

Rediscovery of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* on the coast of West Bengal, India

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Chakraborty, A., Tripathi, S., & Bhattacharya, B. B., 2018. Rediscovery of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* on the coast of West Bengal, India.

Indian BIRDS 14 (3): 83–84.

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Manuscript received on 08 April 2018.

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* is a Critically Endangered wader, with a total world population of just 240–456 birds (BirdLife International 2018). It breeds in the Chukotsky Peninsula, and in the southern and northern regions of the Kamchatka Peninsula—and mainly winters in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. It has also been recorded from India, Vietnam, southern China, Singapore, and the Philippines (Van Gils *et al.* 2018). Due to a number of factors, including habitat loss in its breeding, passage, and wintering grounds—which are compounded by disturbance, pollution, hunting, and the effects of climate change—the global population has crashed in the last two decades bringing this species to the brink of extinction (BirdLife International 2018).

In South Asia, the main wintering ground for this species has been the Bangladesh Sundarbans (Bird *et al.* 2010; Chowdhury 2015). Here we report a recent sighting of this species from the Indian side of the Sundarbans, at Frasergunge West Beach (21.57°N, 88.23°E), Namkhana Block, Bakkhali Forest range, West Bengal.

Biswanath Mandal, Atanu Modak and the three of us visited the beach on 01 April 2018 from 0830 hrs to 1630 hrs. At 1230 hrs AC, ST, and BBB spotted an unknown *Calidris* species among a flock of Lesser- *Charadrius mongolus* and Greater Sand Plovers *C. leschenaultii*. We observed the bird for about seven minutes before it flew off westwards. ST had good views of its characteristic bill through his telescope while AC and BBB photographed it [59], as did Atanu Modak and Biswanath Mandal (Modak & Mondal 2018).

The distinctive character of the wader's bill, and its plumage definitely identified it as a Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The sand

plovers that were alongside gave an idea of its small size, and the bill shape confirmed its identification. We observed it feeding, by moving its head in a side-to-side sweeping action, which is characteristic of this species (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Though it has been reported from a number of sites from all over India (Collar *et al.* 2001), as per Rahmani (2012), the only two confirmed sites for this species are Chilika, Odisha, and Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu. One bird was ringed in Chilika in March 1981 (Balachandran 2009) but has not been seen since then. A total of 11 birds were ringed in Point Calimere during 1980–1990, apart from several observations (Sugathan 1985), with further sight records made in 1994, 1995, and 1997 (Rahmani 2012).

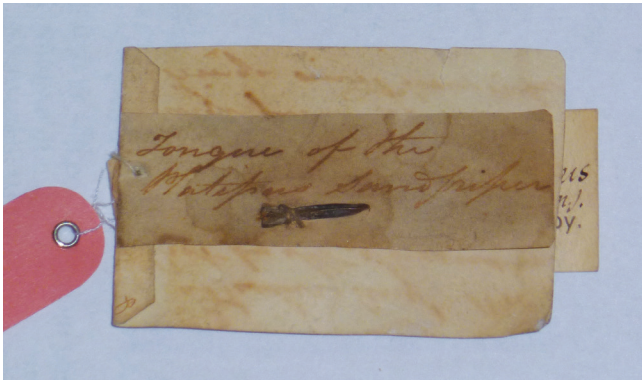
Newcombe presented a single specimen at the meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, held on Wednesday, 02 March 1836 (Newcombe 1836), wherein it was noted that 'this bird is one of the rarest in the world...[and] the Curator was requested to draw a description of it for publication.' In his description of the bird the curator, Pearson (1836), mentioned that Newcombe had shot it on Edmonstone's Island [=Jambudwip] (21.59°N, 88.17°E), which is about six kilometers from the location of our sighting. Blyth mentioned the same specimen as an 'excessively rare and curious species in the Museum' (Blyth 1842: 113),¹ and then brought on record the theft of a specimen of this species, by an employee of the Museum, 'doubtless procured in the bazar, about three years ago, which was previous to my arrival' (Blyth 1844: 178; see also, Collar *et al.* 2001). He subsequently recorded his disappointment at not having collected or seen a specimen himself (Blyth & Strickland 1844). Hartlaub (1842) records a specimen collected by Leadbeater at Saugur [=Sagar] Island, Sundarbans, which was subsequently deposited in the Derby Museum at Liverpool as 'Holotype: D. 3186' (Wagstaffe 1878; see also, Gould 1883; Blanford 1898). The tags [60, 61, 62] and the museum catalogue (Wagstaffe 1878) clarify that this specimen, collected by Stevenson in January 1835, was the one that Blyth (1844) recorded as stolen. Hume procured a specimen from the Calcutta [=Kolkata] market (Hume 1879: 481; see also, Collar *et al.* 2001), and stated that at that time, all birds for sale in that market were thought to have come from within a 40 km radius of the city. To summarise, three specimens had been collected from West Bengal in the nineteenth century: Newcombe (1836); Leadbeater's stolen specimen (Hartlaub 1842; Blyth 1844), and Hume (1879).



