

Here we go again... Bohai Bay, China. 2012 Update 1

Is this the greyest place in the world? It must be close, especially at this time of year when the grey polluted sky merges with the murky grey mudflats in the shadow of a noisy grey oil refinery. Fortunately, from my favourite scanning position on the grey sea wall, just in front of the grey saltpans, I can see plenty of shorebirds adding splashes of colour to an otherwise bleak landscape!

We are back for another season on the northern shores of Bohai Bay in NE China, where, throughout the spring migration, our small team will be collecting observations from this vitally important shorebird staging site. Things seemed to be a little earlier this year with Ruddy Turnstone, Curlew Sandpiper and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper among the species seen in the first few days in the field, all 4-5 days earlier than in 2011. Both species of Knot are here in good numbers as well with a few thousand of each species present when I first arrived on site and numbers of Red Knot growing steadily ever since. An Oriental Plover flew over Nanpu calling on the 12th, a species we didn't record last year and only once in 2010. The first Asian Dowitcher of the year was at Nanpu on the 15th and the first Nordmann's Greenshank was on exactly the same small patch of mud the following day.



Scanning has been productive with 5 sightings of at least 2 Red Knot from Chukotka being among the highlights so far. Others have included a Grey Plover sporting an ELF from Hong Kong and a Dunlin from Sakhalin. A handful of colour-banded birds from Broome are present including several each of Bar-tailed Godwit, Great and Red Knot. The last few days in particular have seen an obvious rise in the numbers of flagged Knot from Victoria and New Zealand and a Bar-tailed Godwit with a Victoria ELF has also been seen a few times. Even though I have been on my own, thanks to the reasonable conditions and increased bird numbers, I have managed a total of 306 flag/band sightings so far. This compares to 249 in first 9 days of 2011 ... I was surprised when working out the totals!

Other birding has had limited success so far but, as with the shorebirds, it is still early in the season and the big push of many species isn't to be expected much before May. Inland from Zuidong there is a freshwater lake which in previous years has held 1000s of duck in April including Baikal Teal and Baer's Pochard. The later in particular is notable as in recent times few if any have been seen at traditional wintering grounds and records have reduced to a handful of scattered sightings a year as this species is becoming one of the world's rarest at an alarming rate. With such a track record I was rather disappointed when I arrived there to find a sum total of 5 ducks! Presumably something has changed drastically as the site is usually productive through until early May. With most of the trees surrounding the lake cut down since last year there was little compensation in the form of passerine migrants although a male Yellow-throated Bunting was good.

The local park is a nice spot for an evening stroll and always good for a few migrants. What the area lacks in size it makes up for in trees, a rarity in this area! Pallas's Warbler are a daily feature as are Red-flanked Bluetail and Yellow-breasted Tit. A Yellow-browed Warbler on the 17th will be the first of many as will an Olive-backed Pipit at Nanpu on the 18th. According to the field guides, Red-billed Starling shouldn't reach much further north than Shanghai. However, a male in the park on the 15th mirrors April records of this species here in 2010 and 11.

As I write I glance out the window and can see rows of grey apartment blocks overlooking grey streets. Even the cars are dull with 17 out of the 19 that I can see are either grey or black! Still, there are colours to look forward to with the few remaining trees coming into leaf at some point, Bluethroats and Rubythroats to pass through and the hope that one day the sun will shine. By the time you read this Ady will be here with the ability to brighten up any dull day!!

Left: A Chinese film crew working on a program about the site.
Right: The mudflats, complete with indiscernible horizon.



A couple of Ady's photos borrowed from previous years in Bohai...

Red-flanked Bluetail are a typically early migrant, especially the males like this one, as they aim to get to their breeding grounds to establish a territory before the females (less blue but still nice!) arrive. Yellow-bellied Tit are regular in the park during spring with regular flocks roaming around the tree tops, the largest flock so far this year numbered at least 35 birds.



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A report on our 2011 Bohai season can be found here...

<http://www.globalflywaynetwork.com.au/reports/GFN-Bohai-Report-2011.pdf>