November on the fishponds close to Beitan village on the South East side of the Leizhou bay. One of them was wearing Kamchatka color combination flag (see also separate article from Yu. Gerassimov), which could be the individual which wintered at Anli Salt pans the previous winter. 8 birds, none of them flagged, were recorded on Fucheng mudflat the following day on 19th of November.

Xitou was surveyed almost monthly by JM, to follow satellite tagged "HU" which spent the entire winter there.

A visit on 21st of October provided no Spoon-billed Sandpiper, 3 were present on 17th November including "HU", 4 were present on 18th of December and 2 on 19th both days including "HU", 2 birds were sighted on 06th of March 2017 not including "HU", and only "HU" was sighted on 10th of March.

Interestingly, with 4 birds this winter, the population of Spoon-billed Sandpiper wintering at Xitou is increasing every year since a single bird back

in winter 2013/14 and two in the winter 2014/15. Xitou has gained a lot of popularity especially as an important site for birds, attracting more and more birdwatchers, and it is encouraging to see that local Forestry Department have taken several actions to offer a better protection for the birds, including several new signs along the mudflat and the access road to the main roosting site informing people : “protect birds and that catching is prohibited”.

A single bird was sighted at Goukou, a Sandbar about 15 km south of Leizhou Bay by JM on 08th of March, this is the first time the species was found at this site which is followed regularly by JM since 2013.

JM also visited the Zhao’an area in Fujian province on 14th of December, to assess potential threat, especially the “Gonkou harbor” bay where satellite tag “CT” spent its entire winter and the Xipu creek that satellite tag “ET” used as a staging site during its southward migration. 2 Spoon-billed Sandpipers were sighted at Gonkou harbor but no sign of the presence of CT, and no bird was found at Xipu creek. However a very large scale illegal mistnetting was recorded at both sites, including mistnets set up in roost and foraging site used by the Spoon-billed Sandpipers present the same day at Gonkou harbor, and in the saltpans, which was the only available and suitable habitat left for shorebirds at Xipu creek. All these sites were intensively covered with illegal mist nets too. Forestry department was immediately informed about the situation and showed a quick response by sending forest police the following day to remove all mist nets.

In March, large area of wetland in Zhao’an, Fujian was reported that there were lots of illegal mist nets. The local forestry department was quickly contacted to help clearing the mist nets.



Group discussion during the training workshop

In addition to the survey, a 2-day workshop was held in Hainan between 17th and 18th December, 2016, with a theme on organizational development. In total, 22 participants from 11 newly established bird watching societies and groups from South China joined the workshop. These will become a growing force to help conservation in the region.

We thank Zhanjiang Bird Watching Society, Zhanjiang Mangrove National Nature Reserve, students from Sun Yat-sen University to help with the survey in bad weather and working long hours in the field during the International Spoon-billed Sandpiper mid-winter census!



Satellite tagged Spoon-billed Sandpiper “HU” at Xitou on 19th of December 2016

*Jonathan Martinez*

## The search for the unknown: using new technology to track Spoon-billed Sandpipers

Nigel Clark on behalf of the Satellite tagging project team

While much has been accomplished to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in recent years including hunting mitigation in the wintering grounds, headstarting in the breeding ground, monitoring and conservation of the breeding, staging and wintering grounds, we are yet to understand where 75% of the population breeds and around 25% of the population winters. For long-term protection of Spoon-billed Sandpipers it is extremely important that we identify all key sites and therefore in autumn 2016, an exciting new effort began to try to locate some of these “missing” sites.

### Challenges to track small shorebirds

Locating a very small and very rare shorebird across a vast range has been an incredible challenge for the Task Force. It has however, been extremely successful over the last decade in locating the breeding, stopover and wintering locations of Spoon-billed Sandpipers by getting people to search likely sites. This depends on expensive searches in the Arctic or people getting to often very remote locations on estuaries. Once on site they need enough time and good weather to find those birds that are present. But how do we know what has been missed?

Since we restarted individually marking Spoon-billed Sandpipers with individual leg flags in 2013, it has become clear that we only know part of the migration routes and wintering areas of most individuals. We had hoped that we could use geolocators attached to leg rings to follow Spoon-billed Sandpipers throughout the year, but we concluded that there was not a safe enough way to attach a geocator for a year as the only place that we could re-catch a bird reliably would be if we marked them on the breeding grounds.

