

**News from the International Waterbird Census  
Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia**



PO BOX 471  
6700 AL Wageningen  
The Netherlands  
Tel. +31 318 660910  
Fax +31 318 660950  
E-mail: [post@wetlands.org](mailto:post@wetlands.org)  
[www.wetlands.org](http://www.wetlands.org)

**Issue no. 12 – July 2009**

**Newsletter for national waterbird monitoring coordinators and observers**

**Special Slender-billed Curlew issue!**

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* is the rarest bird in The Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia, with the last confirmed record in Hungary in 2001. This coming winter, 2009 - 2010, we are making special efforts to find this Critically Endangered bird. We hope that all IWC coordinators and counters within the historic and potential range of the species will join in these efforts. Observers in these

countries are being asked to carry out special surveys to try and find Slender-billed Curlews. Counters and birdwatchers from other countries are being encouraged to visit countries where the species used to occur, to help with the search. In this Newsletter you will find articles explaining how you can help, where you need to look, and what to do if you find a Slender-billed Curlew this winter.



**CONTENTS**

**Page**

- 2. Why join the race to find the Slender-billed curlew? And how we can help you win! – Nicola Crockford**
- 5. Narrowing the search - Graeme Buchanan**
- 6. When, where and how to search? - Tom van der Have**
- 7. Map: Verified records of Slender-billed Curlew since 1900**
- 8. Protocol for international Slender-billed Curlew survey efforts, 2009-2010 - Simon Delany**
- 9. Reward offered for finding Slender-billed Curlew in the Middle East! – Richard Porter**
- 10. Identification of Slender-billed Curlew -Tom van der Have, Paschalis Dougalis, Chris Gomersall**
- 11. Detecting rare birds during IWC counts – the Italian experience - Nicola Baccetti**
- 12. The Hellenic Slender-billed Curlew working group - Stratis Bourdakos**
- 13. The first Slender-billed Curlew in Britain – Tim Cleaves**
- 14. What we will do if we catch any Slender-billed Curlews - Nigel Clark**

# Why join the race to find the Slender-billed Curlew? And how we can help you win!

**Nicola Crockford**, Chair, Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (RSPB and BirdLife International)

A “last push” to find the Slender-billed Curlew was launched in December 2008 in Rome, during the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

The first comprehensive survey of the non-breeding range will be undertaken during 2009/2010. Surveys will extend from Morocco to

International Waterbird Census is uniquely placed to provide a framework for the survey.

**We hope that National Coordinators in countries where the Slender-billed Curlew may occur will rise to the urgent challenge of finding the bird so that conservation action can be taken before it is too late.**

This can be done by encouraging IWC counters to search for the species, and more specifically by helping to coordinate teams of bird identification experts. These experts will supplement the regular IWC count teams by spending time checking the identity of all *Numerius* species encountered. Where national capacity is lacking, these bird identification experts can be drawn from a pool of international volunteers. Some teams of identification experts may not be able to join in with the IWC but it would still be helpful if the National Coordinator can direct them to fill the main gaps in coverage.

National Coordinators in countries having a strong tradition of birdwatching and a lot of bird identification experts can also help by encouraging such experts to travel to countries where their skills can be put to use in the search! Small amounts of funding are available to facilitate the survey, for example to cover the travel expenses of bird identification experts, to ensure the fullest possible coverage.

The Slender-billed Curlew Working Group is producing a range of products to assist the search – for further information or copies of products contact [Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk)

Much information is available at [www.slenderbilledcurlew.net](http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net) including:

- a leaflet on identification and reporting of Slender-billed Curlew that can also be obtained as hard copies (water-resistant and

Japan, and concentrate on the shores of the Mediterranean, Black, Red and Caspian Seas, the Pannonian Plain (Central Europe), the Persian Gulf and the coasts of the South Asian subcontinent. The focus is on finding wintering and moult sites, with the hope of trapping and satellite-tagging any birds found. The

designed to fit into a field guide). It is being made available in a number of languages (eg Greek, Russian, Persian, French and Arabic).

