

BOHAI 2019 – UPDATE 3

We are never short of visitors during our GFN studies here at Luannan. On May 6 we were pleased to host the New Zealand Ambassador to China, Clare Fearnley. This was the second year running that New Zealand have shown very clearly their commitment to the conservation of the Luannan Coast and the Red Knots that flood through here in the northward migration season, with an ambassadorial visit. Remember that nearly the entire Red Knot population of the EAAF pass through for a portion of their staging time in China. This includes both the *rogersi* and *piersmai* subspecies, tens of thousands that spend the non-breeding season in New Zealand.

The common theme with the ambassadorial visits appears to be strong windy conditions. Two years ago was strong enough to have us holding firmly to tripods to prevent scopes blowing over and various hats ending up in the ponds. This year wasn't quite as strong, but hair would not stay in place for official photographs! (This didn't include Chris).

The ambassador was with us for some hours and also met a number of students. This gave us time to give information on the site, the birds and the issues pertinent to their conservation. It also allowed time for a 'Wellington picnic'. That is a coffee tucked behind the van to stay out of the gale! I learnt this phrase from Wen and Michael Powles who accompanied the Ambassador. Michael is a previous Ambassador to China and Wen works as the Political Counsellor at the New Zealand Embassy in Beijing. Wen was formally Consul-General in Shanghai.

I presented a book written by Theunis Piersma to the Ambassador on Theunis' behalf as he had left the day before.



Chris presents a gift to Ambassador Clare Fearnley

My favourite image from the visit shows what happens when a Grey-faced Buzzard flies past a group of birders even if they are supposed to be having an official photograph with a VIP!



Official photos with (left) and without (right) passing Grey-faced Buzzard

GFN extends a heartfelt thank you to the NZ delegation for their time and interest and political efforts. We hope to host them again next year – come prepared for a windy day.

Talking of visitors, Kath Leung joined us for her fourth visit and added a great skill set to our scanning efforts. Professor Zhang, various, PHD students and volunteers from Beijing Normal University were and are here. Zhang has been a great financial and scientific collaborator of our studies here. The inspiration for the creation of GFN and its scientific leader, Theunis Piersma, was with us for an all too brief period. Theunis joins us in all our fieldwork and then we bombard him with questions whenever we are (k)not scanning. It is a very busy and productive time. The Bohai field team would like to take this opportunity to thank Theunis for the huge amount of fund raising he does to keep the Bohai work going and all his continually positive encouragement to us.



Professors Zhang and Piersma with one of the fishermen we see every day

First impressions of a new scanner

Since 2015, I've helped GFN with their colour-banding studies in Roebuck Bay and Eighty Mile Beach in north-west Australia, but this year I was invited to accompany the veteran team of Chris, Adrian and Matt in Bohai Bay, and finally visit an area I've heard so much about.

Roebuck Bay and Bohai Bay are in the same time zone and share the common theme of a diverse and innumerable shorebird community, but are mostly worlds apart.

A network of newly-tarred but as yet unfinished superhighways allows for surprisingly effective movement of our microbus between the town of Nanpu and our mudflat study sites. Unforeseen barriers that seemingly appear overnight force us down alternative paths, which lead along salt and shrimp pond divides and can be described as anything but smooth. These divides provide sensational birding, and close encounters with migrant shorebirds and songbirds are the norm.

Small stands of trees in this flat landscape are also worth their weight in gold, if you are a flock of migrating birds, or a birder full of anticipation (like everyone in the team!). It's near-impossible to find a natural forest, but I've been impressed with the scale of re-vegetation efforts close to towns we've passed through, and these are clearly becoming critical stopover points for migrating songbirds desperate for a rest or meal. China is striving to become more 'ecologically civilized' and it's not difficult to see how small conservation efforts will go a very long way to preserving biodiversity in such a highly modified landscape.

I've quickly learned from those around me that the continued presence of the Nanpu mudflats is a major conservation achievement of GFN and the many individuals and organizations that have worked towards its preservation. These wonderful intertidal flats are invisibly connected to Roebuck Bay, and it's mind-boggling to know I'm watching birds that I've held in my very own hands in Broome. Surrounded by ever-increasing industry and aquaculture, this isolated fragment of mud is obviously critical to the survival of hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds.

I was pleased to discover my childhood cricket fielding skills were transferrable to a regionally-endemic game, the name of which translates to 'rusty bucket' in English. Rusty bucket is most often played from the top of a Bohai Bay seawall, and involves participants carefully selecting several handfuls of small to medium-sized stones, and taking turns lobbing or pegging them into a 20 litre rusty tin bucket from a set distance. Typically, it is only the upper third of the rusty bucket that protrudes from the mudflat, and during the larger tides is filled twice daily to the rim. On just my second attempt at my new found favourite sport, I was crowned "Number One!" by all three of my competitors, after two perfect 'splashes' during a single morning session. Although I'm yet to grasp the true technicalities of the game, it appears imperative it can only be played at extremely low tides, when the Red Knots are at the distant tide's edge or absent altogether.

