

Here we go again... another year and another season in the Yellow Sea!

This year your early-season correspondents are the Bohai stalwart Adrian Boyle, here for his 10th year in a row, and Matt Slaymaker, a former regular returning after a three-year break spent experimenting with a full-time 'normal' job.

We both arrived on the 10th and were out in the field the following day to find a good spread of Great Knots across the usual study area with smaller numbers of Red Knot, Bat-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover and other species scattered through the intertidal areas and nearby saltpans.

Hopefully, many of our regular readers will be familiar with the study site as we talk about it quite a lot. For anyone else, we are on the northern shore on Bohai Bay, in the Yellow Sea about 170 km southwest of Beijing. The coastline in this area has undergone profound changes with extensive reclamation stretching back many years and more recent industrialisation. The site has socio-economic importance with fishing and harvesting of shellfish occurring across the mudflats and salt, shrimp and sea cucumbers produced in the adjacent ponds.

Despite the changes and disturbance, the area still attracts several hundred-thousand shorebirds, particularly during the spring passage period, and this is why we are here. We will be out daily until early June, with the aim of recording bands and flags but we also assist regular counts and help out local researchers from Beijing Normal University with their projects. Shorebirds are banded throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and beyond and many pass through here on passage. Our main targets are colour-banded birds from northwest Australia, which form part of a long-term survival study, but we record everything we see to build an extensive database of the birds passing through the area.



Bar-tailed Godwit 4RRYB. This bird was banded at Broome in October 2013 and has been recorded in Bohai Bay on northward passage every year since.

The first few days are always spent exploring the area, working out the best access routes and trying to get a handle on the tides and birds' behaviour. Every year is different and 2018 continues this trend with Great Knots seemingly favouring a different feeding area and a roost site not used for several years. We have recorded a number of flags and bands with several birds from northwest Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, South Australia, among others. So far, we have recorded almost 300 band/flag observations, including 66 individually identifiable individuals.



Ady in the saltponds with Great Knot coming in to roost

We haven't visited all areas yet, but, based on what we have seen so far, there have been no major changes to the site since last year. Away from the coast, construction work continues in Zuidong village and the new highway through the saltponds.



A Matt's-eye-view of the under-construction highway leading through the saltponds to Zuidong.

If thousands of shorebirds weren't enough, the general birding here is fantastic. Since 2010 we have recorded 310 species and are adding new birds to the list all the time. Pallas's Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail and Daurian Redstart are all typically early birds and each has been seen most days and already this season we have recorded 141 species. Unusual species so far in 2018 include a Manchurian Bush Warbler at the local park, our third site record, and four Bar-headed Geese on the mud at Zuidong, our second record, albeit of a species widely kept in captivity and perhaps of questionable origin.

After a few poor years the nearby lake at Caofeidian Conference Centre is back on form with over 2,500 ducks present including a drake Ferruginous Duck, our first record for the area.



Bar-headed Geese at Zuidong mudflats; our second record in the Bohai area since we started recording in 2010



*Left: Manchurian Bush Warbler in the 'Town Zoo'; a scarce species not recorded here every year.
Right: Coal Tit; a species often recorded in small numbers early in the season.*

Team Bohai, 2018

