

Saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper – Finding and Protecting Unknown Sites

Baz Hughes has worked at WWT for 32 years. As Head of the WWT Conservation Action Department, he is responsible for WWT's reintroduction and headstarting programmes and has managed the Spoon-billed Sandpiper project for WWT since 2009. Nigel Clark acts as Chair of the UK Spoon-billed Sandpiper Support Group and as Scientific Advisor to the EAAFP Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force. Rhys Green has worked on the science needed to conserve bird populations for 40 years, mostly at the RSPB and the University of Cambridge. He studies the effects of conservation actions on Spoon-billed Sandpipers, and ways to make more accurate measurements of their population trends, survival and movements. Guy Anderson has worked for the Conservation Science and Species Recovery teams at RSPB since 1999 and has led and taken part in Spoon-billed Sandpiper surveys in Myanmar since 2011 and in Jiangsu, China, since 2014. Prof. Chang Qing, Professor of Zoology at the Life Science School of Nanjing Normal University, has been appointed by the Chinese government to lead Spoon-billed Sandpiper research and determine conservation activities in Jiangsu Province. Evgeny Syroechkovskiy initiated the Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation programme in 2000 which led to the development of the wider international effort and the establishment of the EAAFP Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force, which he chairs.



The Spoon-billed Sandpiper is Critically Endangered on the World Conservation Union's Red List. In 2010, it was thought the species numbered no more than 100 pairs, was declining at a rate of 26% a year, and could be extinct within 10 years if urgent conservation action was not taken. The international conservation community swung into action. Saving this enigmatic species could act as a flagship for saving the 50 million waterbirds that use the East Asian–Australasian Flyway – the most important and most endangered flyway in the world.

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force immediately began work to prevent illegal hunting on the wintering grounds in Myanmar, Bangladesh and China – the most immediate threat to the species – and to address the most important long term threat – reclamation of crucial staging sites in the Yellow Sea. In a landmark decision in 2018, the Chinese Government announced that it was banning any further reclamation of its coastal intertidal wetlands, though much work remains to be done to ensure that there are adequate feeding and, more importantly, roosting sites for Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other shorebirds along the Chinese coast.

As extinction appeared imminent, an emergency captive breeding programme was established at WWT's headquarters at Slimbridge, UK, with birds and eggs sourced from Chukotka in the far north east of Russia. In 2012 a "headstarting" programme began in Russia – taking eggs, rearing the chicks in captivity, and then releasing fledged juveniles – a process which results in five times more fledglings than the wild birds achieve themselves – as it prevents the natural losses due to predation and adverse weather conditions. A total of 186 Spoon-billed Sandpipers have now been released,

representing about 20% of the productivity of the wild population. Headstarted birds are being re-sighted away from the breeding grounds at the same rate (ca. 25%) as wild birds, so are thought to be surviving as well as wild birds.

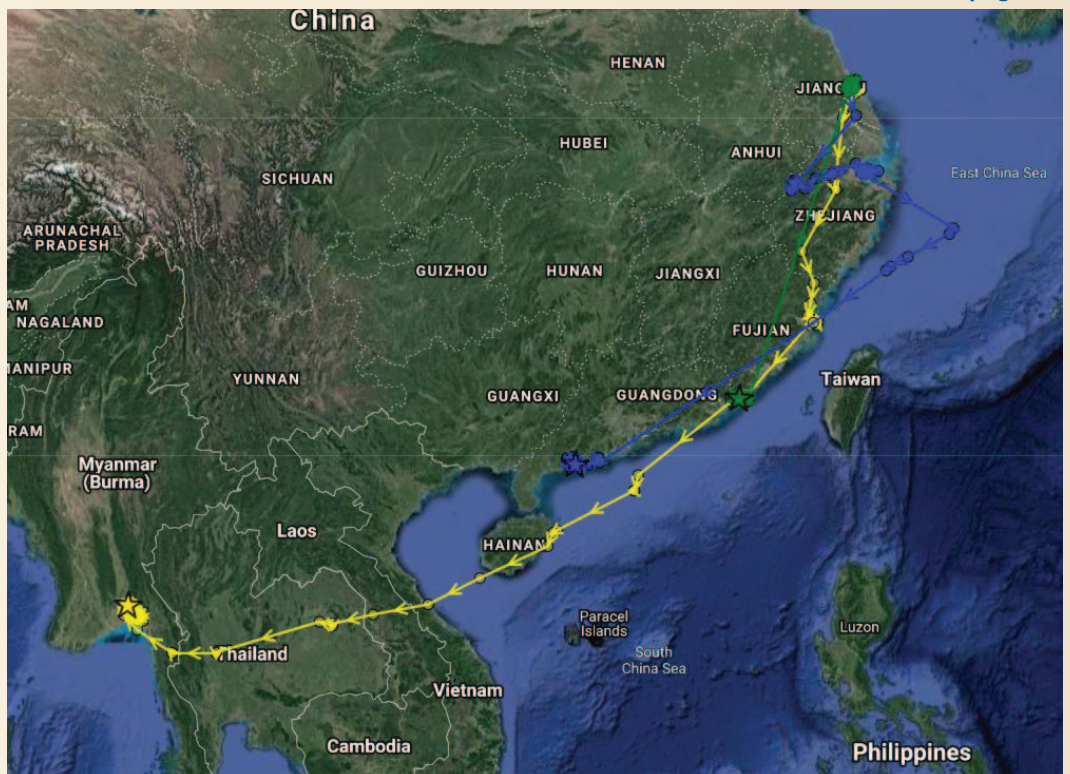
We don't know where 75% of Spoon-billed Sandpipers breed and where around 50% winter. In autumn 2016, we therefore began working with Microwave

Telemetry Inc. to try to locate these "missing" sites. Twelve 2g solar-powered PTT tags were fitted to Spoon-billed Sandpipers – glued to the birds' backs, the tags were designed to fall off when the birds underwent their annual body moults. Six tags were fitted in China and six in Russia, leading us to new staging, wintering and breeding sites, including only the second known autumn moult site in the DMZ of North Korea. We confirmed that birds migrating to Myanmar do so overland, and have addressed

continued on page 5



Ewan Weston and Evgeny Syroechkovskiy attaching a satellite tag to Lime 07, 7 July 2018. Photo by Pavel Tomkovich



Migration routes of Spoon-billed Sandpipers ET, HU and CT tagged at Tiaozini, October 2016.