

## BOHAI UPDATE #4 MAY 21, 2016

Hi All

Welcome to the 4th update from the Luannan coast, Bohai Bay, China.

The main story this time around is, where the heck are the Red Knots?! This was from the last update 'we are not recording big numbers of yellow flagged and colour banded birds yet, but we do expect this to change any day soon.' Well it hasn't! We have recorded very few and it is getting intriguing/worrying. The next week of good scanning tides will reveal more.

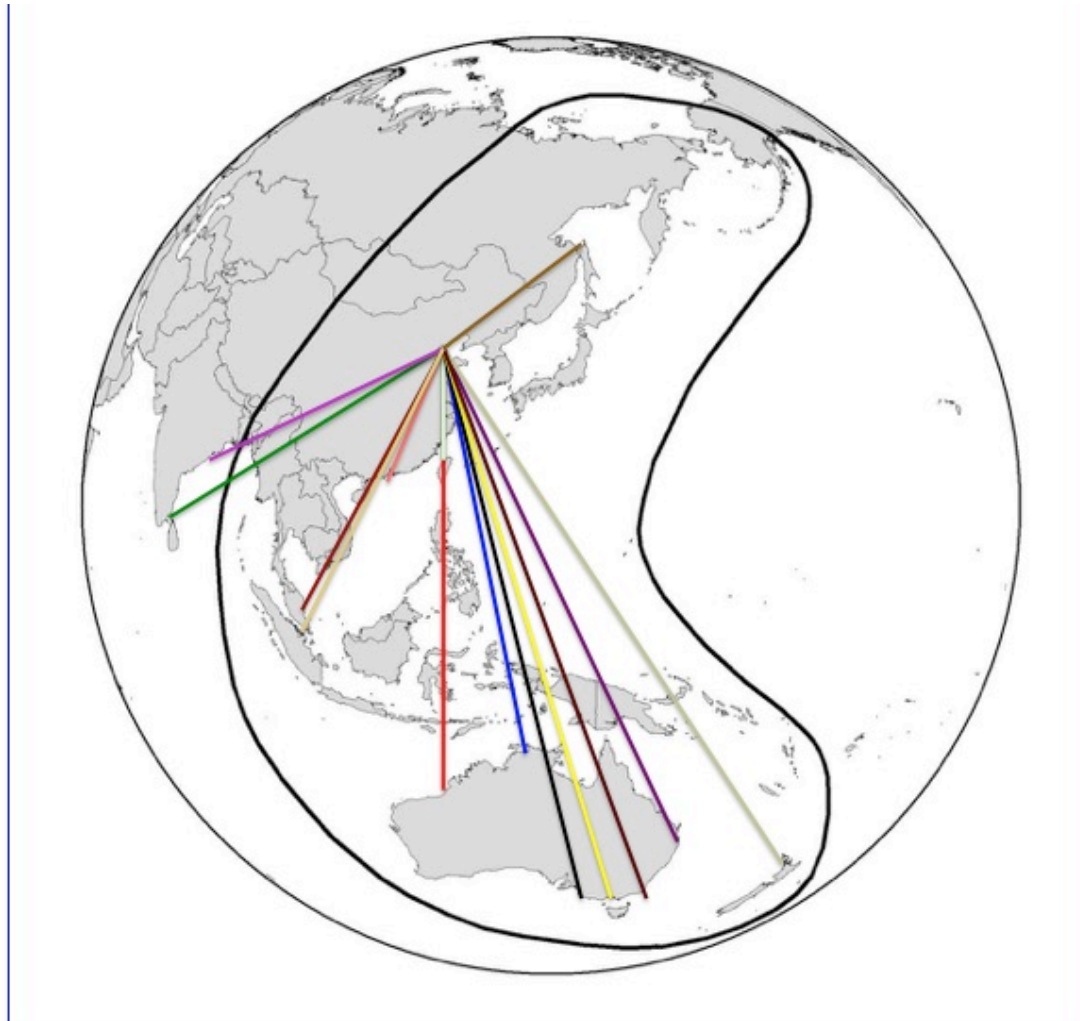
Scanning is going merely okay, so far we have recorded 2,811 birds from 29 sites on 16 species. Red Knot still leads the way with 2,040 sightings.

### **Spotlight on Species: Curlew Sandpiper**

The Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* is one of the small shorebirds. Like many, it is a grey and white bird in non-breeding plumage; transforming into a beautiful, wine-red, chestnut and white bird in its breeding finery. Curlew Sandpipers breed across the high Arctic tundra, from the Yamal Peninsular (central-west Siberia) to the Kolyuchinskaya Gulf (far-east Siberia). Their non-breeding areas are from sub-Saharan Africa, through to the Middle East and south and south-east Asia to Australia. Despite this huge area for both breeding and non-breeding areas, the bird is monotypic (has no subspecies), as the breeding grounds are continuous and not geographically distinct. In Australia this species has just had its conservation status upgraded to critically endangered, due to the rate of decrease in their non-breeding population in Australia.