### Finding a way

In 2015 Paul Howey of Microwave Telemetry, Inc. announced the development of the world's smal-



Yellow ET at the Minjiang Estuary, Fujian, China on 29 October 2016 just prior to its migration to the Gulf of Mot-tama, Myanmar

*Du Feng-luan / Fujian Bird Watching Society*

lest satellite transmitter at under 2 grams. For the first time this would give us the opportunity to get information on the movements of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper without re-catching them. There was still a problem of how to safely attach the tag to the bird. Small radio tags had previously been successfully glued on the backs of small shorebirds. These tags stayed on for a couple of months before falling off so they did not have any long term impact on the birds. After discussing our needs with Paul, he developed a special tag to be glued on the back of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

### Trial to ensure safety of SBS

After discussing the potential for using a satellite tag to track Spoon-billed Sandpipers we decided to undertake a trial on captive bred Dunlin. In February 2016 we glued dummy transmitters on six Dunlin and observed their behaviour. They showed no reaction to the tags and it proved difficult to tell which had a tag unless we actually saw the dummy! As spring approached they came into breeding plumage at the same rate as the control group giving confidence that the tags were not affecting the birds. In April we attached a real



One of the captive bred Dunlin which had been tagged with a dummy in March 2016 while in winter plumage. The photo was taken in early June *Nigel Clark*

tag to one bird. The next day we got a fix suggesting that the bird was within 300m of the aviary. We got regular fixes over the next few weeks and were happy that the tags did indeed work when glued to the bird's back. One of the tags fell off after seven weeks while the others fell off after three to four months when the birds went through their moult. This trial gave us the confidence to deploy the tags on Spoon-billed Sandpipers.

### **Tracking Spoon-billed Sandpipers**

In October 2016 we got the opportunity to deploy the first three tags. A team led by Professor Chang Qing from Nanjing Normal University worked with SBS in China and international shorebird experts from BTO, RSPB and WWT to catch shorebirds and especially Spoon-billed Sandpipers.

Unfortunately our arrival coincided with that of a major storm. This made it impossible to catch Spoon-billed Sandpipers or anything else for three days. When the weather improved, all the roosting flocks were in strange places as most of their normal roosts had been flooded by heavy rain. On the second day of catching we managed to catch an adult Spoon-billed Sandpiper but to our dismay it was moulting the back feathers where we wanted to attach the tag. This meant that we could not tag it! It took another two days to catch the next adult and this time it was suitable to attach a tag. We only had two days left so tried everything to catch some more and managed to catch another six Spoon-billed Sandpipers and deployed the other two tags.

It was now up to the technology and the birds to do their bit and they did not disappoint. Each of the tagged birds had an individual leg flag with two letters on it (ET, CT and HU). HU was first to move going to an estuary just south of Shanghai for a couple of weeks before moving on to its wintering site. ET followed two weeks later stopping at two sites for a few days before making a 2,450 km flight to the Gulf of Mottama, Myanmar where it spent the winter.

### Conservation implications

Finally in mid-November CT moved directly to its wintering site in Southern China. The tags continued to perform well until the end of February when CT stopped transmitting followed a month later by the other two. The tags have lasted longer than we had expected and provided a lot of valuable and new information. In particular on leaving the Jiangsu coast they visited six sites, three of these were well known Spoon-billed Sandpiper sites, one had very occasional records and two had never had Spoon-billed Sandpipers recorded before.

These last two sites were both found to have large numbers of illegal mist nets. These were reported to the SFA authorities who took immediate action - removing the nets and putting up signs saying that bird hunting was illegal. These tags have already led to an increase in our understanding of the movement patterns of individuals and to direct and immediate conservation action. It has also led to the location of at least four other wintering Spoon-billed Sandpipers on the site where CT wintered. We lost contact with all three birds in late February and March when they started to moult into their breeding plumage so we assume that the tags have now fallen off.

### Looking ahead

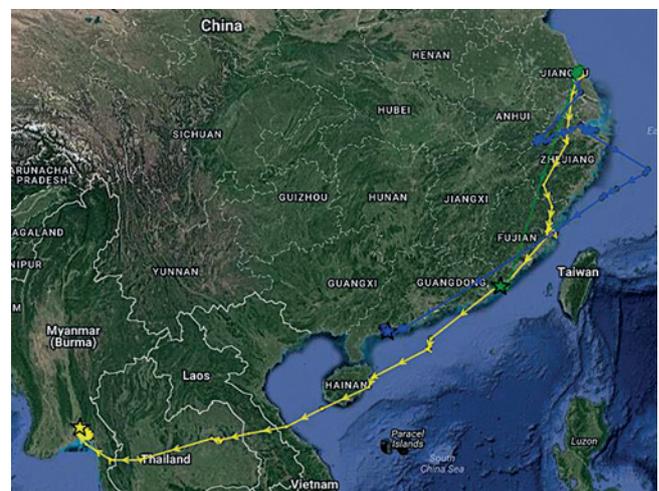
We are now looking to find out other 'missing links' in the Spoon-billed Sandpipers migration route.

