

The early Knot catches the bivalve ... Bohai Bay, China. 2012 Update 3

It is certainly true that the mudflats here have been getting smaller due to reclamation although for two days in late April we lost them altogether! A thick fog engulfed the northern shores of Bohai Bay dropping the visibility to just a few metres and we couldn't find any birds! This however was a minor blip on an otherwise successful week as the sun shone, the temperature rose and by the last few days we were out on the mud in T-shirts wishing the thigh-length waders weren't so necessary!

It seems that news about the importance of this area is getting out as this year we have had a string of visitors keen to see the area for themselves. Doug Watkins and Lv Yong from wetlands international dropped in for a couple of days fortunately just missing the fog. Nick Murray from Queensland University stopped off on his tour of the Yellow Sea as part of his project mapping and quantifying the decline in intertidal areas in East Asia. A presentation of his work only confirmed what is widely known and that some serious changes need to be implemented for the shorebirds to have any future. The film crew from April was back to interview Chris and a second film crew are among the people due to visit in May.

Red Knot numbers continued to rise (now at least 35 000) while Great Knots and Bar-tailed godwits tailed off slightly. Marsh Sandpipers remain in very good numbers although prove difficult to count as they roam around the salt pans with the daily fluctuations of water level. Up to 7 Nordmann's Greenshank are sighted daily at Nanpu and the Asian Dowitcher flock peaked just short of 200 at Zuidong. A run of Grey-headed Lapwing sightings may relate to a couple of birds lingering in the area as few have been seen in other years. A single Grey-tailed Tattler on the 5th May was an unusual record for the site as was Long-toed Stint which has been seen twice in the last week.



The annual Nordmann's Greenshank photo, Nanpu Saltpans (*Adrian Boyle*)

With the arrival of Chris and Ginny Chan in early May we now have 4 pairs of eyes scanning the shores and mudflats of the study site. This extra coverage not only increased our daily sightings but allowed a bit more freedom to explore the area without losing out on too many scanning opportunities. Some exploration was necessary as many of the Knots seemed to abandon their regular roosts in favour of the larger ponds behind the oil depot. Not only is this area difficult to get to but the viewing is poor with birds generally distant and very difficult to approach. We turned to the mud for our best scanning and most mornings were spent following Knots across the flats several kilometres offshore.

Chukotka Knots again featured with a minimum of 12 individuals now recorded including 3 with Geolocators. A small increase in Red Knots of the *piersmai* subspecies indicated an arrival of 'Broome birds' with a few new colour-band combinations seeming to back up our assumption. There is still a lot to learn about the migrations of these birds with many returning individuals seen two or more weeks earlier than they were last year. A few flagged Turnstone were noted as this species increased in numbers and Broome, Hong Kong and Victorian Curlew Sandpiper are now being seen regularly. As we reach the half-way point of the season's fieldwork we now total 1976 flag and band sightings which is 545 more than this date last year. We are not sure of the reason for this increase but our sighting numbers have been much higher since week one. It may be down to our slightly different tactics, concentrating on the mudflats rather than the roosts. We do also have more marked birds migrating from Broome due to our continuing work there. Total numbers of birds seem similar to 2011.

In our last update we mentioned passerines being caught locally in illegal mist nets. Although not quite the same situation shorebirds are also getting caught up in nets out on the mud. As well as being an important area for birds, the coastline here supplies many locals with their livelihood. Throughout the low tide period many, often hundreds, of people can be seen out on the mudflats collecting shellfish and checking fishing nets. This in itself can have a negative impact with increased disturbance to the birds; however, more disastrous to some individuals are the fishing nets. Different types of nets differ in their impact with the ones strung in long lines far out on the mud the most dangerous. They are of such fine material that they are very difficult to see and some birds, predominantly shorebirds but also some migrant passerines, fly into these and become entangled and drown as the tide comes in. At Zuidong in particular there are 100s of metres of these nets that have claimed numerous victims since we have been here. The birds are often left in the nets by the fishermen so it seems there is no intention to catch them, just unfortunate by-catch in an otherwise successful fishing technique. Another type of net is very numerous, often with several rows strung in a series of small funnels the entire length of the coast and are designed to trap small shrimp as the tide rises and falls. Fortunately it is not a common occurrence but we have found Terek Sandpiper and Common Greenshank trapped in these nets as they go in after the shrimp. The Terek was successfully rescued and released whereas the Greenshank wasn't so lucky. Although these present a potential problem to the birds, a mudflat with nets is far more preferable and less devastating than an industrial site and no mud at all.



Top left: Greater Sand Plover in a line of nets (*Matt Slaymaker*) Top right: migrant White's Thrush in fishing nets over 1km offshore (*Adrian Boyle*) Below: Low shrimp nets stretching into the distance (*Adrian Boyle*)

With much of our time taken up scanning and the subsequent data entry little passerine birding has been done. Even so, it is hard to miss the Brown Shrikes when they arrive as they line the fences along the seawall. Interestingly our first sighting was on the 28th which is over a week earlier than in 2011. Evening wanders in the town park produced a scattering of migrants including a small fall of Yellow-browed Warblers on the 1st May with a conservative estimate of 150. Little Bunting and Olive-backed Pipits were also moving in good numbers especially the 4th-6th May when many birds were coming straight off the sea heard calling as they passed overhead on the mud flats.



Our second Asian Stubtail, again in the town park (*Adrian Boyle*)

With the migration watchers in Roebuck Bay recording numerous departures in early May it seems that more Red Knot are on the way ... we wait and look forward to their arrival! We have already had several Knots making quick movements travelling from Broome to Bohai in 7 and 8 days which halves records from previous years. With regular scanning continuing in Broome and here we hope to pick up some more records showing this pattern.

Read all about it in update 4, coming soon...



Just one last photo to finish ...



Early morning on the Mudflats – the distant speck is Matt wondering where the Knots have gone (*Adrian Boyle*)



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