The Luannan Coast and the adjacent salt ponds accommodate thousands of curlew Sandpipers during spring migration. Six years ago on May 11th 2010, we saw approximately 80,000 of them leaving the Beipu mudflats on an incoming tide for the salt ponds. They readily feed in the shallows or edges of salt ponds, particularly on windy days when prey is blown against the pond banks. This makes counting them difficult over the vast area of salt ponds. We possibly 'got lucky' with the big count, although we are sure those numbers have not been here in the last few years.

The Curlew Sandpipers that we see here come from various countries and banding sites of the EAAF, Australia (six sites North Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland South West WA, Northern Territory), Thailand, Hong Kong, Sumatra, Singapore and Chongming Dongtan National Nature Reserve near Shanghai. We also record them from a country that is officially outside the EAAF, India.



Map showing all the areas we have sighted Curlew Sandpipers from in Bohai Bay.

The first time we realized that Indian birds were passing through the Luannan Coast, was when in May 2010 Adrian Boyle photographed a bird with just a metal band on its tibia. He knew this was an unusual sight as by 2010, most birds had some sort of additional mark (a 'flag' or colourbands) in addition to the metal band. So he took multiple pictures of the bird, and from this we were able to read the metal band inscription and track down its origin. Now India is putting engraved flags onto some of their captured shorebirds, and this season we have recorded several Curlew Sandpipers from Point Calimere in the far south east of Tamil Nadu and another from Chilika Lake, Orissa). PhD researcher Leiming, is studying Curlew Sandpipers as one of his main focus species and is learning how they utilise the salt pond and coastal habitat - when they use each and what their diet is in each habitat.



Curlew Sandpiper from Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu, India 11/05/2010.

### **Visitors (some more welcome than others)**

Visitors still come and go. We have had a visit from the ABC radio journalist Ann Jones who produces and presents Off Track. Her colleague from the BBC World Service, Andrew Luck-Baker was also here. Ann interviewed us (Adrian and Chris) in Australia, and continues to follow us, as we follow the birds on their migration! And does a whole lot more besides! The journalists visit has also coincided with the annual visit of Professors Theunis Piersma and Zhang Zhengwang. Theunis is the 'head' of GFN and Prof Zhang is at Beijing Normal University and supervises the PhD students working here along with Theunis. We have been interviewed on the Nanpu Seawall one evening with the birds flying over our heads back to the mudflats from their roosts in the salt ponds.

We have also been accompanied by four officials from the External Liaison Department (it is good to see it is not only Australia that has names that mean nothing for business and Government). They were there to see we didn't say anything controversial, although they didn't speak English. We didn't say anything controversial, just in case!

And to add to our interaction with officialdom, we were once again, driven to the Local Police Station after a young Oil Company Worker took exception to our presence. He thought we were spies, not very good ones I imagine, as each year over the last eight years, we have wandered around in the open on the seawall and mudflats for sixty days without a day's break! You would think we would have gathered our information by now!

We had to show the photos on our cameras and they even photographed our notebooks and what we had written in them.

## **RED KNOT NUMBERS**

As mentioned at the beginning of this Update, Red Knot numbers are down on previous years.

The mid-May count in 2013 was 21,000, 2014 was 27,000, 2015 was 20,000 and this season 2016 it is 11,000.

This season the birds have been 'missing' for 13 days or more (10<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>). We have made sure that we have looked at all the coastal sites including West Heihenzi and the north Beipu area and tried to look at them in conjunction with other sites, so the birds couldn't feasibly escape our attention.

Also, we just get a feeling the birds are not here. When we drive to and from the coast we do not see them in the ponds in anything other than small hundreds. We do not see large flocks flying anywhere.

The questions we are asking ourselves about the NWA birds are;

Have the birds not arrived yet?

Have some of the birds arrived and then moved on as there was not enough food? The birds that are here are looking healthy, BP scores of 4 and 5 are common, and the ratio is the same as other years.

So is there a lack of food? Jason and Ginny indicated that the pots density was lower than in previous years, but with more food close to seawall but they have not carefully analysed the samples yet.

Disturbance of Red Knot flocks is not the reason for the low numbers. There is the same amount of shell fishing activity as last year and less people and activity than in years prior to 2015.

Are they here and we can't find them - very unlikely we think.