- a downloadable recording of the Slender-billed Curlew call (which makes a good mobile phone ring tone! – the more this is played, the more people are likely to distinguish it in the field).
- a link to video footage of Slender-billed Curlew (also in comparison to Whimbrel and Eurasian Curlew).
- Slender-billed Curlew pin badges
- articles recently published about the Slender-billed Curlew Search in *Birdwatch* magazine in the UK and in the *International Wader Study Group Bulletin*: these can be adapted for national magazines.
- a copy of the Slender-billed Curlew database: if you are aware of any inaccuracies or omissions please let us know.
- a database of ‘confirmed zeros’ i.e. places and times thoroughly searched for Slender-billed Curlew without success will also be added: in the meantime, any such records would be gratefully received.
- Draft protocols on:
  - Slender-billed Curlew survey methods
  - Slender-billed Curlew catching, handling and satellite-tracking
  - Making ecological observations of Slender-billed Curlew
  - Communications in the event of a confirmed record.

*These protocols will be finalised following the Slender-billed Curlew workshop on 21 September 2009 at the International Wader Study Group annual conference in the Netherlands.*



*Slender-billed Curlew habitat (glasswort swards in autumn), Evros Delta, Greece (DidierVangeluwe)*

The Slender-billed Curlew Working Group will be at the British Birdwatching Fair, 21-23 August 2009, which will be a good opportunity to recruit bird identification experts willing to collaborate with IWC teams in various countries. If you are likely to need such volunteers, please let [Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk) know your requirements in terms of numbers of volunteers and timing of visit.

Once you have located some Slender-billed Curlews, then the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group has established a pool of international experts to form a rapid reaction team to travel, within a day or two, to the location of any confirmed Slender-billed Curlew sighting and provide assistance to local teams as necessary. This includes:

- a verification panel of international experts on Slender-billed Curlew identification to agree, with national rarities committees or equivalent where they exist, on whether sightings are indeed of Slender-billed Curlews,
- expert bird rarities photographers and sound recordists,
- experienced *Numenius* catchers and taggers (we have four satellite tags to deploy),
- scientists experienced in undertaking behavioural and ecological observations of waders (especially *Numenius*) and quantifying their habitats.

The Slender-billed Curlew Working Group is also establishing contact with at least one Governmental and one non-Governmental representative in each country. We are hoping that the Governmental representative will be in a position to help rush through permissions for catching, tagging and protecting the birds when they are found, as well as supporting a

national Slender-billed Curlew survey. The international hunters' organisations FACE and CIC are also involved with the project and will assist in controlling hunting in any location where the Slender-billed Curlew is found.

*Because the Slender-billed Curlew is a species that even highly skilled and well-equipped birdwatchers can find challenging to identify there is a high chance that it has been overlooked. Within its range, two much more conspicuous, globally threatened bird populations have recently been discovered – 2,000 Sociable Lapwings in Syria and 3,000 in Turkey in 2007 (when the world population was thought to be only 200-600 pairs), and, in Syria in 2002, the only natural breeding colony of Northern Bald Ibis outside Morocco. This gives us hope that we can find good subjects for study this coming winter, before it is too late.*

**Even if we do not find the Slender-billed Curlew, the search for this iconic species will provide many benefits:**

- **further invigorating the existing national networks of IWC counters.**
- **encouraging recruitment of new counters to the IWC.**
- **increasing IWC coverage and gathering further data on Important Bird Areas and other wetland sites.**
- **providing opportunities for publicity for the IWC and implementing organisations; the media like this story of the quest for this lost bird.**
- **building national bird identification capacity.**
- **building international networks of people enthusiastic about finding and conserving globally threatened birds (the**



contacts database of the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group currently has more than 300 contacts from more than 80 countries).

- gathering information on other globally-threatened species, especially Sociable Lapwing, Siberian Crane and Northern Bald Ibis, and on poorly known subspecies of curlew with which Slender-billed Curlew could be confused. In particular, the eastern subspecies of the globally Near Threatened Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata orientalis*, is scarce and declining, the steppe form *N. a. suschkini* is poorly known (and probably also threatened and the steppe

Whimbrel *N. phaeopus alboaxillaris* is also very rare.

- providing an opportunity where highly skilled bird identification experts are uniquely placed to participate in global bird conservation.
- if the worst comes to the worst, at least we, in this part of the world, will have done our best to find our 'lost' species, before giving up on it, and set an example that we can be proud of; there are currently 45 other lost species elsewhere in the world including five other waterbirds.



