

BOHAI UPDATE #3 MAY 13 2016

Hi All

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

Let's talk about the weather! It's hot! Unseasonably so from our eight years of experience, we usually experience some cold and wet weather in the first weeks of our field season, but not so this year. Remember that opening from last time?

The next day? It blew a gale and the rain poured down! And then again a few days ago, but that led to much excitement, see later. So I am unsure if we should or shouldn't talk about the weather!

Scanning is going well, so far we have recorded 2,250 marked birds from 25 sites on 15 species. Red Knot leads the way with 1,636 sightings. Despite this we feel that the Roebuck Bay birds have not really arrived with us yet. We are not recording big numbers of yellow flagged and colourbanded birds yet, but we do expect this to change any day soon.

Spotlight on Species: Black-tailed Godwit

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* is currently classified in to three sub-species, *limosa*, *Icelandic* and *melanuroides*. Simple? Well hold on a moment, there is only one subspecies for the EAAF (*melanuroides*). This subspecies is said to have scattered breeding areas from Lake Baikal in the west to Chukotka in the far-east, an enormous geographic range. So at this point I could lead you to this paper '*Patterns in Nuclear and Mitochondrial DNA Reveal Historical and Recent Isolation in the Black-Tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa)*', but I won't! Look it up if DNA is your thing. Our thing is field observations, old-fashioned I know, but still relevant in biology. The Black-tailed Godwits we work with in Roebuck Bay and the ones we see here look different, very different. Broome birds are small and develop bright breeding plumage. Birds passing through Bohai Bay are big and have very little pale breeding plumage. This has led to much discussion and reading of various papers and it still isn't too clear what is going on with the Black-tailed Godwits in our flyway. So it is exciting that Drew Bingrun from Beijing Normal University has, as part of his PhD studies, GPS loggers attached to three Black-tails caught here in Luannan. One left just eight days after having the logger attached and is in a likely breeding location in Inner Mongolia. We wait with bated breath to see where the others go to breed and then where they spend their non-breeding season. We have never recorded a Broome Black-tail here (and we would if they were here!), the overseas records we have are from South Korea in spring and from the Kamchatka Peninsula in autumn. So they look different, they have different migration routes and therefore, presumably different breeding locations. Maybe we have a fourth subspecies? GFN has a very good dataset on Black-tails including blood samples, and researchers at Groningen University - along with Drew, will be analysing this and other datasets, to try to tease out what is going on with our beautiful EAAF Black-tailed Godwits.

The Black-tails when they are here favour the salt pond habitat for both foraging and roosting. This season 10,000 have been using the 'Prison Salt Ponds'. But they also disperse away from the ponds to forage -----somewhere else!

Drew and his team put in a lot of effort to find out where that somewhere else is, but to no avail. There is the vast area of salt ponds that we often mention and then in addition to this, there are huge areas of rice paddies, which would be very suitable foraging habitats when they are flooded.

Black-tails from Roebuck Bay are very quick to move away from the coastal mudflats when there is good rainfall in the surrounding area. We don't know where they go, but I have been hinting to Drew - he may want to expand his studies! When Black-tails are using Roebuck Bay it is noticeable that they use the soft sediments in the east and north-east of the bay. I have never seen one in twenty years work feeding anywhere else in the bay.

Habitat Loss

Small developments in our area continue to spring up. This is not necessarily a bad thing, economic development will continue to be part of the Luannan Coast story. But the tourist development on the seawall at Beipu has rather caught our attention! It seems to be a Seafood Harvesting Tourist Facility. But obviously dolphins frolicking in the ocean, turtle's nesting in huge numbers and bikini clad girls in the mud will be major components of the experience! I won't go in to detail about the sanitary arrangements but ----- it goes straight on to the mudflats where you collect your shell fish or have a mud bath. We don't expect it to be too popular, but that may just be our western sensibilities, we shall see.



And another patch of habitat going under concrete is at 'Tree Lane'. This is a site that we go to for recreational birding, no counting or looking for flags and bands, just birding for fun. At Tree Lane we have admired many birds in the extensive reed beds, canals, open water and 'bunds' with trees. An impressive avifauna like Grey and Purple Heron, Eurasian, Yellow and Schrenck's Bitterns, breeding Oriental and Black-browed Reed Warblers and many cuckoos presumably parasitising them, plus a whole array of passerines in the trees. But now we are faced with a totally brown/yellow stone desert with a lot of human building activity (what's new)?