We still do not know where the birds stop when they leave the Jiangsu coast in late April on migration to the breeding grounds where they arrive in early June. We also do not know where many Spoon-billed Sandpipers are breeding due to the remote location of the breeding grounds. In addition, once the birds leave the breeding grounds we have very few sightings until they get back to the Yellow Sea.

Still, there is a lot to find out in order to focus on conservation action to save the species but we will only put on small numbers of tags to give us pointers of where we should be focusing survey as we want to minimise the interference with the lives of Spoon-billed Sandpipers as much as possible.



The Spoon-billed Sandpiper catching and tagging team at Yangkou in Jiangsu, China on 6 October 2016



The tracks of the three tagged Spoon-billed Sandpipers: ET coloured yellow, HU coloured blue and CT coloured green. Stars indicate the last 'fix' for each bird

## China adds critical migratory waterbird sites in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea to the World Heritage Tentative List

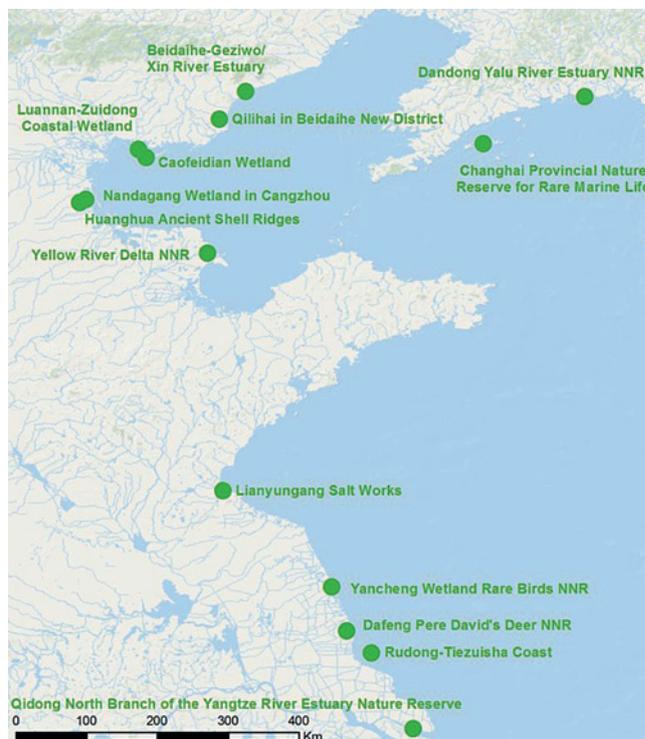
Spike Millington, East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership

Fourteen sites along the coast of the Bohai Gulf and the Yellow Sea of China were added in February to the tentative list of sites to be considered on the World Heritage List of sites of outstanding universal value, a significant step towards the recognition and protection of China's coastal wetlands.

The charismatic Spoon-billed Sandpiper has played a major role as a flagship species to raise awareness for the vital importance of the region for many migrant birds but also the livelihoods of local people and the need for special protection of a number of key sites in the Yellow Sea. The extensive mudflats, sandflats and associated habitats of the Yellow Sea, including the Bohai Gulf, represent one of the largest areas of intertidal wetlands on the planet and are shared by China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (RoK). It is the most important staging area for migratory waterbirds in the greatest of all flyways, the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF).

The flyway populations of many wader populations find vital stopover sites in the rich Yellow Sea intertidal areas, including Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, Great Knot, Nordmann's Greenshank and many others. For the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper the mudflats of the southern Yellow Sea in Jiangsu Province are most crucial for autumn and spring stop over, for moulting and replenishing for the onward migration. Many sites in the Yellow Sea have vanished already and it is very welcome that China has nominated crucial intertidal areas of the Yellow Sea for the WH list.

The region is not just important as a staging area, but supports the entire breeding populations of endemic threatened species, such as the vulnerable Saunders's Gull and the Endangered Black-faced Spoonbill.