*Slender-billed Curlew passage habitat, Amvrakikos, Greece. Adam Gretton*

## Narrowing the search for the Slender-billed Curlew

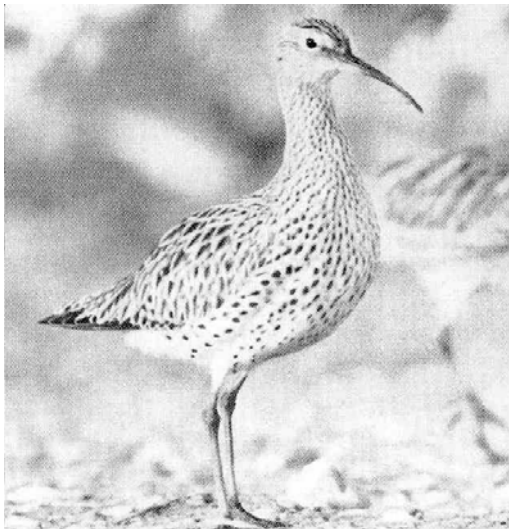
Graeme Buchanan, RSPB, UK

Reports of Slender-billed Curlew come from across Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and extend into India and Sri Lanka with historical records even from Japan. This means that field searches have a massive area to cover in the quest to find the birds again. Reducing the potential search area and targeting searches will increase the efficiency of surveys and increase the chances of finding the Slender-billed Curlew.

As a starting point, field surveys can be targeted on locations of previous sightings, or on apparently similar areas within the vicinity of historic records. A database of all known Slender-billed Curlew records has been collated, using local contacts and literature searches, and this can be used to prioritise sites for coverage. See: [www.slenderbilledcurlew.net](http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net).

Further, through interpolation of these records we have identified at what time of year particular areas should be visited in order to maximise the chance of a bird being recorded. However, this still leaves extensive areas to cover, not least in the potential breeding grounds of central Asia.

We are attempting to focus the searches by identifying the areas most likely to hold the birds through a range of approaches. The chemical composition of feathers from museum skins will reflect the isotope signature of the area in which they were grown, since the isotopes are passed through the food chain. Ratios of isotopes in



February 1968 Aiguillon Bay, France. Michel Brosselin



*Slender-billed Curlew habitat (shrubby glasswort thickets associated with mudflats beside lagoons), Evros Delta, Greece (Didier Vangeluwe*

feathers are calculated using mass spectrometry, and this approach has previously identified broad areas of potential occurrence of other species. By using a combination of  $^{15}\text{N}$ ,  $^{13}\text{C}$ ,  $^2\text{H}$  and Strontium we hope to identify the breeding areas based on the signatures of immature birds. This work is very much in progress but we hope to use the outputs to target field surveys in 2010.

Museum skins may also provide a source of trace elements, pollen, and DNA. Trace elements and pollen may identify characteristics of sites, such as plant communities, where the birds have visited or moulted. If suitable quality DNA can be extracted from skins it may also be possible to consider whether there is any evidence of genetically distinct populations (Mediterranean vs Middle Eastern).

If sufficient information exists it may also be possible to examine moult patterns, and identify where or when birds may be moulting. The potential distribution of Slender-billed Curlews could also be narrowed through comparative studies of similar species, particularly Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel and Eskimo Curlew. We plan to review the diets of these species, together with habitat selection, migration routes and potentially physiology. We hope these approaches will help to identify sites and areas that could be considered more suitable for Slender-billed Curlews. These would be of a greater priority for visits by survey teams



## When, where and how to search?

**Tom van der Have**, WIWO, The Netherlands

### Habitat

Observations of the Slender-billed Curlew have become very rare in the last four decades. Primarily this has been caused by its (increasing) rarity, but also because the species may have been overlooked in extensive, drier habitats. Its apparently preferred habitat, extensively grazed, wet grassland, may have become less extensive in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Drier steppe and salt marsh vegetation surrounding wetlands still seems abundant in some regions (Algeria, Tunisia). The possibility of finding a single Slender-billed Curlew in these extensive areas now seems very challenging indeed. Slender-billed Curlews have been observed in a wider range of coastal and inland wetland habitats, in particular during migration.

