

Knot Knot ... who's there? Bohai Bay, China. 2012 Update 6

Welcome to our 6th and final update ... that's right... 6 exciting instalments of our adventures in Bohai. That makes it at least twice as good as the Lord of the Rings trilogy! We came, we saw, we scanned. We were happy, we were sad, we laughed, we cried. We scanned some more. It has been a rollercoaster ride, but, all being well, at least some of us shall return in 2013 to relive it all again.

Following the unexpected second peak in Red Knot numbers we witnessed just before the last update, totals slowly began to dwindle during the last few days of May and into early June. Almost all those present were of the more northerly breeding subspecies, *piersmai*. Sanderling are another breeder of the far north and their numbers also remained high to the very end. Both these species were seen migrating on several evenings with small flocks calling excitedly as they gained height and disappeared to the north. With the exception of these species the mudflats had a very empty feeling. Many species, common a few weeks ago, were reduced to singles and small scattered groups here and there. Even with the bright sunshine the place seemed back to its former, much greyer dullness.

Weather in the last few days of May was perfect for evening scanning with the sun, low to the south-west, perfectly illuminating the Knots making for spectacular views out on the mud. With these excellent conditions we did very well for colour bands. We had many successful sessions although one in particular, with the additional eyes of Professor Piersma, was exceptional. In a few hours we saw 74 individually identified colour banded birds from north-west Australia (approx. 10% of the total marked in this way) along with a host of other flags from elsewhere. For a site over 6000km away from the banding location this is amazing and helps to highlight how vitally important the Nanpu mudflats are.



Feeding Red Knot flock. Beautiful birds with an unfortunate backdrop of an oil well (*Ginny Chan*)

A full report with summaries, results and basic analysis will be available in due course but just to whet the appetite ... some numbers from the season. Between the 10th April and the 2nd June we spent 54 days in the field. We recorded a total of 4503 flag and band sightings, a 34% increase on 2011! We have seen flags from over 20 different banding regions on a total of 13 different species. We identified the subspecies of over 64 000 red Knots and counted more birds than I care to add up. Various scientific papers utilising this vast data set are also now firmly in the pipeline (no mudflat reclamation pun intended), it's going to be fascinating!

It is perhaps not surprising that we have seen more than in previous years. Every year more people, in more places are catching more birds which add to the marked population making our lives easier with more individuals to look for. More importantly, throughout May we have been joined by Miss Ginny Chan (A.K.A. Ying Chi Chan and/or 'the Ginster') who has not only been an excellent scanner, but has possessed an amazing tolerance and ability to cope with Chris, Ady and Matt. A feat not to be underestimated!

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper mentioned in the previous update was seen again. It was present in the same spot at Zuidong on the 28th and 29th May then at Nanpu on the 2nd June. It was eventually seen well by all including Zhao, our driver, and Matt (third time lucky). This species continues to decline rapidly, in part due to reclamation and destruction of critical staging areas along their East Asian migration route. Let's hope that this site doesn't go the same way as the many others. Another rare visitor this week was a Chinese Egret at Nanpu on the 29th. With a small and declining population, this is another victim of the loss of mudflats and estuarine habitats and is currently classified as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List. It is not the first we have recorded here with a single record in May 2010. Chris was on hand to witness both these birds and luckily, this time was joined by people not only possessing, but willing to use cameras.



Spoon-billed Sandpiper – for more information on the recovery project see www.sbsproject.wordpress.com (Adrian Boyle)



Left: Chinese Egret at Nanpu (*Ginny Chan*) Right: Yellow Bittern at 'Tree Lane' (*Adrian Boyle*)

Again, other birding was limited. The passerine migration is all but over with just a few birds seen along the wall and at other sites. A trip to 'tree lane' on the 30th produced few passerines except for large numbers of singing Oriental and Black-browed Reed Warblers. We did, however, see a surprising number of small Bitterns with over 50 Yellow and 1 Schrenck's. Although some were seen displaying and pairs seen chasing each other, a subsequent visit produced much smaller numbers so perhaps many were migrants. It now seems that this marsh land, reed bed and migrant hotspot is set to be turned into a housing estate and (another) golf course so maybe we won't be visiting this site next year ... sad times.

As the birds have left we make our way back to Beijing ready for our flights home. We would like to thank many people including anyone who has read these updates and taken an interest in our work here. An enormous thank you is due to Nicky (AKA Yang HongYan and/or 'the Nickster') without whom the organisation and logistics of our work here would be incredibly difficult. Funding from WWF Netherlands, WWF China, Birdlife Netherlands and Beijing Normal University make this project possible.

Each year we are amazed at how great this site is. The diversity and sheers numbers of birds that rely on coast here is incredible and it would be a tragedy if it is lost. As things stand at the moment there are plans to continue reclaiming Zuidong, Nanpu and Beipu for industry but there is an increasing interest in the area and an ever growing number of people opposed to this. Each year we learn more about the significance of the site but with development work continuing around us it is a race against time.

It's Knot over yet...



Thanks for reading

Ady, Matt, Ginny & Chris

The Bohai 2012 Team



Left: Zuidong in 2011 ... mudflats, a dirt track, some pipes. Right: Zuidong in 2012 ... a recreation of the photo in exactly the same spot, no mudflats, 6-lane highway, pumping finished, power lines. It's all changing ... FAST!! (*Theunis Piersma*)



Left: 'Spongy corner' This great little birds' favourite corner ... well, the place we saw it the most. It wouldn't be so bad without the trucks thundering past every few seconds. (*Adrian Boyle*) Right: Work has begun at 'Tree lane' already (*Ginny Chan*)



Eastern Curlew (*Adrian Boyle*)



A mud flat with nets and fishermen is better than no mud flat at all! (*Ginny Chan*)



And a sunset to finish (*Matt Slaymaker*)



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