We speculate that they have not yet arrived and we will see them eventually, and hopefully soon, however, why they are late remains a mystery. If they have not arrived yet and they have left Broome - then where are they?

## **NON-SHOREBIRDS**

Not a lot of bird sightings to report for this update.

The weather has been nice and most migrants have presumably kept on migrating and not landing for us to look at.

Plus we have not been to the local park for several days, as the tides and the extra searching for the Red Knots has not made it possible.

This year we have seen less numbers of migrating passerines (except the brilliant day mentioned in the last Update #3), and despite the overall numbers, the species diversity has been very good and we currently have 209 species in our list for the trip so far.



A beautiful Yellow Wagtail in one of the salt ponds that we scan. © A Boyle



Female Chinese Grosbeak in the local park. © A Boyle



Male Common Pheasant behind where we stand to scan knots at Nanpu. © A Boyle

### **BAD NEWS**

There is no other way to headline this part of the Update.

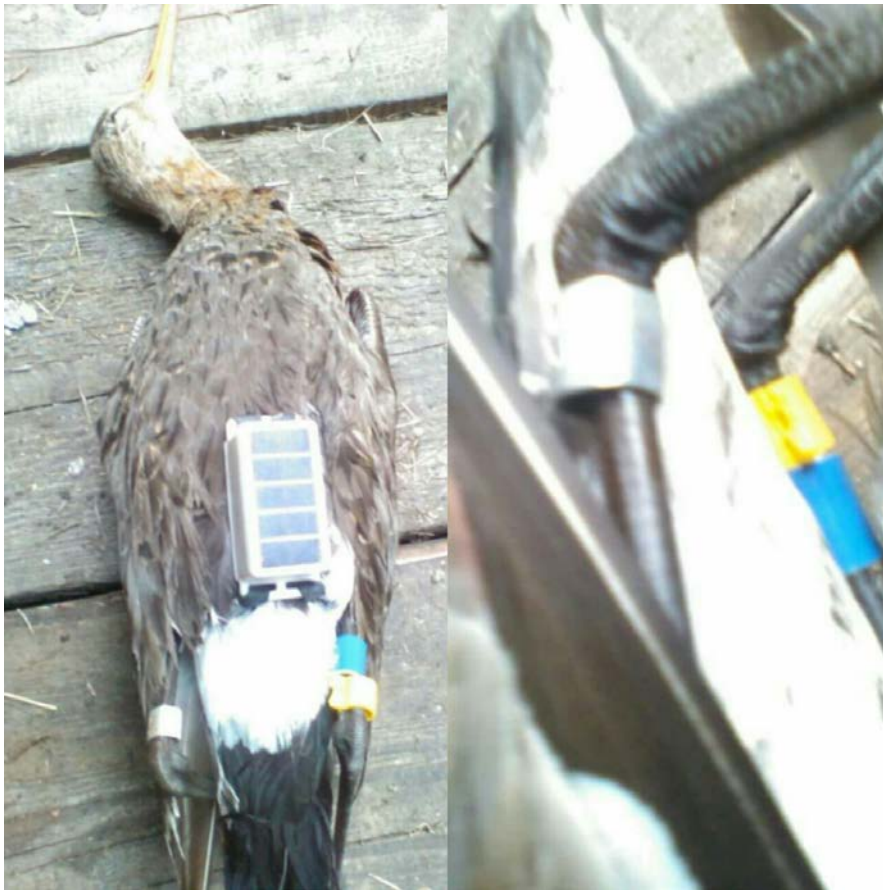
Zhu Bingrun is one of the PhD students from Beijing Normal University working here on the Luannan coast.

His main study species is the Black-tailed Godwit (see Update #3 for more information). He has attached three birds with GPS transmitters. On 01/05/2016 Zhu banded and attached a transmitter to a male Black-tailed Godwit with a metal band and Blue/Yellow flags - the blue engraved H03. The bird moved around the salt ponds, never using the mudflats, and then migrated on 17/05/2016. He flew in a single flight and was still flying when the signal was lost at the Inner Mongolia/China border. Two days later on 21/05/2016 two images were uploaded to Facebook showing the bird had been shot and killed in Sakha Republic of Russia.

Zhu has two more Black-tails carrying GPS loggers. H02 is already in the region where H03 was killed and has not sent a signal for the last two days. H04 is also heading towards the Sakha region.

Zhu would like to thank Mrs Inga Bysykatova, a Siberian Crane researcher in Russia, who passed all the photos and information to him. She's is now trying to locate where the hunter is, and see if it's possible to get the transmitter back.

We hope this is a very unlucky occurrence for the bird and Zhu's research and not a regular occurrence (a lot of godwits being shot each breeding season).



Chris, Ady, Bob

23/05/2016