

Bohai 2013 Update 3 – Part A, Reaching the half-way point of our 2013 stint in Bohai!

Bang! Just as the last update was going to press, it all kicked off. The mudflats became considerably redder as the number of Red Knot more than tripled overnight. The sea wall was swarming with passerine migrants and many other shorebird species began to build in numbers. The weather continued to warm, the light was good, the tides were favourable, and we enjoyed some of the best scanning we have ever had in terms of reading engraved leg flags.

Curlew Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Red-necked Stint were among the other species arriving in numbers over the last 10 days. All species which often feed close to the sea wall and these seemed to draw the Red Knot closer than usual. For several days we were treated to fantastic views as, even when the tide dropped, the Knots were feeding within a few feet of the rocks below. The numbers of Great Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and Eurasian Curlew dropped off gradually with many of our regular, individually identifiable, birds seem to have moved on with them. Marsh Sandpipers seem to be notable by their absence. Often at this time of year there are tens of thousands feeding on the saltpans although so far it just hasn't happened. Perhaps this year they are using a different area within the saltpan complex or just scattered around rather than in large concentrations? At least 8 Nordmann's Greenshank are now present and although scattered on the mudflats they can often be found roosting together in the adjacent saltpans.

A combination of good morning tides and an increase in birds proved a winner and our totals took a good boost. Although Broome Red Knot are yet to arrive en masse we are still picking up new individuals daily suggesting that they are trickling into Bohai. Until they do arrive we can amuse ourselves with all the Victorian and Kiwi birds that are present. We had a couple of days with exceptional scanning allowing us to read more engraved flags than we ever have before – in 5 days we saw as many engraved New Zealand individuals as we did in the whole of last season. Several Red Knot flagged in Queensland are also present as well as birds from Sakhalin (3), Sumatra (1) and Chukotka (10+). Curlew Sandpipers have provided good scanning opportunities also with birds from Broome, Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore all seen. An Asian Dowitcher sporting the yellow flag of Broome was seen briefly on the 5th, the first we have seen here.



Red Knot 'CKY' from Chukotka (*Adrian Boyle*)

An unusual sighting concerned a Curlew Sandpiper seen at Nanpu with a pale blue plastic cable tie on its left tibia. The bird didn't appear to have a metal band or any other tags or marks. This is not the first record of this in the flyway but the origins of these birds are so far a mystery. If anyone has any ideas we would be interested to hear them!

At times the birding has been very good with a few notable falls of common migrants along the wall at Nanpu. As the scanning picked up in intensity (8 hours of observation in the field on some days) we took a step back from other birding but it was impossible not to notice when well over 100 Yellow-browed Warblers are scattered through the sparse vegetation along a few kilometres of shoreline. Richard's and Red-throated Pipits passed overhead daily and various Buntings flitted ahead as we followed the Knot flocks along the coast. Occasional trips to the 'park' always produced something different with Rufous-bellied Woodpecker and Chinese Grosbeak one day and 20 Eastern Crowded Warbler and 5 species of Thrush a few days later. The first Flycatchers began to arrive with Taiga and Asian Brown both regular and sometimes the more colourful Yellow-rumped Flycatcher.



Eastern Crowned Warbler in the local park (*Adrian Boyle*)

In the next week or so we are hoping for another rise in Knot numbers and with them an increase in Broome colour-band sightings. Soon there will be more eyes to look for them as Chris joins us for a few weeks and we will be on our best behaviour as the boss pays us a visit.

Bohai Team 2013

Number bird species recorded so far in 2013	177
Number band/flag sightings so far in 2013 (+ number regions)	2304 (16)
Number NW Australia colour-band Sightings so far in 2013	127
Ratio Red Knot ssp. Rogersi:Piersmai in last 10 days	15199:4148 - 78.6% rogersi

From 23 April to 3 May, I left Nanpu and joined the Fudan University team which is surveying Yellow Sea coastal shorebird habitat, led by PhD student Ingrid Chen and David Melville as a core team member. We explored two major shorebird staging sites in Liaoning Province.

After a 12-hour night train, we reached Dandong city of Liaoning Province. From there we headed towards the Yalujiang estuary, a key stopover site for shorebirds, and is recognized by the establishment of the Yalu Jiang National Natural Reserve.

In the morning we visited the area east to the Reserve. While pointing our telescopes at North Korea at the other side of the Yalujiang river, we adjusted our focus on flocks of bar-tailed godwits and great knots, scanning for bands and flags. After lunch we walked on the mud of 'Site 5' of the reserve for scanning. On the second day in the early morning high tide we conducted count of shorebirds together with the reserve staff, while in the afternoon during low tide we walked on the mud to scan for flags and bands. Overall, we got over 20 colour-banded great knots from North-west Australia, and over 30 colour-banded Bar-tailed Godwits banded in New Zealand and Yalu Jiang, plus many engraved flags. Other highlights include two NWA geolocator great knots, and two great knots which were equipped with radio transmitters last year (of course the radio transmitters are already shed).