Most observations have been of resting birds. Foraging birds have only been observed in grazed wet grassland and salt marshes of Merja Zerga, Morocco (1988 – 1995), and dry, salt marsh vegetation or even agricultural fields in Puglia, Italy (1995). In both areas, wetlands were only used for roosting. Indeed the mudflat roost site at Merja Zerga was too distant for the birds to be readily distinguishable from the shore.

That means we have very little information about which areas and habitats should be the focus of our attention. Known observations are mainly from birdwatching trips (one to five persons visiting a few wetlands over a day or so) but such surveys are often too short and cover all bird species in an area. Waterbird surveys (one to ten persons visiting several wetlands for several days) have generated several records. These surveys often can spend too little time on identification (for a solution, see contribution of Nicola Baccetti, p. 11) and tend to focus on areas that do not seem suitable as foraging areas. Specific surveys have been carried out in wetlands with historical records. Again, the drier foraging areas may have been overlooked during these surveys and there are few accounts of night roost checks in the evening or morning.

### When

The annual cycle and staging times of the Slender-billed Curlew could be as follows: stopover sites (numerous potential sites) 1 - 20 days, breeding area (vast, largely unknown) 60 - 90 days, moulting sites (completely unknown, but could include the likes of Aral Sea, Caspian Sea, Black Sea/Danube Delta, Pannonian Plain) 30 – 60 days, wintering area (several well known sites and potentially others in the east which are yet to be found) 120 - 150 days.



*Merja Zerga, Morocco Chris Gomersall*

From this it is clear that the wintering period (November – March) provides the best chance to find Slender-billed Curlew, as many different wetlands could be checked within range states over a longer period of time without decreasing observation chance. However, the effort per site has been rarely documented and it is unclear how long a specific area should be checked to maximize observation chance.

### Where

*Countries* within the wintering and moult range with the highest number of historical records are Italy, Greece, Morocco, Hungary, Ukraine and Tunisia. Other potential areas may be found in other North African countries (Algeria, Egypt and Libya), Mediterranean countries like Turkey, Spain and Albania, the Black Sea countries of Bulgaria and Romania, Caspian Sea countries of Russia and Kazakhstan, Middle East countries such as Iran, Iraq, Oman and Iran and countries further east such as India, Sri Lanka. There are even historical records from Japan!

*Sites* Information is available about the sites with historical records for each of these countries.

*Habitat* Every birdwatcher seriously looking for Slender-billed Curlew should make a mental

search image of the extensively grazed, wet grassland and salt marsh of Merja Zerga, Morocco. Drier steppe salt marsh or even agricultural fields may also be suitable. Google Earth may be used to help pinpoint suitable remaining habitat: sites that supported birds historically may no longer have suitable habitat.

### How

Make a mental image of the Slender-billed Curlew jizz from the published pictures (small size, whitish plumage, very dark legs and, in adults, dark bill,), videos and call.

Make use of taped calls to lure birds.

Check each wetland complex for at least two days and include a morning and evening visit of potential roosting sites (For more details, see contribution of Nicola Baccetti, p. 11).

Check roosts especially of *Numenius* sp. and also perhaps of *Limosa* sp. and *Vanellus* sp. Roosts on intertidal mudflats may be too distant

to be readily checked so observations when the birds are arriving or leaving the roost may be preferable. At hypersaline sites, roost sites may be at freshwater inflows and potentially more accessible.

Do not only rely on scoping when confronted with extensive steppe or salt marsh vegetation, but *walk* the area too.