Nominated sites on World Heritage "Tentative List":  
The Coast of the Bohai Gulf and the Yellow Sea of China  
(Submitted on 28th Feb 2017)

The millions of waterbirds that use these wetlands act as an indicator of the vital ecosystem services provided by the Yellow Sea, including fisheries, tourism, disaster risk reduction and climate change resilience, which profoundly underpin socio-economic development. It provides an ecosystem base for the regional economy and human well-being of the most populated coastal area in the world with an estimated number of more than 200 million people and a density of more than 500/km<sup>2</sup>.

Concern about habitat loss and the plight of migratory waterbirds led to a call to ensure a suitable framework for the conservation and management of the intertidal wetlands of the Yellow Sea, including the Bohai Gulf, and associated bird species at the IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Jeju, Republic of Korea in September 2012, where a resolution on the 'Conservation of the

East Asian-Australasian Flyway and its threatened waterbirds, with particular reference to the Yellow Sea' was adopted by 100% of voting governments. Subsequently, national workshops were held in Beijing in 2014, organized by Beijing Forestry University, and Incheon, Republic of Korea, organized by the Korean Ministry of Environment in 2016 to implement this resolution nationally, in advance of a joint meeting in August 2016, where representatives of the government authorities of China and the Republic of Korea responsible for World Heritage implementation discussed the nomination of Yellow Sea coastal wetlands. A further resolution "Conservation of intertidal habitats and migratory waterbirds of the East Asian- Australasian Flyway, especially the Yellow Sea, in a global context" was recently adopted at the 2016 World Conservation Congress in Hawaii.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, responsible for World Heritage nomination in China has been very active in identifying key sites and involving different stakeholders to promote the current tentative list, with technical assistance from Shanshui, a Chinese conservation NGO. There is recognition that the tentative list may not be comprehensive, but that optimal solutions can be achieved as the nomination proceeds. The Republic of Korea is already working on a nomination for the tidal flats of the southwest region including the most important site for migratory waterbirds in the country, Yubu Island.

With these proposed nominations by China and the Republic of Korea, the coastal wetlands of the Yellow Sea are being increasingly recognized for their outstanding global importance and it is to be hoped that this will result in stronger protection and management for the continued survival of migratory waterbirds.

Wen Cheng of Shan Shui noted that "Shan Shui is very pleased to support MOHURD to add the-

se sites in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea coasts of China in view of their importance as coastal habitats and the unique species they support, as well as being a haven for migratory waterbirds in the East Asian - Australasian Flyway. China has a great responsibility to protect these birds and habitats on their long journeys and is actively working with local and national authorities, as well as national NGOs and enterprises, such as Shan Shui, Qiaonyu and SEE Foundations, to further this goal. In recent years there has been a significant increase in public awareness of the need for biodiversity conservation and habitat management, particularly focused around birds, through programs such as Nature Watch".

A remarkable parallel to the Yellow Sea already exists in the East Atlantic Flyway, where the tidal flats of the Wadden Sea, covering Germany, Netherlands, and Denmark, also serve as a vital stopover site for migratory waterbirds and this area is already a trilateral transboundary World Heritage Site, indeed the first ever transboundary World Heritage Site for an intertidal area and with the Banc d'Arguin in West Africa both located on the East Atlantic Flyway, the only existing intertidal World Heritage Sites in the world. As Jens Enemark, former secretary of the German-Dutch-Danish Wadden Sea Cooperation remarks "Any initiative to protect and conserve the intertidal flats of the Yellow Sea should be welcomed by the international conservation community. The Yellow Sea is, together with the Wadden Sea (a World Heritage property since 2009), by far the most important intertidal mudflat area worldwide with a global importance far beyond its boundaries, particularly for migratory birds. The Wadden Sea is excited to welcome the Yellow Sea into the family of World Heritage properties to reinforce the protection of intertidal mudflats worldwide, a key habitat for global biodiversity".

On behalf of our partners and collaborators, I



Spoon-billed Sandpiper

*Eugene Cheah/EAAFP*

would like to congratulate the Government of China on working so hard and so diligently to get these very important sites on to the World Heritage tentative list in such a timely fashion. The support of EAAFP partners, notably IUCN, BirdLife International, Conservation of Arctic

Flora and Fauna (CAFF) and the work of the Paulson Institute, through the Coastal Wetlands Blueprint Project as well as the hard work behind the screens by SBS in China and the CCWCT, has been instrumental in promoting Yellow Sea intertidal conservation, culminating in this listing.

