

## Spoonbilled Sandpiper ☑

by Jerry Goldsmith

In late October of 2010, Sharon and I were in China for a couple of weeks. While Sharon attended her two days of meetings in Shanghai, I went birding with Birding Pal, Zhong Lin, a driver and another birder from the Netherlands. We traveled around three hours northeast of Shanghai to Rulong Natural Area that included the coastal mudflats of the South China Sea. Luckily, our trip coincided with the height of fall migration.

Any hopes that this “Natural Area” in China looks at all natural, was shattered quickly. The mudflats are bisected by a three hundred mile long concrete barrier wall to protect the low-lying interior from storms—and huge wind turbines as far as my eye could see in the fog and smog. However, the shorebirds that migrate along the coast still use the mudflats, as they do in DE bay, and they wait by the tens of thousands on the mudflats in the inland side of the seawall for the tide to go down so they can feast in the mud flats. We also birded in active and abandoned farm fields, remnant wooded areas and abandoned rice paddies and fish farms.

It was fun to see some of “our” birds in China, including mallard, dunlin, sanderling, northern goshawk, peregrine falcon, barn swallow, osprey.

It was also nice to see infrequent visitors to DE where they belong, such as the wood sandpiper—which many of us saw a couple of years ago at Bombay Hook.

But what I was really hoping to see--and we did see three of them—was the spoonbilled sandpiper. This threatened shorebird has piqued my interest ever since I saw its photo in the book “Shorebirds of North America.” According to our guide Zhang Lin, the official world population of spoonbilled sandpipers is around 500—they are affected by severe habitat loss all along the coasts where they nest, migrate and winter (Cambodia and south).

Overall, we saw 81 species in two days—around half of them life-birds for me. Using my formula of

$$TV=TC/LB$$

where *TV* is “Trip Value”, *TC* is “Total Cost”, and *LB* is number of “Life Birds”,

this was a great two day birding trip!

Among the species we saw were Eastern and Eurasian Curlews, Sandpipers (green, Terek, broadbilled, spoonbilled, marsh, wood, common), Plovers (grey, Kentish, lesser and greater sand, Pacific golden), gulls (blacktailed, Heuglin’s, Vega, Mongolian, blackheaded, Saunder’s, relict), herons (grey, black-crowned, Chinese pond), Noordman’s and common greenshank, plus a number of thrushes, skylarks, starlings, shrikes, egrets, magpies, wagtails, and other species. We also saw bar-tailed godwits—doing

their China stop-over in their counter-clockwise Pacific Rim migration that takes them from Alaska to Australia and back again every year.

As for our travels in other areas—the most common bird in the trees in Shanghai and Hangzhou were light vented bulbuls. Along the Yangtze River, the most common birds were the white wagtail (common) and very scattered egrets. And during a small boat trip on a tributary of the Yangtze, we spotted numerous Mandarin ducks. Overall, there were few birds to see away from the coast—which I attribute to the time of year of our visit and also, possibly, to the rapidly changing climate and vegetation as a 400 mile long lake backs up behind the Three Gorges dam and buries the former Yangtze shoreline under nearly 500 feet of water.

A word about Birding Pals and Zhang Lin. I have now used birding pals to find local guides (some happy just to go out and some do it for a living) in a number of countries and have not been disappointed. It is a great way to find a local expert when birding is only a part of your trip and you are not traveling with your own guides. Zhang Lin is a self-taught birding guide with excellent knowledge of the birds of Eastern China. His skills as a general tour guide can use some improvement (I am interested in history and geography of the places we travel), and certainly, the accommodations in the area we birded (hotel and meals) were not up to Western standards—it is a rapid industrializing fishing area. Breakfast was steamed dumplings and tangerine soda, but for lunches and dinners, we were able to go into the kitchen and choose our own seafood and vegetables, so we had some delicious clams, fish, squid, shrimp, noodle dishes and vegetables. The hotel did have Western toilets (a very big positive!) and hot showers, but Chinese beds (hard) and only Chinese stations on the TV.

A last word for those that might have a chance to bird the seacoast of China (or other coastal areas of Eastern Asia.) I bought the McKinnon *Birds of China* which indeed has all the problems the reviews said it did. Lin used “Birds of Eastern Asia”—as we saw more birds that were vagrants from Korea, Japan and Taiwan, than we saw birds from Tibet or the Gobi desert.