Of course we couldn't read and understand the information board at the entrance of the human playground, but the artist's impression didn't leave any room for imagination: hundreds of leisure houses, some big central buildings, a tennis and basketball court. Also an artificial lake has been planned, but no reed beds around it. It looks a thoroughly nice place to live if you are NOT a nature lover. The complete complex of houses, surrounded by woods (not sure that bit will eventuate) instead of reed beds, will be ready in May 2019 - as far as we can understand from the undoubtedly sunny selling text. We can't wait!



How some of it used to look (and a bit still does)! © B Loos



The Present. © B Loos



The Future. © B Loos



Red Knots just arrive on the mud and ready to be scanned. Note some of the invasive *Spartina* growing in the foreground. © A Boyle

Non shorebird highlights.



Bianchi's type warbler at the town park on the 09 05 15 was our third record ever of this well out of range bird. However, without the call we cannot identify it to species level. © A Boyle



Black Redstart, female at Nanpu Seawall on the 06.05.16 is only our second record. © A Boyle



Citrine Wagtail. Usually only seen once or twice a season but we have had 4 so far. © A Boyle

We have so far recorded 203 bird species for the year.

It's raining birds

May 12th started off just like most of our mornings. An early start followed by an hour drive to our site at Nanpu, where we planned to scan knots as they arrived on the mudflats on a receding tide. For the past few days the knots had been troublesome, not arriving when they should, being very skittish due to the many cuckoos and raptors migrating overhead but mostly because they were just (k)not there!

They seem to do this every season and just vanish for a few days and we look for them, can't find them and then just turn up again. So with the early starts catching up with us, the knots probably not going to be there, and dark stormy weather complete with strong wind and rain, we were not looking forward to the day's adventure. Little did we know that this would turn out to be the best day we have ever had for non-shorebird migration!



Female Amur Falcon in the rain. © A Boyle

We parked at our first scanning site at Nanpu and we could see four Egrets flying towards us. It was three Little Egrets and one Cattle Egret. Then the pond herons came across the sea, twenty nine in total and overhead were dozens of Pacific Swifts.

The mudflat started to reveal itself as the tide receded and we all split up to cover our assigned scanning areas and, of course, the knots, as predicted, didn't show up in big numbers - but the sight of low flying migrants arriving on the coast was spectacular.

There were hundreds of Buntings including at least fifteen endangered Yellow-breasted Buntings and ten Chestnut Buntings. Wagtails were in the hundreds and we soon notched up three sub species of Yellow Wagtails, several White and Grey Wagtails along with three Forest Wagtails. Flocks of pipits passed overhead along with over a dozen snipe, a Grey-headed Lapwing, Daurian Starlings and a large flock of Rosefinches. The first hour was impressive, and with the knots not arriving, the wind howling and the rain falling, we sheltered on the side of the car, poured cups of tea and watched the spectacle unfold. Three Black-capped Kingfishers, eleven Black-naped Orioles, Cuckoos, Amur Falcons, Oriental Honey Buzzards, Hoopoes, and Blue Robins you name it and it was there. After several hours the numbers started to drop and we headed home for lunch and to enter the small amount of shorebird data we had collected for the day, with the bird log taking rather longer than usual.

As the seawall had been 'pumping' we decided to head to our local park in the afternoon to continue our lucky run. Jason and Drew rang to inform us they were going to the 'Magic Forest' and would catch up with us later. The park didn't have lots of numbers but the diversity was very high with Siberian Thrush, Claudia's Leaf Warbler, Northern House Martin and Chestnut Bunting being the highlights. Then the phone rang. Adrian it's Jason. The forest is pumping and we have yet another Bianchi's type Warbler and a probable Fujian Niltava. We quickly contacted our driver and sped out there. The Niltava was never seen again, but the Bianchi's type Warbler was unbelievably tame and would hop around our feet and 20cm above our heads. Too close for my 500mm!!!!



The second Bianchi's type Warbler 12 05 16. © A Boyle

Swinhoe's Robins, Siberian Blue Robins were common on the ground and Chinese Thrushes, Grey-streaked Flycatchers and Yellow-browed Warblers were common in the trees. On dusk over 200 Yellow Wagtails came to roost and we added yet another Black-capped Kingfisher - our fourth for the day. With the light fading quickly, we started to head home, and just before we hit the edge of town, an owl was spotted on the wires and it was a Little Owl. This was out 121st bird for the day and our highest day total ever.



Siberian Blue Robin. © A Boyle

Adrian, Bob and Chris
The current GFN Team.
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