## Southward Migration Wader Studies on West Kamchatka in July - September 2016

Yu. Gerasimov, A. Matsyna, E. Matsyna, R. Else, H. Watson, E. Khudyakova, D. Chasov, A. Grinkova, R. Bukhalova

In July – September 2016 we continued our study of southward wader migration on the western coast of Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia with support of the BirdsRussia using RSPB financial support. These investigations were conducted in the same area as in the two previous years. Field work was carried out on Vorovskaya River Lagoon on 16–20 July, 28 July - 7 August and 11 August – 8 September. The lagoon is 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 (54° 11' N, 155° 49' E). The length of this part is about 5 km.

As in the two previous years our work included daily counting of birds in mudflats during low tide, observation of visible migration with counting of birds flying past, banding and flagging, and searching for flagged waders. 37 mudflat counts of waders during low tide were conducted and 36 species of waders were recorded in total. The maximum number of waders was 10.500 individuals on 6 August 2016.

During the third period of our work – in the second half of August and early September (As we know it is juvenile Spoon-billed Sandpiper southward migration time in our place) – the average count of shorebirds on mudflats was only 3270 individuals (Figure 1). It was much lower than in the previous two years. The reason was unseasonal rainy and windy weather in the first three weeks of August. As a result unexpected flooding happened on the river and during low tide the area of mudflats was very much reduced comparably with normal situation.

Like in previous years obtaining new information on Spoon-billed Sandpiper southward migration was prime goal of our investigation. We could observe birds of this species feeding on mudflats from 14 August - 6 September. During this period feeding birds were observed almost every day (See figure on next page).

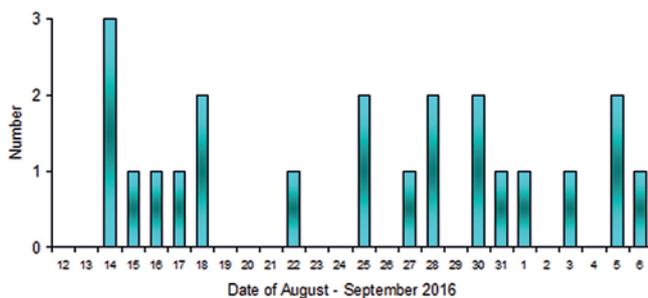
We compared number of Spoon-billed Sandpipers which we observed on 13–29 August with



the same period of previous 2 years. We counted 21 birds in 2014, 20 birds in 2015 and 14 birds in 2016. We have bigger team for observations in 2016 and we believe that count for Spoon-billed Sandpipers in 2016 was more exact then before. It means the number of Spoon-billed Sandpipers which were feeding of mudflats of the river was lower in 2016 as well as the number of other small shorebirds.

The adverse weather prevented the successful catching of Spoon-billed Sandpipers in 2016. We could not use mistnets most of the time as strong winds might injure some of the birds during catching. We caught only one Spoon-billed Sandpiper on 25 August. The number of other shorebirds caught in 2016 was also much smaller (in 4–5 times) then in previous years.

Current hunting rules of Russia do not allow shooting of small shorebird species. In Kamchatka only Whimbrel is popular hunting game for local community. Additionally Godwits and some other medium size shorebirds are common in hunter bags. In August 2016 we did not observe any poaching of small shorebirds in studied area.



Handled, measured and released again ...

## Conservationist Profiles | Spoonie Saviors

**Pyae Phyto Aung: From ‘Lucky Fish’ to Spoon-billed Sandpipers**

Karin Eberhardt

**K**nown to most of us as Phyto Lay, Pyae Phyto Aung came to birds through fishes. This is perhaps not surprising, given the proximity of those two Chordate classes in Phyto Lay’s primary habitat of the Gulf of Mottama – and the linked pathway to their conservation. As a boy Phyto Lay loved nothing more than to raise aquarium fish, such as the ‘Flower Horn’ and ‘Lucky Fish’, raising at least seventy species in his youth. In those days aquarium stores were not yet established in Myanmar, and little outside expertise was available to help him keep his fish alive. If he lost a few, he simply tried a new management method, learning by doing. Naturally Phyto Lay went on to study fish ecology at his hometown’s Mawlamyine University, graduating with a B.Sc in Marine Science in 2005. That was back when fishing was still good business in the northern part of the Gulf of Mottama, especially for the high-value hilsa fish.