Chris and I have now been here for a week, but every day has brought its surprises and challenges. However, everywhere here feels safe, the Chinese people are friendly and curious, and the street-side food has been sensational. I'm more excited than ever for our final month of research.



Nigel at work



and play

Shorebirds

Our scanning over the past 10 days has not been easy with very low, neap tides causing the birds to stay far away on the mudflats, even at high tide. So very few birds were able to be scanned from the sea wall or in the roosting ponds.

We did try walking out on the mud to get closer to the birds but had little success.

A lot of the mud this year seems to be more uneven than in the past. This causes many small pools to develop and hence many of the knots are standing in water and we are unable to effectively scan their tarsi and hence see the bands that we seek.

Red Knots are present in good numbers with 41,500 on the 8th May. As yet the main influx of NWA Red Knots hasn't happened. We have now recorded 55 individually colour banded Red Knots from North West Australia but we expect that figure to leap up as the NWA birds flood in over the next 2 weeks.

We have recorded our highest ever count of Great Knot since our work started here in 2010 totalling 12,966 on the May 8 count. This is probably due to various factors; many sites in the Yellow Sea are being studied and most of them show declining bivalve densities. This is a big concern for many shorebird species and the exact causes are yet unknown, but pollution is surely a contributing factor. This issue is, of course, in addition to the major issue of habitat loss

Some species that breed at lower latitudes have already started leaving for their breeding grounds. Marsh Sandpiper, Eastern and Eurasian Curlew numbers have decreased noticeably.

As some species leave others are still arriving (e.g. Red-necked Stints and Curlew Sandpipers) or even still on their way (e.g. the previously mentioned *piersmai* Red Knot)

Water levels in the ponds are similar to that of the past few years and water depths remain very high. This precludes most species from being able to forage there and we never record the tens of thousands of shorebirds in the ponds that we did several years ago.

Due to the conditions in the ponds our main focus is on the mudflats for scanning and counting.

We have now recorded 1,441 flags and bands on 11 species from 23 banding locations. This includes 308 individually identified individuals.

One of the highlights since last update was finding yet another flagged Relict Gull and not only did it have a flag on but a satellite transmitter. We look forward to learning more about this individual.

Grey-headed Lapwing update

Recently we returned to see how the breeding lapwings were doing. We are excited to report that all 3 eggs had hatched and we saw 3 chicks only a few days old. We have also since discovered another site where lapwings were showing signs of breeding. What is so different about this year?



One of the 3 recently hatched lapwing chicks

Non-shorebird sightings

As mentioned in earlier updates the passerine migration had a slow start but now we are in peak migration and whilst scanning the shorebirds there can be hundreds of buntings, pipits and swallows passing overhead. The small strip of vegetation along the sea wall is providing temporary habitat for many of the migrants such as stonechats, thrushes, flycatchers and several bunting species. Recently we were lucky enough to observe a single, critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting. Unfortunately in the past this species would have migrated in large numbers but hunting for food has decimated the population.

<https://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/news/yellow-breasted-bunting-next-passenger-pigeon>

On the 2nd May we were lucky enough to flush a White-breasted Waterhen a new bird for our Bohai list which now stands at 320 species.



The White-breasted Waterhen flying over the mudflats and back into the reeds

The Global Big Day is organised by eBird and is a challenge to see how many birds can be recorded during a single day around the world. Of course, this challenge is not only fun and gets people outdoors but also collects a wealth of data about bird distribution and populations. If you don't already submit your bird sightings to eBird we encourage you to do so. Even a technophobe like Chris uses it!

We have participated in the 2017 and 2018 big day so 2019 was no exception.

In the past we were lucky enough to have morning incoming tides, so this allowed us to scan the shorebirds for bands and flags as normal whilst recording many of the species passing overhead as mentioned above.

However, the tides were not ideal this year and were high around 2pm.

So, we got up early and visited the local park to start birding before heading off to one of our study sites to walk out on the mud to scan Great Knots and search for colourbands. While scanning we records some 'good birds' such as Garganey, Red-throated Pipit and Red-breasted Merganser.

After several hours of scanning and recording many bands and flags it was time to visit most of our regular birding sites many of which Nigel had yet to visit such as Tree lane, Eco lodge and Caofei Lake

It was great fun and we finally made it home around 7.30 after 12 hours of scanning and birding with a total list of 130 for the day. This was the largest number recorded in China on that day (not that that is important of course. But we still thought we would mention it!) There were many highlights such as Oriental Scops Owls, Nordmann's Greenshanks, Common Snipe, and Siberian Thrush. However, Long-tailed Shrike and Black-winged Kite were long overdue additions to our personal Bohai list.

6,816 species were recorded from around the world with 32,500 people participating. For more information click on the below link:

<https://ebird.org/globalbigday>



The endangered Chinese Egret at our Zuidong site is a species we rarely record



A stunning male Green-backed Flycatcher was a welcome sight



Northern Boobook an uncommon annual visitor



1 of 2 Oriental Scops Owls found during the eBird Big Day

The GFN Team 2019

10 May 2019