'Nature Reserve' in China does not equal to a permanent safe haven for migratory birds. In 2007, the boundary of the Yalu Jiang Nature Reserve has been adjusted so the reserve area is reduced by about 7,000 ha to accommodate the developments of Dandong Port. As the east and west ends of the reserve had been recorded with highest counts of shorebirds, the on-going reclamation and industrial developments outside the 'new' reserve boundary poses serious threat to the shorebirds staging at this area. While driving through industrial areas built on reclaimed mudflats on our way to the coast, the emptiness of the 'industrial' buildings are very noticeable. Are all these developments necessary? No matter what's the answer, many more mudflats are currently reclaimed for the sake of 'economic growth'.

After three days in Yalujiang, we headed towards west, aiming to explore the coasts of the cities Jinzhou, Panjin and Yingkou, where three rivers (Ling River, Shuangtaizi River and Liao River) reached the sea. The centre of this region is the Shuangtaizihekou National Nature Reserve, established as an important site for red-crowned cranes and breeding Saunder's gulls.

At the town close to Shuangtaizihekou National Nature Reserve, we were welcomed by Mr. Zhang, the chairman of the Panjin Bird Watching Society. With his help we entered the Reserve early in the morning and had a first look at the area. Again, 'nature reserve' in China doesn't mean no development; the Shuangtaizihekou nature reserve is the largest reed farm in the world, and oil wells are all around the reed fields and out in the sea. At the coast there's also hundreds of sea cucumber ponds, while on the mud loads of workers are harvesting shellfish and other seafood.



left- One of the many Oil wells in the region

right -The 'three-wheel': the ultimate field transportation if you're ready for a massage of all your muscles!

In the late afternoon, we returned to the area where the highest number of shorebird occurred, according to Mr. Zhang. With a massive spring tide rising, we witnessed waves of great knots flying over us, and swirling in the air! The 'count' that we originally planned gradually became an impossible task as flocks of ten thousands of shorebirds, mostly great knots, flew over us mainly in the direction from east to west. After the mudflats were all inundated, huge flocks are swirling around in the air, it seemed that the shorebirds were very excited, one reason could be that they could not find suitable roosting sites. As night approached, the birds are still not landing and it had been over 1.5 hours.

David, Ingrid and me, standing at different locations, tried to estimate the number of shorebirds, and our estimates on the number of shorebird ranged from 96,000 to 120,000, while about 70%-80% are great knots, so approx. 70,000-90,000 great knots were in the area! That's an astonishing figure, so we decided to stay longer in this region where very little shorebird study have been conducted, but might be an extremely important staging site, especially for great knots. On the following day we didn't record the same high number of shorebirds as the day before. We suspected that the extremely high numbers were a result of shorebirds at neighbouring region being 'pushed' towards our site by the spring tide, in search for roost.

The next day we decided to leave the nature reserve area and went off to coastline of the city of Yingkou. Once outside the nature reserve, we felt the immense pressure of coastal reclamation: new ports, a university city, a sport centre were being built on the reclaimed land. We did found some remaining narrow mudflats. Afterwards we headed towards Jinzhou city and a similar story, mudflats were being destroyed for the development of a port, an industrial area and a high-end residential/recreational area with man-made beaches. Moreover, the sea cucumber ponds that extended kilometres towards the sea had destroyed massive areas of mudflat.

On the last day we finally found the way to the mudflat at the mouth of Ling River, located just west of the Shuangtaizihekou NNR. After riding on little 'three-wheel' for 3 hours, we reached the end of the sea cucumber ponds finally seeing the mud! We walked on the mud to scan, but with our limited time and an outgoing tide we didn't get much. On our way we learnt that a new highway and a hotspring resort planned to be built in the area, taking over more reed fields and mudflat.

While we anticipated vast mudflat in this region from Ingrid's google-earth satellite images, after 6 days of finding mudflats in this region, we figured out not much had left, and more destruction are on the way. This is a similar situation faced by Ingrid since she left Shanghai where the survey began.

Ginny Chan



Huge flock of Great Knot



Earlier in the season we built a hide (above) for Ady to photograph shorebirds in a small creek just behind the sea wall at Nanpu – here are some of the results so far...



Sharp-tailed Sandpiper



Little Ringed Plover



Red-necked Stint



Little Stint



Temmick's Stint



Long-toed Stint

To learn more about our work here as well as see reports and updates from previous field seasons in Bohai check out the Global Flyway Network website ... <http://globalflywaynetwork.com.au/>

