

## **SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER CONSERVATION BREEDING**

### **EXPEDITION TO RUSSIA - 2012**

Three months ago I could only have dreamt that this year's expedition would be more successful than 2011. We had decided to adopt a different, higher risk but potentially higher gain strategy – rather than rear chicks in Anadyr then quarantine them in Moscow (and probably suffer losses like we did last year), we would collect eggs in Meinypil'gyno and fly them back to the UK. Sounds easy doesn't it. I can assure you it was not.

On 22 May, this year's WWT expedition team (Richard Smith, Richard Hesketh and Liz Mackley) left Slimbridge to join the international field team led by Christoph Zöckler – 16 members from Russia, the UK, New Zealand, Germany, Bangladesh and Myanmar - a real multinational effort.

Never in the history of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper expeditions had the journey from Moscow to Meinypil'gyno been as swift. The town of Anadyr, Gateway to Chukotka, is notorious for weather and bureaucratic delays. But thanks to Nikolay's quick logistical manoeuvring, to fast and sweaty teamwork hauling mountains of gear in endless stages to the helicopter, and to great good weather-luck, the team was through the town in under 24 hours and arrived in Meina on 25 May.

Surveying began immediately and the first Spoon-billed Sandpiper was seen on 30 May – 3 days earlier than in 2011 – and the first nest was then found on 15 June – 1 day earlier than last year. The four newly laid eggs were collected immediately, firstly to prevent them being predated but secondly, and importantly, to give the parents the best chance of laying a replacement clutch.

Over the next month or so, under the expert supervision of the New Zealand Department of Conservation's Liz Brown, a total of 37 eggs were collected from 10 clutches, all as soon as they were found – providing sufficient eggs not only for the conservation breeding programme (20 eggs) but also for headstarting – rearing and releasing birds on the breeding grounds (nine Spoon-billed Sandpipers were released by WWT's Roland Digby and Moscow Zoo's Juriy Bragin).

And so the mission to extract the eggs began. Nigel Jarrett and Liza Tambovtseva arrived in Anadyr on 25 June. Again we were blessed by the weather. After a week of continuous cloud, fog and rain (meaning the helicopter couldn't fly), the next day turned out to be glorious sunshine, allowing the WWT egg extraction team to fly in to Meina, collect the 20 eggs, and return to Anadyr – an operation that took only 12 hours, with the helicopter on the ground in Meina for only 30 minutes!



Collecting the first clutch.



Egor Loktionov lifts the eggs into the helicopter.



Liz Brown hands over to Nige Jarrett during the flight.



Team celebrating at the release pen site.

To cut a very long story short, the 20 eggs arrived back at Slimbridge at 10am on 5 July – after a monumental eight day journey from Meina. The first egg hatched only 6 hours later and so began a nine day, 24 hours a day vigil as the eggs hatched. And I am very happy to say that we now have 17 healthy Spoon-billed Sandpiper chicks at Slimbridge – in addition to the 11 birds from last year’s expedition. So 28 birds in total – or maybe 10% of the world population! DNA sexing has confirmed that we have 7 males and 4 females from the 2011 cohort and 8 males, 8 females and 1 individual of unknown sex from 2012. So signs are good that that we may be able to reach our target population size of ten breeding pairs.



**BA Captain Jerry Woodham and Nigel Jarrett.**



**The eggs arrive at Slimbridge.**



**4 day old Spoon-billed Sandpiper chicks.**



**24 hour old Spoon-billed Sandpiper chick.**



**2 week old Spoon-billed Sandpiper chicks.**



**Juvenile Spoon-billed Sandpipers in their purpose-built accommodation at Slimbridge.**

British Airways were truly fantastic. Not only did they provide free flights for WWT personnel, the assistance we received from BA staff was over and above the call of duty. Captain Paul Smiles (Chief Pilot Shorthaul) was incredibly helpful. Working with colleagues including Tim Price, Ben Mason and Martin Jordan, Captain Smiles helped arrange CAA clearance for the power supply and incubator and dealt with the incredibly complicated logistics of getting them on board BA Flight BA0236 to and from Moscow. Captain Jeremy Woodham (Pilot of BA0236), and apparently an avid birder and bird ringer, and his cabin crew took care of Nige on the flight and helped him offload his precious cargo. Last and by no means least, Mary George (Community Investment Account Manager) and Mary Barry (Community Investment Manager) arranged, re-arranged, and re-arranged flight after flight after flight. Thank you BA!



**Captain Jerry Woodham and Spoon-billed Sandpiper.**

I would also like to thank the four main projects partners – Birds Russia, Moscow Zoo, RSPB and WWT, for their considerable efforts in making this year's expedition such a success, and also our major funders – RSPB, WWT, the UK Government's Darwin Initiative and SOS – Save our Species.

Dr. Baz Hughes, Head of Species Conservation Department, WWT

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation breeding programme is a collaboration between WWT, Birds Russia, Moscow Zoo and the RSPB working with colleagues from the BTO, BirdLife International, ArcCona and the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force.



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