

Summary report of 2005 Chukotka expedition



The Spoon-billed Sandpiper continues to decline. Although the decline in the survey area of Meinopylgino, South Chukotka, compared to 2004 seems to be less drastic, the species is still on a downward trend. With 32 recognised territories and an estimated 40 pairs, the survey results from 2005 confirm the continuing decline between 2003 and 2004, from 80 pairs to only 45 pairs. This decline was initially assumed to be a result of the freak weather conditions in 2004, when flooding occurred throughout the breeding season in many suitable nesting areas. In addition, numbers of breeding Spoon-billed Sandpiper have also declined in neighbouring areas further south and west. In the region of Khatyrka, the population was estimated in 1976 to be around 8-10 pairs (Tomkovich pers.comm.), but in 2005, only 3 pairs could be found breeding there. This confirms once more the overall decline of the species in the last 30 years to only a third of its former population. Based on the new findings the total population estimate is more likely to be at the lower end of the estimated 300 – 500 global pairs.

With all signs pointing to low success after hatching and fledging, and the low return rate of juvenile birds, the main conclusion remains that the species is suffering a clear recruitment problem. It appears increasingly evident that the main reason for the declining population lies outside the breeding area. Despite some problems there, it seems unlikely that the main reason for the decline lies within the breeding area itself. Moreover, the lack of juvenile birds returning to the breeding area suggests that the main reason for the decline has to be elsewhere along the flyway. It appears that juvenile birds in particular suffer on the non-breeding grounds. Whereas several adult birds were observed to return to the same breeding sites in 2004 and also in 2005, still no juvenile birds from 2001 (30 ringed) or 2003 (88 ringed) have been observed to return to the breeding grounds and start to breed. Only one such bird has been observed displaying, and then only reluctantly. Further surveys might reveal a more complete picture of the return rate. However, we can no longer wait for those results. The continuing decline requires immediate action at a global level.

Urgent and international co-ordinated action is required if we want to prevent this charismatic sandpiper from going extinct. The species uses a flyway that is very vulnerable to major changes and considerable efforts are required to sustain the vital stopover and wintering sites for the species. There are indications that requirements might differ in some ways between the adult and juvenile birds, reflected in the poor return of juvenile birds compared to adults. There are still many unanswered questions, especially in respect of the stopover and wintering sites. However, action for the recovery of the species cannot wait. The Recovery Team established in 2004 needs to continue its work and, jointly with officials and others from the range states, to start working on an action plan to halt the continuing decline of the species.

In addition, it is important to raise wider awareness of the species and its precarious situation, in particular in the countries along the flyway. It might be necessary to conclude a Memorandum of Understanding, which will engage as many as possible of the 14 - 16 countries most closely involved.

The survey of potential stopover sites, and the search for the main wintering sites, seem increasingly crucial for understanding and for undertaking the necessary next steps in safeguarding this vulnerable sandpiper population.

Christoph Zöckler, Cambridge

Evgeny E. Syroechkovski, Moscow