Phyto Lay went first into the shrimp business, which was just then beginning to boom in the Ayeyawady River delta, due west as the sandpiper flies over the Gulf of Mottama. There he learned from an Indonesian expert the ecology of shrimp ponds and how to keep Tiger Prawns and other large shrimp alive and thriving. Quickly learning all there was to know, he soon struck out with a set of friends to run their own business, this time raising Whiteleg Shrimp using simpler zero-water exchange technologies. That led to a short stint in the shrimp export-import business. and a branch out into fish ponds. But after a few years of hard work – and good profit – Cyclone Nargis hit, destroying the ponds and shifting Phyto Lay’s outlook, just as it transformed everything else in the delta.

Post-Nargis, Phyto Lay worked for the recovery of farmer livelihoods, applying his knowledge of ecology to agriculture, supporting contract farmers in partnership with the NGO Mercy Corps. Then Phyto Lay heard that BANCA (Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association) was



“Phyto Lay” as we know him

*Tin Tun Aung*

looking for people to help with a socio-economic survey of bird hunters in the Gulf of Mottama. In December 2009 Phyto Lay showed up at the BANCA office for an interview, and since that day Phyto Lay has not been able to shake off the little bird with the spatulate bill. Although he staffed surveys in other parts of Myanmar, and had numerous and varied responsibilities for BANCA, he always came back to the Gulf of Mottama. Phyto Lay learned field identification from Nigel Clark and others, participated regularly in surveys and in community awareness-raising, and for many international conservation partners, is now their main man in Myanmar for anything Spoon-billed Sandpiper related.

When Phyto Lay joined BANCA, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper had only recently been discovered in Myanmar by the now-legendary Russia-Myanmar team, and BANCA pioneers were taking emergency action to stop hunting in the Gulf of Mottama. The BANCA team worked to raise awareness in

local communities of the bird's important global status (as well as the illegality of hunting wintering waterbirds, according to Myanmar law). Phyo Lay's first survey helped identify twenty-six hunters who were catching birds for market as their main livelihood activity, and then helped provide them with livelihood alternatives. BANCA organized Local Conservation Groups to sustain the change in behavior and monitor birds and people. The hardest part in the beginning, he says, was that local communities thought the BANCA team was coming to fine or to punish the bird hunters. But once it became clear that they were there to protect birds by helping people, relationships with the local fishing communities changed.

Phyo Lay says he prefers conservation to the private sector, because it brings great opportunities for international exchange and contacts. But that he can bridge both of these worlds is a real boon to BANCA as well as to the Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation effort. His business acumen stands him in good stead as the Program Manager at BANCA, not only because of a fast email response that impresses international scientists and supporters, but in his steadfast pursuit to help hold the organization together through the leadership transitions of the last few years.

His persistence and patience has been a major driving force behind Ramsar designation for the Gulf of Mottama, as Phyo Lay worked with other BANCA stars such as Aung Kyaw Nyunt and Zau Lunn to raise awareness, educate and convince both local communities and local and national government that Ramsar designation would be in their best interests. Phyo Lay's family has been a support here as well, especially his sister, who works with the Mon State government and can be counted on to help. Recognizing his dedication and communications expertise, in 2016 the Ramsar Secretariat designated Phyo Lay as the CEPA focal point for NGOs in Myanmar, responsible to

work with government and other stakeholders to develop national and local action plans on communications, capacity-building, education and awareness for targeted wetlands.

As the BANCA focal point, Phyo Lay also works with IUCN and other organizations in the context the Community-led Resource Management for the Gulf of Mottama project, which hopes to achieve sustainable use of the gulf through a multi-stakeholder plan for fisheries co-management and bird conservation. One day, it is hoped, fisher-people will be out monitoring the ban on bird-hunting as part of their daily fishing routine, motivated in part by the increase in catch that will come with locally-led fisheries management. The vast mudflats of the gulf will be sustaining local fisheries as well as shorebirds. And then Phyo Lay will have come full circle in his career bracketed by these two very different mud-dependent animals.

What's next, Phyo Lay? This inquiring mind wants to know. How about inventing a method to seed tiny shrimp as feeding supplements for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the benthos of the Gulf of Mottama?



