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▲ Spoon-billed Sandpiper photo by Chen Tengyi.



▲ Searching for shorebirds, Tiaozini mudflats. Photo by Hu Zhenhong.

Shorebirds of the Yellow Sea coast

Article by Lynne Anderson

In late 2016, I joined an amazing birdwatching tour in China that included visits to key migratory shorebird sites along the Jiangsu intertidal mudflats of the Yellow Sea coastline. The 11-day tour was hosted by "The Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China (SBSC) (Shanghai) Environment Protection Technology Co. Ltd", which is very competently and passionately headed by Jing Li.

Participants in the tour were incredibly well looked after, from the time we arrived until our departure, by our hosts and guides Jing Li, Zhang Lin, 'Kiwi' (Zhang Lun), and Cheng Tengyi. I was joined on the tour by five wonderful birding companions: Nigel and Simon from the UK, Andrew from Australia, and May from the USA. The tour guides were extremely knowledgeable, as were the two British birders. They were all very helpful and patient with someone like me, who is fairly new to birding.

The tour was a first for the company and it helped to raise funds for their cause of conserving habitat for all migratory birds that rely on the Yellow Sea coastline for their refuelling stops, before and after breeding in Siberia or Alaska. The dedicated SBSC team has helped to lobby government authorities for the protection of these habitats. According to the "Birding Shanghai" website, reclamation schemes have claimed about 70% of this vital intertidal zone, leading to a considerable decline in many shorebird species. The website also reports that the Chinese Government has signalled intent to protect some of the remaining mudflat zones along the Yellow Sea and Bohai Bay.

Fourteen of these sites are on the official "Tentative List" for nomination as UNESCO World Heritage Areas, identified as being absolutely vital to all shorebirds on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF). The EAAF is the largest migratory flyway for shorebirds in the world. It encompasses 22 countries (including New Zealand) and supports over 50 different species of migratory

birds. One of these species, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (more commonly known as the 'Spooner'), which is listed as Critically Endangered, has become the little hero of the cause, to the extent that this enthusiastic and committed NGO has named their organisation after this bird.

The tour started in Shanghai, with the first six days concentrating on coastal sites. Although kilometres of concrete retaining walls for land reclamation have been built along this coast, in some areas enough tidal mudflat has been left to allow shorebirds to gather and feed. Even though these walls are undoubtedly an anomaly, they do - ironically - provide for excellent viewing! We spent the first few days around the Rudong area, including Chongming Island. At Chongming, from the grandstand viewing on a wall, Jing Li spotted a 'Spooner'. However, it seemed to be one bird among thousands and was soon lost from view and not sighted again that day.

On the second day, at the Taiozini mudflat at Rudong, we hit 'The Jackpot'. We had all donned our new water boots and trudded out onto the mud. Although there was no wall to view from, and we couldn't get too near because the birds were quite flighty, we were still able to 'scope up the prize - with an estimated 11 Spoon-billed Sandpipers seen that day by us all. This delightful little shorebird, unaware of its iconic status, goes about its daily business like a pint-sized clockwork toy bobbing its head and mechanically trotting along in fits and starts. Yet it was the last day we spent on the coast before heading inland that I found to be perhaps the most spectacular.

At the deltas of the Xin Zhang and Qing Kou rivers, the spectacle of thousands upon thousands of numerous different species of migratory shorebird has to be one of the natural wonders of the



■ Oriental Pratincole photo by Woniu.



■ Nordmann's Greenshank photo by Tang Zhenghua



■ Little Curlew photo by Woniu.



■ Grey-headed Lapwing photo supplied by Lynne Anderson.

world. Once again, we viewed them from a wall. This time we saw a hovering raptor put fear into the feeding birds. This presented us with the wonder of seeing the entire shorebird flock rising into the sky simultaneously. The moving black clouds that these birds cluster into perform wavering dances, which is a sight to behold as these clouds rhythmically change in shape and form. The spectacle of these waltzing antics in the sky has been performed for millennia, and the thought that this may one day be lost is just intolerable. These are everyone's birds: Australia's, New Zealand's, Asia's, the Pacific's, Siberia's and Alaska's.

The species that we saw on these mudflats and freshwater fish ponds included Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Nordmann's Greenshank, Little Curlew, Eastern Curlew, Eurasian Curlew, Black-faced Spoonbill, Oriental Pratincole, Oriental Plover, Great Knot, Saunder's Gull and Relict Gull.

The last six days of the tour were spent travelling inland to Nanjing, Huangshan and the Wu Yuan districts. These areas, especially the purple mountain of Huangshan, revealed sightings of many sought-after species, including Siberian Rubythroat, Blue-and-White Flycatcher, Pied Falconet, Red-billed Leiothrix, Chestnut-headed Warbler, Grey-sided Scimitar-babbler, Dusky Fulvetta, Greater Painted Snipe, and many more.

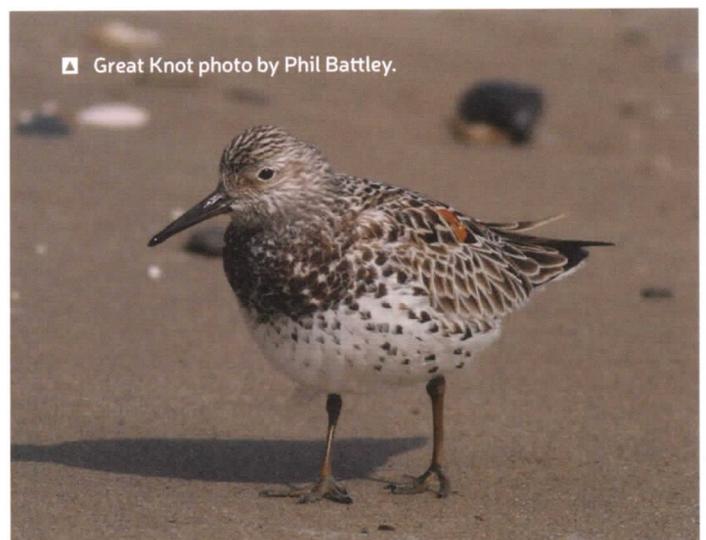
The other big highlight of the tour came on the last day when we sighted the Blue-crowned Laughing-thrush. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to see this species the previous day, we rose at 4.30 am and ventured to a different site: a small village where the bird nests in the school grounds. The school principal and students diligently protect the welfare of this Critically Endangered species by not allowing bird photographers onto the school grounds where the birds nest. A dull drizzly morning seemed to suit the birds well and several were seen at dawn in a small area outside the school grounds. However, these were not

the best conditions for taking photos.

Overall, we saw some 230 different bird species during the tour. It was a great tour - to be thoroughly recommended. The SBSC team are planning another tour which will start on 2nd November 2017, which will once again highlight the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the many other species found in the area, including the majestic Red-crowned Crane.

If you are interested in joining this tour, please email: jing.li@sbsinchina.com

For more information about SBSC: info@sbsinchina.com



■ Great Knot photo by Phil Battley.

Amazing Yellow Sea

Eastern China, from Yellow sea to
Poyang Lake, November 2nd to 17th.

by Tiger Sun



by Luke Tang



by Hu

For more information:
info@sbsinchina.com



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An experience of a lifetime
to see Spoon-billed Sandpiper,
Nordmann's Greenshank,
Siberian Crane, Red-crowned Crane,
Baer's Pochard, Reeve's Pheasant
and more.

All our tour guides have supported
Yellow Sea mudflats conservation
since 2008.

Their rich field experience and
strong local connection will ensure the trip
makes a contribution to the community.

Designed by Guo