

BOHAI UPDATE #2 MAY 01 2016

Hi All

Welcome to the 2nd update from the Luannan coast, Bohai Bay, China. Let's talk about the weather! It's hot! Unseasonably so from our eight years of experience - we usually experience some cold and wet weather in the first weeks of our field season, but not so this year, the odd chilly morning and a drop of rain, but other than that, warm and today its 32 degree C 90 degree F!

Scanning is going well, so far we have recorded 1,117 marked birds from 24 sites on 11 species. Red Knot lead the way with 669 sightings.

We plan to have a 'spotlight on species' for each of our upcoming Updates this season so here goes with the first one.

Spotlight on Species: Marsh sandpiper

As we drive to the Luannan coast mudflats in the dawn light, we pass through the salt ponds. Two of these ponds, that are adjacent to the road, sometimes have thousands of birds roosting or feeding in them. This spectacle relies purely on the water levels. Deep water, and a few Pied Avocets and Black-tailed Godwits might be there. Low water level with a bit of the pond floor on view, and the sight of thousands of shorebirds is very evocative in the early morning light. One of the most abundant birds using these ponds is the Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*), a beautiful delicate shorebird with a very fine bill, long yellowish legs, a white underside that is finely streaked on the upper-breast, and grey upperparts with beautiful patterning in breeding plumage. In North West Australia it is commonly recorded from September to April, but rarely in big numbers. It favours freshwater wetlands, but will happily use the coastal habitat when the inland lakes are dry.

Here in Bohai, Marshies (as we refer to them), occur in big numbers, and this year we have had a count of 7,510 in just the few ponds mentioned above. The biggest count we have recorded here was an estimate of over 10,000 on 26/04/2012. These numbers are absolute minimums for the area, as it is impossible to count the whole salt ponds. The total area is enormous with literally hundreds of ponds. Not all of the ponds are suitable for shorebirds to use, but many are. Small numbers of shorebirds feed on the edges of the ponds, but we only see the ones that we drive alongside. The ponds are, very roughly, 20km by 10km in size and there are many more aquaculture ponds in the area. So the Marshies we see are only a fraction of what is probably using the site. This is reflected in the EAAF estimate for this species. It is between 100,000 and 1,000,000! A difficult species to monitor as it doesn't gather in large roosting aggregations or massive flocks feeding on inter-tidal mudflats. Marshies arrive here in large numbers between April 16th and 21st and all but a handful have gone by May 10th to 16th.

The only marked Marshies we have seen here, have been from the freshwater lakes near Broome. They are not commonly caught at banding sites in the EAAF.

A conservation concern for Marshies, is they get caught in a certain type of fishing net much more than any other species do. Here at our Luannan site over the years, we have found dozens of dead Marshies in nets, but almost no other species. This may have something to do with their foraging methods? Dozens doesn't sound much, but there must be literally millions of these nets used around the Yellow Sea.



One of the thousands of Marsh Sandpipers at Nanpu. © A Boyle



Marshie caught in a net. © M Slaymaker

As usual, we are recording the presence of both subspecies of Red Knots that visit this coastline. The proportion of the piersmai subspecies of Red Knots (that spend the non-breeding season predominately in NWA) have increased in the flocks. In our first five days here, they only comprised up to 5% of the flocks. Now they are up to 37%.



Mostly rogersi subspecies arriving on the mud - spot the Dowitchers.

We are still not getting that many colour banded (CB) birds from NWA yet. But what is noticeable is that all the first sightings we have of CB NWA Red Knot, are birds that 'live' at 80 Mile Beach and we only have one that is a Roebuck Bay bird so far this year. This is a small sample of resightings, but it is quite striking. It would seem odd that birds spending the non-breeding season within 200km of each other, would leave those sites at markedly different times. Some of the birds we see here are like 'old friends'. Bar-tailed Godwit 1YLYB.

He was banded 17/02/2007 aged 2+ (second year of life or older) and is recorded regularly (but not many times) in Roebuck Bay. He is actually recorded more often here in Luannan 6,400km away from his original banding site! While the table below is not hard core science, it appears he arrives here between April 11th and 20th each year.

YEAR	1ST DATE SIGHTED	LAST DATE SIGHTED	TOTAL RESIGHTS AT LUANNAN COAST
2010	20-Apr	22-May	9
2011	14-Apr	15-May	10
2012	14-Apr	28-Apr	4
2013	11-Apr	18-May	10
2014	12-Apr	16-May	14
2015	17-Apr	13-May	5
2016	14-Apr	TBC	2 TO DATE

In 2010 we were noticing a lot of metal bands on Curlew Sandpipers - but with no flags. When Adrian photographed one and we were able to read the band from the images, it indicated we were getting these birds from India. India is officially outside the EAAF and in the Central Asian Flyway, but of course birds don't give a damn for our human-imposed boundaries!

We encouraged the shorebird banders in India to start using flags, and they first started putting them on in 2014. We had a few sightings last year and one Curlew sandpiper we could ID to an individual (M44). Already this season we have identified three Curlew Sandpipers and one Asian Dowitcher, two individuals, from two different banding sites in India. Yet another county's birds that depend on the very important Luannan coastline.



The Asian Dowitcher B08 banded in Chilika Lake India in Dec 2014 here in Nanpu April 2016.

The non-shorebird watching has been fantastic yet again since the last update.

So far we have recorded 158 species during this year's visit.

We have managed to fit in nearly daily visits to our local park and of course the sea wall is always producing good birds.

Some of the many highlights are below.

On the 22nd April our team discovered a young Greater Flamingo feeding in the salt ponds during our counts. They don't breed in China and are classed as a rare vagrant, but records over the past ten years have been increasing and are mostly immature birds. It was last seen on the 27th April.



Greater Flamingo, Nanpu Saltpans. © A Boyle

Also on April 22nd we spotted an Isabelline Wheatear on the sea wall. This was our first record of this species in our study area and we have heard it's only the second record for Hebei province.



Isabelline Wheatear Nanpu. © A Boyle



Mongolian Lark. © A Boyle

The beautiful Mongolian Lark is recorded by us annually in small numbers and the individual above was our 2nd sighting for the season and was looking rather splendid.



A nice male Grey-backed Thrush in the park. © A Boyle

Another interesting sighting has been Greater Short-toed Lark, a bird that looks very similar to Asian Short-toed Lark and we have probably overlooked this species in the past. Despite the wonderful birds around on the seawall when conditions are correct to 'bring them down', our scopes are usually trained on the legs of migratory shorebirds on the intertidal mudflats! The mega rare (?) Sulphur-breasted Warbler has now been seen four times and from close study of the images the sightings are of two individuals.

Chris and Ady

May 1st 2016