

GFN fieldwork season on the Luannan Coast, Bohai Bay 2014, Update 4.

It has been a mixed 10 days since the last update, from scope-shaking winds to clear skies and sun. We lost a whole day to heavy rain, an unusual event here, which had knock on effects as the sea wall was wet enough to make driving difficult for a couple of days. We are now benefiting from a series of good early morning tides – excellent for scanning but the 4am starts are a little less enjoyable.

This is a busy time here in the Yellow Sea. Many birds have left Bohai already as the northern breeding grounds thaw out and present new opportunities to the migrants that survive the journey. At the same time birds are still arriving here and there are many more to come. Great Knot and Red-necked Stint have been seen migrating north and Marsh Sandpiper have all but left with just a few scattered individuals remaining. Despite a recent influx of new individuals, overall numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit are down and many of the remaining birds look fat and ready to go. Red Knot numbers seem to be up a little recently but they are widely scattered along the coast and in the salt ponds so estimating total numbers is even more difficult than usual. There has been a clear influx of 'Broome birds' and perhaps some of the *rogersi* have begun to move on. Whatever the actual number of birds, the spectacle of many thousands pouring en masse from the roost to the mudflats is an impressive sight. White-winged Tern have really started to arrive in numbers with thousands now scattered around the salt ponds. 515 Asian Dowitcher at 'North Beipu' is an excellent count with several thousand Broad-billed Sandpiper also in the area. Up to 3 Nordmann's Greenshank were lingering in the Nanpu area but haven't been seen for a few days and may have moved on.

Right on cue our numbers of Broome colour-band sightings have stepped up a gear and we are hoping for a big late-May finale like in previous years. Unusual Red Knot flag sightings have included a regular South Korea bird, at least one from south-west Western Australia and one from Hong Kong. A couple of new 'Chukotka birds' have been seen including a couple seen here in previous years and we have had several sightings of birds from New Zealand carrying Geo-locators. Two flagged Grey Plover that have been present for most of the season (one from Japan and 'S6' from Hong Kong) are still seen occasionally and are now in beautiful full breeding attire. Bar-tailed Godwit Y1YYLY has been seen for the first time this season. This bird has been seen annually (usually very regularly) at Zuidong but its favoured creek has changed a little and few birds have been using that area this year. We don't know where it is spending its time now but it seems to pop in to Nanpu occasionally and it is good to know it is still alive!



Red Knot feeding in the salt ponds at high tide (Adrian Boyle)

Many aspects of the migration of Red Knot is still a mystery, particularly those spending the non-breeding season in north-west Australia. We watch them leave Broome ... then it all gets a bit hazy as many birds aren't seen here until several weeks later! Do they stop and if so, where? Do they fly straight here but we don't see them right away? All hard questions to answer based on colour-band sightings alone. In the last week a couple of birds have bucked the trend and seem to have done a direct (or almost direct) flight. Thanks to the dedicated work of local Broome volunteers making regular visits to scan the shores of Roebuck bay combined with our daily efforts on the Luannan Coast, we have several individuals seen there and here within relatively short time periods. One within 7 days, one in 8 and another in 9 days, all excellent records! As usual there are more questions than answers but it is a start...

Although our core study site is still the mudflats of Nanpu we regularly visit the adjoining areas of coast. We still see shorebirds here but they are nowhere near as productive as they have been in previous years and act as a constant reminder of how quickly things can change and how precarious is the future of the birds here. Zuidong, an area where we conducted a large proportion of our scanning during our early visits to Bohai, is now flanked by a 6-lane highway and building work on reclaimed land is well underway. The small fishing village on the banks of the river is unrecognisable. To the north, birds are almost completely absent from Beipu. Small numbers spill over from the mudflats at Nanpu but the days of scanning as the birds streamed over the wall to the first available mud at this site seem a thing of the past. A little further and our view is blocked by a new wall currently under construction. One of the areas favoured by the Knot in 2013 is being made substantially smaller as more than 1km² of mud is 'reclaimed'. In this particular area the reclamation seems to be for Shrimp ponds and the area of mud taken up for this expands a little every year, slowly eating away at the birds feeding areas. The stretch of mud where we estimated 80 000 Curlew Sandpiper in 2011 no longer exists.

Mid-May is the time when passerine migration really kicks into first gear. The sea wall has been good for migrants and, whenever our busy fieldwork schedule has allowed time for a visit, the local park has produced some quality birds. Siberian Blue Robin, Brown Shrike and Taiga Flycatcher are all recorded daily now and less regular species have included Blyth's Pipit, Forest Wagtail and Chinese Thrush at Nanpu and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler at Zuidong. In the park Mugimaki Flycatcher, Black-naped Oriole and Rufous-tailed Robin have all been seen and the nesting pair of Great-spotted Woodpecker have started feeding young. A female Chinese Flycatcher, also in the park, on several dates is only our second record in Bohai following one in the same location in 2010. On the 15th, 2 Mongolian Lark were present on the sea wall at Nanpu. This is our 4th record here now (1 in 2010 + 2 in 2011) but it seems like an unlikely species to turn up here naturally. They are common in the Chinese bird markets and although all 'our' birds have seemed in good health and excellent condition we will probably never know their origins. A visit to the 'Wetland Maze' was a little disappointing. This 'reserve' used to be very good for birding but, like the nearby lake, it seems to be constantly under development and our visit produced few birds.

