

Bohai 2018, Update 4 ...

Due to the tides and wandering knots, we have been spreading our scanning efforts along the coast to including a couple of visits to the Hangu Wind Farm (as we call it). This section of the coast is close to Tianjin and has, at times in the last few years, been a favoured feeding area for Red Knots. We recently found several thousand feeding on the mud there and a few days of scanning produced many colourbands and flags on a variety of species. A count of 1,703 Asian Dowitchers on May 13th was a highlight. This count is remarkably similar to last year, when we recorded 1,754 at the same location on May 8th, 2017.



Some of the thousands of shorebirds seen at the Hangu wind farm. Note the potential moving hazard for shorebirds and the introduced *Spartina* grass becoming established on the mudflats.

On May 16th another shorebird census of the area was completed but it was hampered by dense smog/fog. Despite this a little short of 100,000 birds were counted across our regular sites. The counters comprise Beijing Normal, Tianjin Normal and Princeton University students and their volunteers along with the GFN team.

Red Knot are the main focus of GFN studies here at Bohai and it is interesting and heartening to see the counts have produced neigh on double the numbers compared to last year.

15/05/2017 = 14,577. 16/05/2018 = 38,720.

Of course, there are many variables at any site and here is no different; however, last year we 'felt' there was never more than about 20,000 Red Knots in the area and this year we have definitely 'felt' that there are many more. This has been borne out consistently in the counts. All sites (from Zuidong in the south to Hangu in the north) are counted simultaneously on the most favourable tides we can find in the given window. The weather, though, is out of our control and thick smog made this count a little challenging, but we prevailed.

We don't believe for a minute that the EAAF population of Red Knots had crashed and rebounded in 12 months! The counts from the major non-breeding sites in Australia and New Zealand during the Austral summer of 2017/18 didn't show any alarming declines. The big question is where the Red Knots were last year or why are they back this year? There are many possible reasons; perhaps last year the majority of *piersmai* birds left Australia late, or stopped for longer elsewhere, like Borneo? Maybe many didn't arrive until some of the *rogersi* had migrated north, so the peak of both subspecies didn't coincide? A yet to be discovered/

uncounted site nearby might have been exceptionally good last year but isn't this year. As technology for tracking these amazing birds develops some of these mysteries will be solved.

While many species reach or are near their peak numbers at this time, some birds are also notable by their absence. Both Eurasian Curlew, Eastern Curlew and Dunlin numbers have dropped off since the start of the season and we last recorded a Nordmann's Greenshank on the May 18th. Marsh Sandpipers are down to a few scattered individuals, although numbers were never high this year as their favoured salt pond habitat was always too deep (as discussed in previous updates). On May 19th we witnessed some migration over town with 80 Common Greenshank and 20 Whimbrel flying high and heading north in the classic vee migration formation.

Our scanning efforts so far this season have produced a total of 2742 flag/colour-band sightings. This includes almost 700 identified individuals from 14 different banding regions. We have collected 577 observations of northwest Australia colour-bands, including 176 different Red Knot individuals. If the birds continue to cooperate, it is set to be a very productive year.

One of the great joys for us this season is that our 'drivers' (this does not seem a suitable term as they help us with many things and are our friends!) are now the proud owners of binoculars and a telescope and 2 Chinese-language bird books, one dedicated to shorebirds. Recently when Chris returned to the van from a scanning session hoping to be driven to the next site the car was locked and he couldn't see Xiao Liu. After a quick search with his binoculars he saw him sitting on a bund wall of a salt pond scanning a flock of Red Knots. They have been spotting some flagged shorebirds and even taking photos of them through their telescope with their phones. Ady and Matt are worried they may not be required next year!



Xiao Liu introduces one of the local fishermen to shorebirds and scanning for colour bands!

The birding this week has been fantastic. On top of the good numbers of regular migrants, we have found a few unusual and/or out of range species. White-bellied Redstart, Little Gull and Asian Koel were all new birds for our ever-increasing 'Bohai list'. Long-billed Dowitcher, Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Yellow-legged Buttonquail, Fujian Niltava, Tiger Shrike and Hawfinch are all species we have recorded only a handful of times previously.

We have been keeping daily bird records of all bird species seen at all the sites we visit now for 9 years and have a great data set showing when certain species pass through the area along with records of rare and vagrant species. So far our total bird list for this season stands at 237 out of a total of 315 that we have recorded over those 9 years.

Here is a cracking, full-frame shot of the Redstart and some dodgy record shots of some of the others...



White-bellied Redstart



Clockwise from top left- Long-billed Dowitcher, Little Gull, Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Fujian Niltava (with some white fluff in the foreground!).

Additionally, hedgehogs have become a regular feature in the local park and we now find them snuffling around the undergrowth most evenings. They seem to be Amur Hedgehogs although in previous years we have also recorded Daurian Hedgehogs in the area.



Amur Hedgehog at the 'zoo' and a Tolai Hare on the sea wall at Nanpu



The less enjoyable aspects of field work, flies and flat tyres!

