

## **Highly important sites for wintering Spoon-billed sandpiper found in Myanmar**

### **The findings of an International survey of the Species Recovery Team raise hopes for saving the species**

The observations of a total of 84 Spoon-billed Sandpiper during an international survey of coastal Myanmar in January 2008 not only highlights the importance of these coastal ecosystems, but also suggests that Myanmar hosts important numbers of wintering birds of this critically endangered shorebird. This is equivalent to 10-15 % of the global population and these figures raise hopes for a species in rapidly decline in the breeding and non-breeding areas (no records from Bangladesh this winter! and 50% less breeding pairs in Chukotka (Eastern Siberia) from 2006 to 2007!

The international survey team is part of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team with members of ArcCona Consulting, Cambridge, UK, and Kiel, Germany, JAWAN, Tokyo, the BirdLife partners in Russia (RBCU) and Thailand (BCST), teamed up and well looked after in Myanmar by local BirdLife partner BANCA and local Wetlands International partner MBNS. The 14 survey members were divided in two teams covering the mudflats of the Martaban (Mottama) Bay east of Yangon near the Thai border and selected coastal habitats in the SW state of Arakan (Rakhine), near Bangladesh.

The experience of previous surveys in India, Bangladesh and Thailand, combined with the interpretation of satellite images allowed both teams to target selected suitable habitats in the Bay of Bengal, such as sandy island surrounding intertidal mudflats in Arakan, where 35 Sbs were counted at one high tide roost. Among them was one juvenile ringed with a light blue flag in North Chukotka in the last summer (see photo). Being the only observed flagged among 84 birds, the survey results hint to a potentially larger population yet not discovered in the breeding grounds.

The Arakan coast has never been surveyed before and the Martaban coast only marginally in 2003. So it was no real surprise to find so many Spoon-billed sandpiper and further globally threatened species, such as 27 Indian Skimmers, several pairs of Sarus Cranes and huge numbers of wintering Bar-headed Geese. Due to restricted access, strong winds and inappropriate transport means only a small section of the promising Arakan coast has been covered. The survey team believes that Arakan most likely hosts many more of the globally endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Although small scale reclamation of the mudflats for prawn ponds has been observed the coastal zones are largely healthy ecosystems, which not only provide the crucial habitat for thousands of Arctic waders, but also livelihoods for hundred thousands of people in coastal communities, relying on small-scale fishing, shellfish and crab harvesting on the mudflats.

The Martaban team found in total 48 Spoon-billed Sandpiper, which were much more scattered over the huge mudflats of the Bay, which is believed to host more of 50,000 waterbirds with globally significant numbers of Broad-billed Sandpiper, Lesser Sand plovers and Pallas 's Gulls. No reclamation of the highly dynamic coast has been observed here. However, as a major threat the hunting and trapping of waders, including Spoon-billed sandpiper, was identified. Local fishermen, who displayed a profound knowledge of waterbirds, which they catch preferably in new moon nights, have caught 4 birds only last December.

In direct response to our findings the local authority in Arakan secured the important site temporarily and arranged signs to be posted immediately. A formal protection process will take longer and will also be based on future survey results taking into account the understanding of the entire suitable coastline. The government authorities of Myanmar were very supportive during the preparation and conduction of the survey and indicated further activities to secure the protection of the species in Myanmar.

World Wetland Day 2008 is celebrating healthy wetlands for healthy people. The survey teams found the coastal wetlands in Myanmar largely in a healthy condition, which not only provide the crucial habitat for many ten thousands of Arctic waders, but also the livelihoods for hundred thousands of people in coastal communities, relying on small-scale fishing, shellfish and crab harvesting on the mudflats. The gradually encroaching reclamation of mudflats for prawn pond development along the western coast can jeopardise the healthy wetlands in the longer term. Likewise the continuation of trapping waders in the Martaban region can shift the species in to even deeper crisis. Suitable alternatives for local communities should be developed in both areas. Follow up expeditions are planned to further survey suitable habitats along the 2,000 km coastline of Myanmar and help promote further conservation activities.

The survey was operated in Myanmar by WATT (Wildbird Adventure Travel and Tours) and generously funded by Keidenran Foundation in Tokyo with additional contributions by the RSPB, UK, BirdLife Asia, The Manfred Hermsen Foundation and private Russian sponsors. The surveys would not have been possible without the full support of the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism of Myanmar. We are grateful to all of them for their support.

Contact:

Dr Christoph Zöckler, ArcCona Cambridge  
Dr Evgeny Syroechkovskiy, RBCU, Moscow  
Minoru Kashiwagi, JAWAN, Tokyo  
Dr Htin Hla, BANCA , Yangon