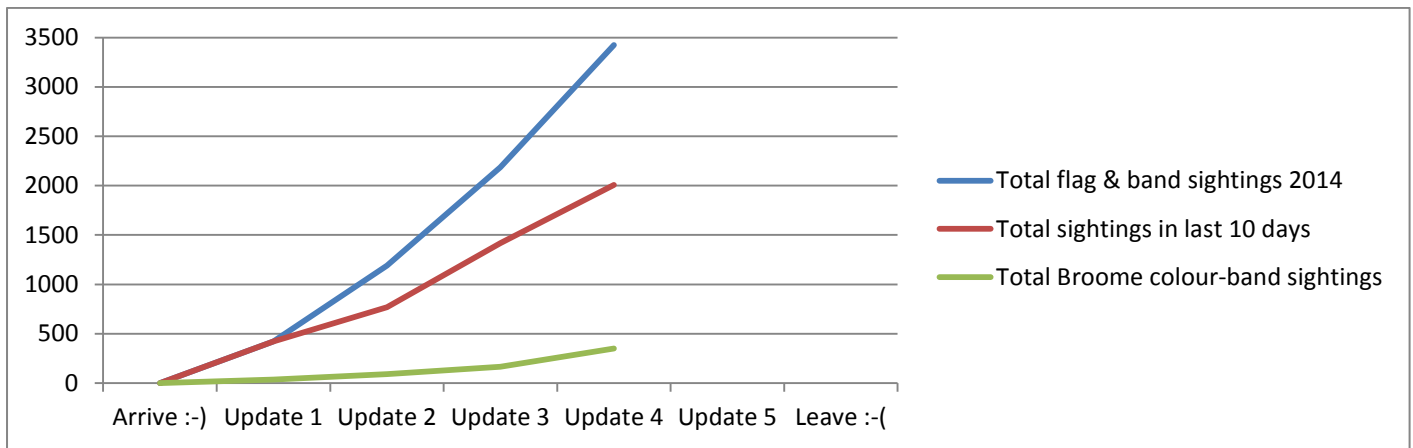
We are looking forward to the arrival of more birds and hopefully some slightly later starts in the morning.

The Dream Team

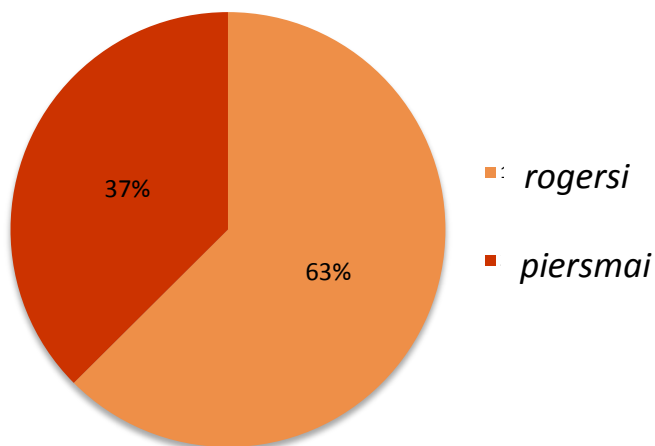


Chinese Flycatcher and Citrine Wagtail (*Matt Slaymaker*)

The numbers so far...



Red Knot sub-species ratio - Update 4



Number species seen so far:

191

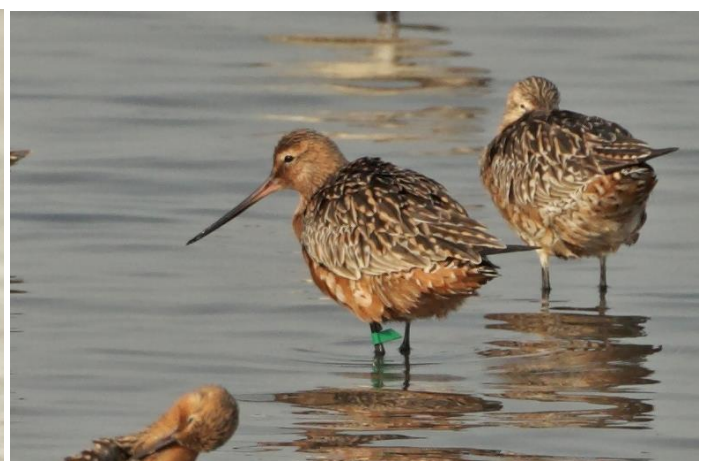
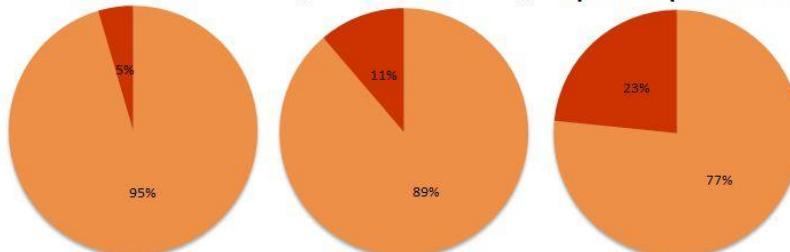
Flagging regions:

19

Flagged species:

16

Update 1 (3680 birds) Update 2 (5291 birds) Update 3 (7225 birds)



SW Western Australia flagged Red Knot and Thailand flagged Bar-tailed Godwit (Adrian Boyle)



Reclamation at 'North Beipu', on the left Asian Dowitcher feed as the new wall is closed behind them (MS)



The highway at Zuidong still has little traffic and the small fishing village is having a complete makeover (MS)



Although the funnel style fishing nets are not currently being used there are still lines of the fine mistnet-like nets up, especially at Zuidong, and birds are sometimes an unfortunate by-catch. The Red-necked Stint above was found just as the tide was rising and released alive but the Oriental Scop's Owl below was not so lucky. (MS)



A convenient hiding spot in the roost provided some great photographic opportunities for Ady. As well as the Red Knot on page 1 these are just a small selection of the images taken...



Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Adrian Boyle*)



Sanderling (*Adrian Boyle*)



A very close Red-necked Stint and displaying Black-winged Stilt (*Adrian Boyle*)



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/>