

# Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force Report

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Myanmar



## Report from Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force to the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership

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Acknowledgements: Tony Htin Hla and Zau Lunn (BANCA), Christoph Zöckler (ArcCona), Nigel Clark (BTO), Rob Sheldon, Guy Anderson and others (RSPB), Geoff Hilton (WWT) and Minoru Kashiwagi (KNCF)

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There are only few estuaries in the world that regularly build up a tidal bore at spring tide. The Gulf of Martaban in Myanmar is such an estuary and it is possibly this highly dynamic and widely undisturbed coastal and river system that is responsible for hosting the largest remaining population of wintering Spoon-billed sandpiper. Unlike a tsunami, the tidal bore is predictable and occurs with rising water. It also intensifies to a 1.5 meter high wave at spring tide. Spring tide is the period when the rising water floods the little channels that connects the many villages for 6-7 days per month with the huge Gulf and allows thousands of fishermen to access the rich estuarine water for fish. This is also for us - members of the SBS Task Force - the only opportunity to access with the fishermen these rich feeding areas for 100,000s of waders.

Conservationists from ArcCona, BTO, RSPB and WWT from the UK joined the BirdLife partner in Myanmar, BANCA for a training workshop and survey of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the Gulf of Martaban (Mottama). The field survey as well as a training course was accompanied by members of the SBS Task Force from Japan, Bangladesh and China, who shared their knowledge and experience with the survey team.



*Members dropping off from the boat for survey © Christoph Zöckler*

The 5-day boat survey took place during the new moon period in the upper estuary to allow the boats accessing the most important wintering site at spring tide. Local fishermen aware of the tidal changes and dynamics of the area, guided the survey without risking encounters with the 1.5 meter high tidal bore that determines the upper part of the estuary at spring tide and characterises the dynamics of the site, responsible for constantly changing coastlines, mudflats and salt marshes, the high productivity and ideal feeding habitat for the Spoon-billed sandpiper.



*Members surveying at the gulf of Martaban © Christoph Zöckler*

The team of 12 scientists had over 100 sightings of Spoon-billed Sandpipers during the four days of surveys of their prime habitat in the upper estuary. In February another team of British scientists repeated the survey with similar results. A full analyses of the count data is needed before to be certain, but first indications give hope that the work already done by BANCA to reduce hunting may be having a positive affect. A Japanese – Burmese Benthos team took soil samples for analyses of potential food items of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. In addition 4-8 birds have been observed at Ahlat at the Salween River mouth in the south of the Gulf which confirms that this area is also an important wintering area.

The most positive news comes from separate field surveys at Nan Thar in the Arakhan region, where a total of 25 SBS were observed on 20 January compared to 22 the year before and only 14 the year before that. This increase follows the cessation of hunting following the Task Forces' intervention three years ago and the start of ecotourism in the area to supplement livelihoods of the local people. It is fortunate that BANCA together with Bird Holidays is offering tours to visit this beautiful little island next winter again. People who join the tour will not only see Spoon-billed sandpiper in winter, the globally endangered Nordmann's Greenshank and roosting Bar-headed Geese amongst many others; they, who stopped the hunting of birds on the island, will actively support the local community by their visit. A more detailed programme is available at Bird Holidays

<http://www.birdholidays.co.uk/Myanmar.birdwatching.holiday.2013.htm>



*Bird tracks © Christoph Zöckler*

These results are encouraging, demonstrating that early interventions and the mitigation work on the hunting issue have shown affect.

Even more encouraging has been the workshop on World Wetland Day (2 Feb.) in Nay Pyi Daw, the Myanmar capital, hosted by the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry on behalf of the Ramsar designation of the Gulf of Martaban and other sites important for the Spoon-billed sandpiper. Several members of the Task Force and BANCA presented and highlighted the importance of the Gulf of Martaban and the ministry outlined a roadmap for protection. Further meetings and close cooperation between BANCA and the ministry are planned to increase the number of Ramsar sites and protected area coverage, including other coastal sites, such as Nan Thar Island.

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*Spoon-billed Sandpiper T-shirt*



*Spoon-billed Sandpiper Workshop*