*Saw Moe San*

## Conservationist Profile | Spoonie Saviors

**Moses: Born bird-crazy**

Karin Eberhardt

Moses has been a bird-lover as long as he can remember. As a small boy growing up in forested Kalaw on the southern Shan State plateau, Moses constantly watched for birds, identified species, and even spoke to them. He loved birds so much that as a naughty five-year-old he stole into his grandmother's library and tore all the bird illustrations out of her encyclopedia, to keep with him because they were so beautiful. No wonder his family called him 'crazy crazy bird-man', especially when he would break off a conversation mid-sentence to talk to a passing bird.

Moses' mania did not stop at birds. When he was older, he would spend hours on his own at the zoo, just watching what the animals did. He later began to collect primates, as people brought him strays such those unlucky monkeys orphaned by hunters. He ended up with four of them, including a Pig-tailed, a Stump-tailed and a Rhesus Macaque, all living in a specially built cage off the wall of his home. He would sometimes take the monkeys out to play free in the forest, but they always came back home with him willingly.

After completing his degree, to keep body and soul together Moses turned to another love, namely music. He founded a recording studio in Kalaw and played back-up instrumentals on keyboard or synthesizer. Although he played a lot of country music during that period, country was for the bread – or for the body – while for his soul, he still loves jazz and classical music best.

When a prospecting European travel company asked him to do a few bird surveys for potential nature tours around Myanmar, it was like a dream come true. But his big birding break came a few years later when he met Dr. Tony Htin Hla. Tony was preparing to support Craig Robson's Myanmar survey to research the now-classic Birds of Thailand and Southeast Asia; Tony was also considering launching a bird tour company. The two



Moses the birdman

*Christoph Zöckler*

realized that they could help each other achieve their goals. They became friends, and Moses became Tony's first bird guide. This auspicious meeting changed the direction of Moses' career, and he sold off the recording studio to live from his love for birds.

Through Tony and his tour company, Moses soon became involved with the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA), especially when BANCA began to conduct environmental impact studies. Moses participated in BANCA's first and most difficult major impact assessment, upstream of the Ayeyawady River confluence, as well as a number of subsequent assessments. He finally asked Tony, by then the Chair of BANCA, to put him full-time on surveys rather than on nature tours, and Tony realized where Moses skill and passion lay. Although as kind and gentle with people as he is with animals, Moses would frankly rather just deal with the birds.

Moses took part in the ground-breaking survey

that re-discovered the Gurney's Pitta in Myanmar and helped establish the Lenya lowlands as the last stronghold of this highly endangered species. He has been to Rudong to help survey China's most important wintering passage area for the SbS. He has conducted countless studies and surveys for BANCA, Flora and Fauna International (FFI) and other organizations. He is a backbone of the monthly wintering grounds surveys in the Gulf of Mottama that monitor all shorebird species, but especially the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Nordmann's Greenshank.

Moses is a self-taught birder, who as a kid worked from binoculars and field guides that his brothers in overseas jobs sent back for him. Through his work with WATT and BANCA, Moses was lucky to partner with expert international ornithologists, learning from them, and contributing to their knowledge in turn. His greatest talent is the art and craft of bird survey, and he has become one of Myanmar's leading experts in the field.

Moses is a quintessential field man determined and persistent. In a survey team he is always the first to pull out the scope in the morning, and the last to put it away in the evening, not willing to quit until it's too dark to see. I have watched him shoulder his scope and take off across even the muckiest of mudflats, sinking in to nearly his knees with every step, to walk a kilometer or two over to a vantage point to see what is beyond. He is equally at home in the forest as the mudflat, with a single-mindedness to find each and every bird out there. Moses shrugs off discomfort, forgets physical necessities like food or rest, too curious to see what he might find down the next waterway or forest path.

When he was being interviewed for this profile in the Gulf of Mottama in late 2016, Moses had just returned from a Baer's Pochard survey around Mandalay. He compared the prospects for the

two species in Myanmar, noting that the small lakes near Mandalay that could have been full of Pochard were not, simply due to too much human disturbance. As he spoke, his outstretched arm took in the vastness of the Mottama mudflat, where we waited for the tide: "Out here," he said, "there is so much room for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other species. If the habitat continues like this, they will continue to be happy here." Moses is hopeful for the future of the SbS in the Gulf of Mottama.

Yet despite having roamed from mudflat to dry zone to jungle in search of birds, and seen Myanmar's rarest species, Moses favorite bird remains the Hill Myna, his childhood companion in the forests of his native Kalaw. The Myna is a reminder of his own hill forest origins, and his Karen ethnicity. And it is a bird that can almost be taught to talk.



