

Spoon-billed Sandpiper Expedition Myanmar 2009

Summary

In January 2009 a second expedition was convened in search of Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Between Jan 11 and 26 an international team of German, British, Russian, Canadian and Burmese scientists under the lead of BANCA and ArcCona, Cambridge, and under the auspices of BirdLife International surveyed critical areas of the Myanmar coast for the globally threatened Spoon-billed Sandpiper (*Calidris pygmeus*). In total of 63 birds were found by two teams, operating in the Rakhine (Arakan) coast and in the Bay of Martaban. Despite stable numbers around 48 in the Bay of Martaban, the species is continuing to decline sharply. In fact, the number at the island of Nan Thar near the Bangladeshi border dropped from 35 in 2008 to only 14. This largely corresponds with the decline observed in the regularly monitored breeding sites in Chukotka, where the number also halved over the past two years. Additionally numbers dropped to almost zero in North Vietnam and only 8 birds were found in Bangladesh this year, where simultaneous counts were conducted.

A new site along the Rakhine coast was found with hosting at least one Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the coast of the Bay of Bengal appears to host a few more sites with Spoon-billed sandpiper. The Gulf of Martaban, close to Thailand is the most important wintering site as the survey results confirm. At least 48 birds were located in the vast mud flat area. This number is estimated to be a minimum and well below the total number that winter in the estuary a result of three factors:

- 1) Despite increased efforts this year's survey only covered 25-40% of the suitable habitat
- 2) Most of the survey was conducted during neap tides, when it was not possible to visit many areas, due to large amounts of deposited sediments and low water levels across the intertidal area.
- 3) Flocks of waders were difficult to get close to, making it difficult to check all flocks for Spoon-billed sandpiper.

Taking all this into consideration it is likely that this site holds more than 100 Spoon-billed sandpiper, making it by far the most important wintering site at present. However it has no protected status at present, putting the site at risk for development. The team also counted more than 78,000 waterbirds, of which 65,000 were waders, and considering the coverage more than 100,000 waders are estimated to winter in the area, raising the site into the league of the 25 top global sites for waders. Among the waders the survey team found at least 7 globally endangered Nordmann's Greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*) and a new wintering site of 42 previously unrecorded Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*), usually wintering in South America only. The Bay and its mudflats are extremely difficult to survey, due to its high dynamics in the tidal system. Especially at spring tide the area is prone to a one meter high tidal bore, which can be very dangerous for operating boats and people. The waders utilise the vast mudflats according to the constantly changing conditions, which are determined by the tidal dynamics, leaving parts drying out for over a week. This means that some prime feeding areas on spring tides are unavailable to waders on neap tides. This results in considerable local movements within the Bay to utilise nutritious sediments, freshly deposited elsewhere in the mudflats.

Not only at Martaban but also on Nan Thar island there was evidence of hunting and trapping of birds. Targeting mainly larger birds, the trapping techniques though catch and often kill also smaller waders that strangle themselves in the net. According to one local hunter, who appeared to be very knowledgeable on waders and geese, about 30 Spoon-billed Sandpiper are caught on Nan Thar during one catching season from November to April. He estimated that 2/3 of the small waders die before they were released. Increasingly younger hunters also kill smaller birds, reflecting the increasing pressure of an increasing coastal population on the natural resources.

Realising the devastating effect immediate action was taken and with the support of a member of a local environmentalist group a trapping stop for hunters from two villages catching birds on the island was negotiated with immediate effect in return for a small compensation. In the longer term the local environmentalist group is encouraged to develop an economic and ecological sound alternative for the local communities, of which community based eco tourism seems a likely alternative.

The scale of hunting and trapping in the Bay of Martaban is still largely unknown but vital in the conservation of the species and there is urgent need to conduct a survey of the local communities to establish the extent of trapping. The knowledge gained about the Martaban area will enable a detailed waterbird/ Spoon-billed sandpiper survey to be designed, which takes into account the constantly changing conditions in a high energy system.

Taking into account the continued sharp decline also observed in the wintering sites immediate action needs to be taken. As major threats to the wintering birds have been identified it is possible to address these immediately and effectively with only little resources required.

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