

Knot much field time left now... Bohai Bay, China. 2012 Update 5

As we approach our last few days in the field we are exhausting our supply of clever and witty update titles using the word 'Knot'. Perhaps some would say we ran out weeks ago.

The weather was variable with some sun and some smog. With the tides as they were we had few options and had to rely on long walks across the mudflats over the midday period to gather most of our sightings. However, in the last few days we have had a couple of early morning sessions in good light with variable success.

Red Knot numbers dropped suddenly as we had a noticeable departure of the *rogersi* subspecies. Overall counts halved and our 'subspecies ratio scans' swung heavily in favour of *piersmai*. This was expected as many birds depart for the northern breeding grounds, less expected was a second peak in numbers. Having dropped to less than 20 000 Red Knot numbers surged up to close to 30 000! Where have they come from? There have been birds feeding in the saltpans, perhaps they have just come back to the mud for a final few days feeding before leaving? Every season is a bit different and the behaviour of the birds is changing from day-to-day ... there is still a lot to learn! With the influx of birds comes an influx of colour bands and we are still seeing a lot, including many new individuals seen for the first time this season. We have now surpassed our 2011 total for flags and band sightings.



It took 4 trips and almost 7 months on site but Ady finally made the effort to take a good Red Knot portrait. This one of the *piersmai* subspecies (Adrian Boyle)

Just like last year, WWF have taken a huge interest in the site and have provided much support, not least of which is financial support in conjunction with WWF-Netherlands and Beijing Normal University, that has made our work here possible. A conference organised by WWF was held on the 25th-26th in nearby Tangshan to offer an opportunity for interested parties to meet, discuss the problems and raise awareness about the issues. The first afternoon was very entertaining with various speakers including our own Professor Piersma. The second day included a field trip to the mudflats where participants were able to see the site as well as a large flock of Red Knot. Overall it seemed to be a success and with the media attention that was received anything that can raise the profile of the site can only be a good thing.



WWF Conference, talks and field trip (Adrian Boyle)

We thought the bird of the season had slipped us by as we focused on the mudflats. A visiting birder reported a Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the salt pans on the 22nd. We checked the area a little more frequently than usual but if it was still there we failed to pick it from the thousands of Red-necked Stint present. On the 25th Chris was lucky enough to get great views of one feeding at very close range on the receding tide at Zuidong. The rest of the team were a few kilometres away at Nanpu and with no Knot to scan we made our way over to Chris to take a look. The bird flew off just before we arrived so Matt got out to scan and check through some other birds on the way. This turned out to be a bad decision as he was the only team member to not see it when it came back, albeit briefly, to the original spot! Spoon-billed Sandpiper is among the most threatened birds in the world and certainly one of the most high profile. This is the first we have seen here but it seems reasonable to assume that they occur annually and can easily be missed in amongst the large numbers of stint present, especially when we are looking primarily at the Knots! For more information on the Spoon-billed Sandpiper recovery effort see www.sbsproject.wordpress.com.

[Insert SBS photo] ... oh, wait Chris doesn't have a camera ... maybe next time!

As a change of scenery we went on a little exploratory mission to Daqinghe saltworks to the north-east of CaoFeidian development. With the saltworks surrounding our usual study site being so productive we were keen to check out this alternative saltworks and the nearby tidal areas for birds. The survey went well and we recorded a good diversity of species although the densities were nowhere near that of our usual areas. The day will be long remembered, however, for the after survey entertainment! We were guided for the day by a local businessman by the name of Mr Tian. He was familiar with the area, had an interest in birds, very friendly and hospitable and had a fantastic beard. Near the saltworks he took us to an agricultural area where large numbers of birds are trapped illegally for food and the cage bird market. Most targeted are Yellow-breasted Buntings as they are a delicacy in parts of China. We have seen illegal bird trapping before but never on this scale! There were literally hundreds of nets all around the area. We released a few trapped birds and then, with permission of course, had the satisfaction of ripping down many of the nets. In all we released 20 birds and destroyed over 50 nets but still barely scratched the surface and surely, with such poor official policing, the nets will be replaced within the next few days. After this, we visited Mr. Tians farm area where we were surprised to find out he not only owned several racing greyhounds but had his own racing track! When he asked if we wanted to see a race we enthusiastically agreed. We each chose a dog and offered them plenty of encouragement as they sped around the track. 'Grey dog', chosen by Matt, was the comfortable winner. It is hard to briefly sum up just how surreal and special this experience was in a short update that is supposed to be about mud and shorebirds but trust us ... it was pretty cool!

Other birding was limited but a trip to the wetland maze was successful. Over 15 000 shorebirds were present, primarily Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers, as the water level has dropped to leave just a few muddy puddles. Two Oriental Storks flew over and a couple of Yellow Bitterns bolted between reed beds with the constant background soundtrack of multiple Oriental and Black-browed Reed Warblers singing from every patch of vegetation.

A rather long and rambling update this one, thanks for reading! Just one more to go ... next week sometime ...



Influx of sandpipers to the 'wetland maze' (*Adrian Boyle*)



Kentish Plover (*Adrian Boyle*)



Another (better) shot of Zuidong village being knocked down and rebuilt (*Adrian Boyle*)



An unexpected day at the races with a triumphant 'grey dog' (*Matt Slaymaker*)