

## CONSERVATION REPORT

# Preliminary survey of shorebird hunting in five villages around Sonadia Island, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Recent surveys suggest that Sonadia Island is a globally important site for the Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*, with records of a minimum 13 individuals in January and 25 in March 2010 (Bird *et al.* 2010). Very limited information is available on shorebird hunting in the area. This preliminary survey on Sonadia, focused specifically on Spoon-billed Sandpiper, gives an indication of the threat to shorebirds that exists due to hunting.

## Survey method

The survey was conducted between 22 and 27 September 2010 in five villages around Sonadia island. The Coastal and Wetland Biodiversity Management Project (CWBMP) had already set up Village Conservation Groups (VCG) and these helped organise meetings in the five villages, Borodia, Ghotibhanga, Dembunipara, Tajiakata and Sonadia-Paschimpara, to which local hunters were invited. Hunters who attended the meetings were briefly interviewed individually using guidelines prepared by BirdLife's Richard Grimmett and Spoon-billed Sandpiper socio-economic survey questionnaires as used in Myanmar. Notes were taken and recordings made during the semi-structured interviews. Hunters who hunt 40–60 birds a week and earn more than 80% of their monthly income by bird trapping were identified as 'professional', 10–30 birds a week earning 50–70% of their income were identified as 'semi-professional' and < 10 birds a month with earnings of < 50% were identified as 'occasional' hunters. Curlew, whimbrel, godwits, knots, redshanks and greenshanks were categorised as 'large waders' and sandplovers, stints and sandpipers were categorised as 'small waders'.

## Results and discussion

A total of 53 hunters were interviewed. Their ages ranged from about 16 to 75, but the majority (80%) were under 50; 56% of them were identified as professional, 33% as semi-professional and 11% as occasional. The professional hunters rely on bird trapping for their family livelihood. The semi-professionals occasionally engage in fishing and

casual labour work but the majority of their livelihood comes from bird trapping. The occasional hunters are mostly fishermen who hunt either opportunistically whilst fishing or deliberately target high-tide roosts at full moon.

The majority (80%) use noose traps to capture shorebirds. The traps are 200–500 mm long and capture both large and small waders. Usually they are set up along the high-tide roosts, levees in salt pans, and small channels, but sometimes across mudflats. Other hunters (13%) use fishing nets of different mesh size to capture birds of different sizes. They usually hunt in small groups between 2–5 and said that net traps are generally successful during high tide at night and account for a large

**Plate 1.** Is this a sign of hope for the beleaguered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*? The bird shown is being released by hunters in Bay of Martaban, Myanmar, 21 January 2010.



number of birds. Only a small number (7%) use bait traps with fish hooks to capture larger waders.

According to the hunters, they mainly look for shorebirds and occasionally ducks during winter, and hunt resident egrets, herons and cormorants or over-summering shorebirds during the monsoon. The professional hunters are usually active 4–6 days a week, semi-professionals 1–3 days a week and occasional hunters once or twice a month. The semi-professional hunters prefer to hunt close to home (up to about 2 km from their villages), whereas the professionals tend to travel longer distances (up to about 6 km) from home. Both groups use traditional wooden boats propelled by hand.

All the harvest is sold directly by the hunter and there is no specific marketplace for the birds, which are usually sold (preferably still live) by simply hawking them in village streets. However, they do have regular purchasers in their villages and occasionally receive special orders from well-off ones. All the hunters are keen to trap large waders as the market price of these birds is BDT 100–150 (about US\$ 2–2.5) each. Small waders sell for BDT 20–40 (about US\$ 0.5) each.

### Spoon-billed Sandpiper hunting

Eight hunters claimed to have captured a total of 22 Spoon-billed Sandpipers between October 2009 and April 2010. They were shown illustrations and asked to describe field characteristics, and all their descriptions of Spoon-billed Sandpiper habitat (small pools on mudflats) and feeding technique were quite convincing. Seven of them claimed to have taken birds from sites visited during the 2010 surveys, including 11 from one visited four times by Bird *et al.* without seeing a single individual, whilst four had been caught at a site where Bird found two individuals.

Conservation work by the CWBMP had included setting up VCGs made up of village elders and influential people and the appointment of three to six 'conservation guards' in each village to prevent migratory bird hunting, sea turtle egg collection and shellfish collection. However, the hunters said this had not interfered with their activities; all the VCGs are inactive and conservation guards are unemployed since the project ended in June 2010. Awareness campaigns by other NGOs have included the collection of hunters' trapping gear, conservation awareness talks, posters, etc. In this

case the hunters stated that they carried on hunting as they had no other livelihood option. In these circumstances on-going awareness campaigns are unlikely to have any effect.

All the professional and semi-professional hunters showed interest in changing their occupations if they could earn sufficient money to support their families. Alternatives they are interested in include fishing boats with gear, small shop-keeping in the village market, and salt-panning.

### Further measures

- Identify any remaining hunters in the five villages surveyed to date and conduct similar surveys in other villages around Sonadia.
- Urgently investigate alternative livelihoods: a large sea-going fishing boat (about US\$ 5,000 including fishing gear) could sustain as many as 12 people (this could be an ideal option for 11 hunters of Sonadia-Paschimpara). Preferably, a small percentage of the monthly income from the fishing boat could go to a fund to cover salary for local staff, boat repair and other awareness activities. Smaller boats would be cheaper but would support fewer hunters.
- Many young hunters are keen to get jobs in Cox's Bazar and there is plenty of hotel and tourism work there. Ideally, negotiating with some key hotels to support Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation work by employing hunters could be useful.
- There are certain regular bird consumers in each village. It might be worthwhile to carry out an awareness campaign targeting these groups.

### Acknowledgements

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### Reference

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