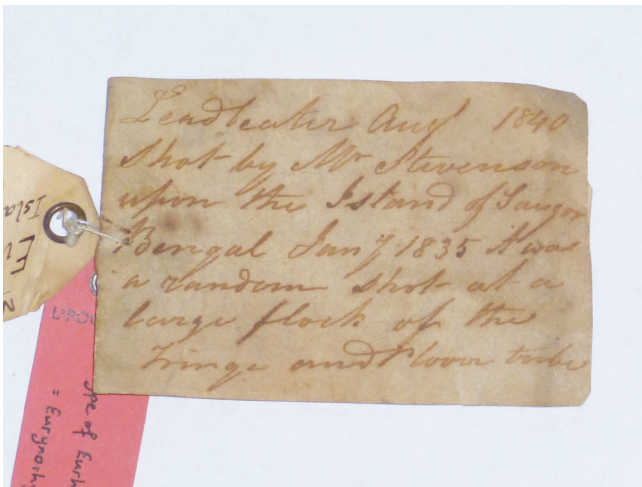
Bidyut Baran Bhattacharya

59. Spoon-billed Sandpiper at Frasergunge West Beach, West Bengal, India.

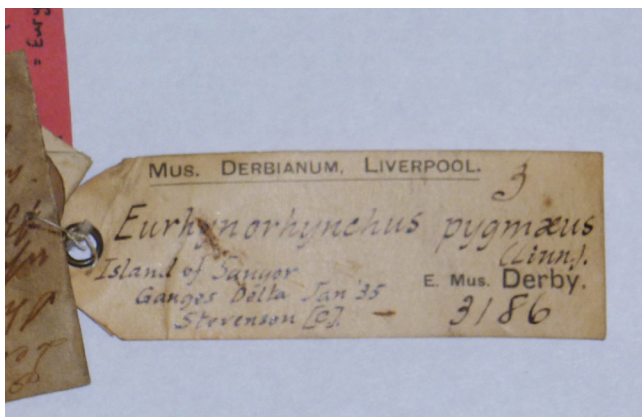
¹ Blyth erred in citing Pearson (1836) as 'As. Res. xix. p. 699', instead of p. 69.



60. 'Tongue of the Platypus Sandpiper.' Pics 60, 61, 62: All (c) National Museums Liverpool, UK.



61. 'Leadbeater Aug 1840 shot by Mr Stevenson upon the Island of Saugor Bengal Jan of 1835. It was a random shot at a large flock of the Tringa and Plover tribe.'



62. 'Mus. Derbiamum, Liverpool. *Eurhynchus* (sic) *pygmaeus* (Linn.). E. Mus. Derby. 3186. Island of Saugor Ganges Delta Jan 35 Stevenson [C.]'

In November–December 2001, Sharma (2003) reported this species from Sagar Island, as well as seven other parts of the Sundarbans, including a single flock of 14 birds. However, Rahmani (2012) doubted these reports.

Hence, ours appears to be the first photographic record from West Bengal, after it was reported four times in the nineteenth

century, two of which, in fact, from the same general area!

Acknowledgements

We thank Kushal Mookherjee, Sujan Chatterjee, and Kanad Baidya for their help with this note. We retrieved relevant literature from the online 'Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology' (Pittie 2018). We would like to thank Tony Parker and Clemency Fisher, Liverpool Museum, UK for providing the information and labels of the specimen they hold.

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