*Christoph Zöckler*

## How many Spoon-billed Sandpipers are there?

Christoph Zöckler

During our Task Force meeting in Mawlamayone we had a discussion on the global population estimates for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Two recently published papers (Zöckler et al. 2016; Clark et al. 2016) and another one (Syroechkovsky et al. in prep.) in preparation show slight differences in the global population estimate. Therefore, it was important to discuss this and agree on a common approach to the global population estimate.

1. Wintering population: the recently published wintering distribution and population (Zöckler et al. 2016) estimated roughly 100-120 pairs, based on observations across the wintering area over the past 12 years.
2. Another recent paper by Clark et al. (2016) estimated around 220 pairs, based on re-sightings of 10 marked birds from the key stop over sites in China.
3. The third publication on the distribution of the breeding birds and the global population estimate from the breeding grounds is in preparation by Syroechkovsky et al., where preliminary results conclude about 55-90 pairs.

Whereas the estimates from the wintering and breeding area aim to account for unfound and hidden populations and added a proportion of extrapolated individuals, this will still likely be incomplete and unsatisfactory. The estimates derived from these observations could be higher but also lower. The estimate from marked birds and their re-sightings though has a much more comprehensive methodology and its approach is more likely obtaining a comprehensive result. However, this method is just based on 10 marked birds and a lot of assumptions that might not fully reflect reality and its results could also likely shooting off the real range or even still underestimate the total population.

We all had to admit that we still don't know how

many SBS there are and we agreed that we ought to provide a range rather than take the mean between the different estimates, because the middle is rarely the truth in reality. And although our research has become far closer to reality we still don't know and likely will not know for sure what the exact number is. All we can do is to improve our knowledge, increase the basis of our analysis and extend our knowledge of the wintering and breeding area. This way we can get close to the 'truth' and refine our estimates. At the moment we can only provide a wide range of 80-220 pairs. For now I propose to use a range of 100-200 pairs. That should include all of our current thinking and it would be great if it is more closely towards the upper end. More importantly, we would like to understand and provide trends of the Spoon-billed Sandpipers. These are currently only derived from one or two breeding areas and also one or two regularly monitored wintering sites.

During the meeting, it also has been stressed that we should provide estimates in pairs rather than individuals as the number of non-breeding individuals can vary between the years according to breeding success and also non-breeding component of the population. As observed among several extremely rare birds the gender balance is tipping off towards more males leaving the actual number of breeding pairs lower.

All this might not be very satisfactory for many of us and for those who follow our activities, but we hope that the reality is closer towards the upper end, but we don't know for sure. However, we do know that the population has not increased since the estimate from 2010 based on the breeding population and it is important to bear in mind that floating different estimates may confuse the public and important decision makers, hence our attempt to provide a range rather than aiming at an impossible accurate number of pairs.

## Two new major donors from America



The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force very much welcomes the **International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC)** to join the efforts to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and many other shorebirds. ICFC is Canada's leading charity for conserving nature in the tropics and other priority areas worldwide. In 2015, ICFC launched a Shorebird Conservation Initiative that targets some of the world's most endangered shorebirds. ICFC provides funding and guidance, as needed, to establish long-term conservation programmes for these species and the habitats required to sustain them. ICFC is now supporting Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation work in Myanmar, Bangladesh and partly supporting Task Force's Assistant Coordinator Sayam U. Chowdhury's position. Scott Hecker, ICFC Director of Bird Conservation says, "We enthusiastically support the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force field-based protection in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and will do everything we can to increase the reach of this work on the nonbreeding grounds in the region."

### BIRD CONSERVATION FUND

#### The **Bird Conservation Fund**

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force is also delighted to introduce the **Bird Conservation Fund**, which was established in 2015 by our long-term supporter Graham Chisholm and Aaron Maizlish to deliver targeted funding to bird conservation projects around the globe. This volunteer-led organization seeks to protect threatened and endangered species through direct action. Bird Conservation Fund works cooperatively with both large and small conservation organizations to identify and help fund projects that we believe can leverage measurable and lasting results in protecting fragile bird populations. BCF acknowledges the importance of monitoring and scientific research in order to achieve long-term conservation goals. Therefore, BCF will be supporting Spoon-billed Sandpiper monitoring, surveys in new areas and conservation work in Bangladesh for the next two years.



Searching for SBS in the Gulf of Mottama

*Hilger Lemke*

