



For immediate use

## Getting a handle on Spoon-billed Sandpipers – one of the world's rarest birds

**The Spoon-billed Sandpiper, one of the world's most threatened birds, could be rapidly heading towards extinction. The latest research outlines why, and what we can do to save this enigmatic species.**

Evidence from the breeding area indicates that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper declined by 88% between 2002 and 2009, making this one of the most rapidly declining birds in the world. British scientists have been involved in finding out why this might be and have just published their findings in two scientific papers.

The entire breeding population, found in Russia's far north-west numbered around 1,000 pairs in 2002. This had dropped to 120-220 pairs by 2009. No changes were found in adult survival over the same period and parents fledged chicks in each year. However, the recruitment of these young birds back into the adult population was zero in all but one of the years studied.

Observations from wintering areas confirm the declining trend observed in the breeding areas but until recently little was known about the wintering areas of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The rapid decline of this species resulted in expeditions to possible wintering areas to find out more. In both 2009 and 2010 around 200 birds were found wintering in the Bay of Martaban, Myanmar, constituting most of the known world population.

There was extensive evidence of the hunting of waders in all the sites visited, the majority of hunters encountered knew of Spoon-billed Sandpiper and probably caught them every year. For a species with such a small known breeding population, it is likely that hunting in the wintering area is the major cause of the species' decline, exacerbated by the fact that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's core wintering area happens to be in an area of high hunting pressure.

**Dr Nigel Clark, Head of Projects at the British Trust for Ornithology and a scientist on the Spoon-billed Sandpiper expeditions,** commented, *“Urgent action is needed to find ways to give the local hunters economic alternatives to hunting. An awareness campaign will also help to persuade hunters to release Spoon-billed Sandpipers they catch. It is also vitally important to protect the habitats of the Bay of Martaban. Without urgent conservation action, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper could become extinct within 10–20 years.”*

**Christoph Zockler, Lead Author on both papers,** said, *“Both papers illustrate the critical state of the species that will be extinct in the next decade or so if the rate of decline continues. Fortunately the expeditions during the two winters found what is probably the main wintering population in the world, in Myanmar, and we are confident that we can address the threats caused by hunting and trapping there.”* He added, *“There is some hope. Local people in Myanmar hunting waders for food are keen to cooperate with the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team and find alternatives. This will help to halt the current state of rapid decline.”*

More >>

# Notes for editors

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## 1. The scientific papers

*Rapid and continued population decline in the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Eurynorhynchus pygmeus indicates imminent extinction unless conservation action is taken.* Zockler *et al.*, was carried out in the breeding season and looked at the pressures Spoon-billed Sandpipers faced then.

To view a summary of this paper <http://journals.cambridge.org/spoonbilledsandpiper>

*Hunting in Myanmar is probably the main cause of the decline of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Calidris pygmeus.* Zockler *et al.*, studied them on their winter grounds.

To view a pdf of this paper visit <http://www.bto.org> It was recently published in the journal of the International Wader Study Group. [www.waderstudygroup.org](http://www.waderstudygroup.org)

- Hunting has a greater effect on young birds.** After leaving the areas they were hatched, young birds spend the whole of their first year in the wintering areas and are therefore far more susceptible to hunting than the adults that return to the breeding areas for the northern summer. Anecdotal evidence points to increased hunting pressure on waders during the monsoon season, as fishing is difficult in these conditions. The monsoon season is between May and September, the period the adults are on the breeding grounds.
- Concerted international conservation action** is essential if this species is to avoid extinction. This requires (i) improved understanding of the main wintering and staging areas and associated threats; (ii) addressing those threats that can be tackled with immediate effect, such as hunting; (iii) continued long-term monitoring on the breeding areas; (iv) an exploration of other potential breeding areas; (v) conservation action at all important stop-over and wintering sites along the entire flyway and (vi) consideration of a captive-breeding programme to ensure the survival of this species.
- The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation.** Over thirty thousand birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys. They collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 100 at its offices in Norfolk and Stirling, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry and conservation organisations.

## Contact information

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### Paul Stancliffe (BTO Press Officer)

Office: 01842 750050 (9am to 5.30pm)

Mobile: 07845 900559 (anytime)

Email: [press@bto.org](mailto:press@bto.org)

### Phil Atkinson (Head of International Research)

Office: 01842 750050

Email: [phil.atkinson@bto.org](mailto:phil.atkinson@bto.org)

### Nigel Clark (Head of Projects)

Office: 01842 750050

Email: [nigel.clark@bto.org](mailto:nigel.clark@bto.org)

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