

2004-2007: The search for the wintering area of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper

With the financial support of the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung and under the direction of Dr. Christopher Zöckler an international team of researchers travelled to the Ganges delta in India in January 2005, to Bangladesh in January 2006, and to the little-visited and poorly understood coasts of Burma and Myanmar in 2008 and 2009. In 2013 the decisive excursion to China took place.

At first the results were disappointing, because not a single Spoon-billed Sandpiper could be discovered in India. Reliable statements of local people suggest that these are not the wintering grounds of the species.

Bangladesh has always been suspected as a traditional wintering area due to previous observations, but is expected equally important as its neighbouring country Burma after there has been found 84 wintering birds, with no sightings of Spoon-billed sandpipers in Bangladesh in the winter of 2008.

In both countries, developments and changes in the sensitive coastal ecosystems have been observed. The mudflats, which are so important for the endangered sandpipers, are converted into artificial ponds excluded from the tides. In a few mudflats there are nets regularly set up by locals for catching wading birds. And in accordance with local hunters, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper also regularly ends up in the cooking pot.

In 2013 finally it came to the long-awaited breakthrough: 140 Spoon-billed Sandpipers were discovered resting in the tidal flats near Shanghai - the most nearly complete inventory of adult animals of this kind. At a conference co-sponsored by our foundation, the results were presented and - so the promise of authorities – are likely to lead to the designation of protected areas.

In the breeding areas in the north-east of Siberia, the inventory counts continue. Unfortunately 7 known breeding areas are already abandoned. In five additional areas that are controlled almost every year, the drastic decline was continuously confirmed. First protection measures in these areas were carried out in 2008 and 2009. Among others, local guards were employed who should put a stop to egg robbers, and also directly protect nests from dogs and foxes.