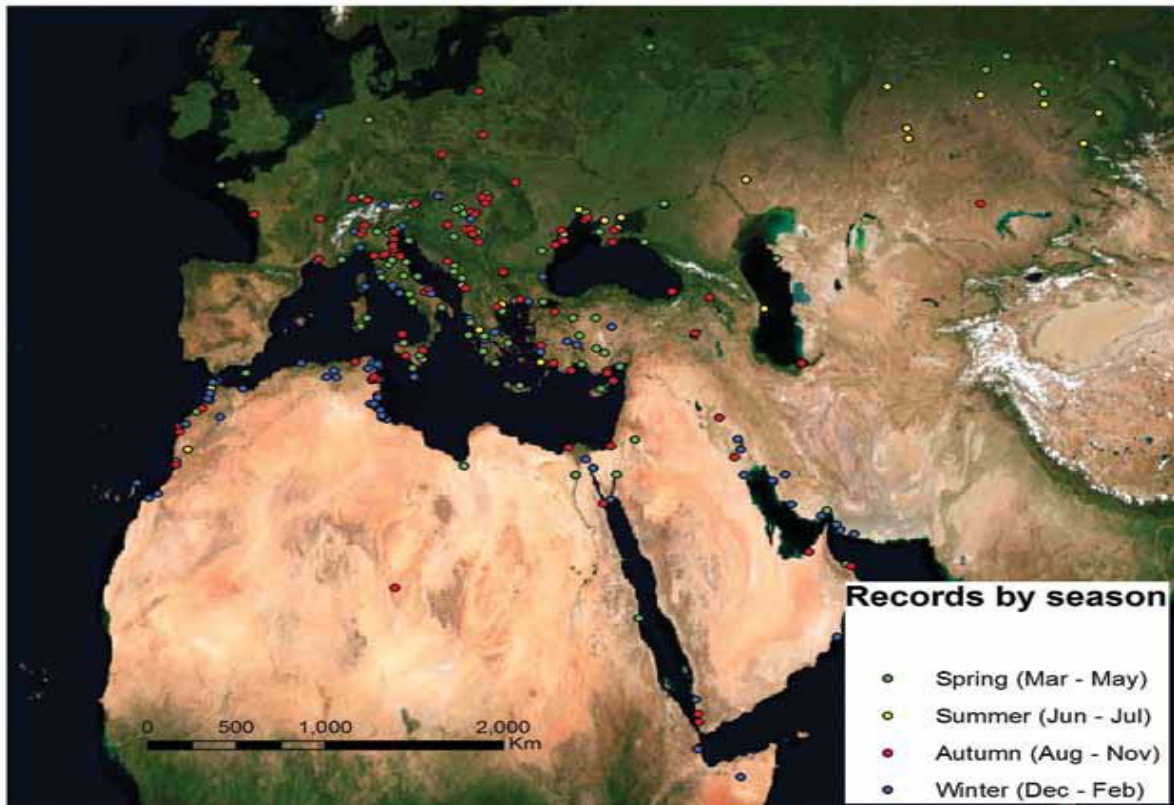
Checking Eurasian Curlews and Whimbrels over and over again will train your mind and search image, but may distract you from the really interesting foraging habitats for Slender-billed Curlew, which are less frequented by the other curlew species.

However, it is important also to record and submit any observations on the 'confusion' subspecies of Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel.

It is important also to submit records of 'confirmed zeros'.

## Verified records of Slender-billed Curlew since 1900

Single records in The Seychelles and Canada are omitted



# Protocol for international Slender-billed Curlew survey efforts, 2009-2010

Simon Delany, IWC Coordinator, Wetlands International

Most countries within the range of the Slender-billed Curlew participate in the January counts that are the basis of IWC. It is recommended that in all countries where Slender-billed Curlew has been recorded, and in all where there is a reasonable chance that it may be found, a special effort is made to search for it at least between August 2009 and July 2010.

Furthermore, the opportunity should be used to gather information on the eastern *Numenius* subspecies *N. arquata orientalis*, *N. a. sushkini* and *N. phaeopus alboaxillaris* as well as any other globally threatened species.

## 1. How to prepare for the search

National waterbird count coordinators should recruit a team of bird identification experts to complement the counting teams who go into the field in January 2010. In countries on migration routes, and with potential moult sites of Slender-billed Curlew, it will also be very valuable to search suitable sites on autumn (August to December) and spring (February to June) migration. To organize these surveys, National Coordinators should:

- Use personal contacts, internet discussion fora, national ornithological organisations, publications, newsletters, etc., to identify bird identification experts in their country who are enthusiastic about finding Slender-billed Curlews.
- If possible, recruit a volunteer national Slender-billed Curlew survey coordinator, to take responsibility for organizing and implementing efforts at national level; in some countries it may be appropriate to form a national Slender-billed Curlew working group, as is already the case in Greece, for example (see contribution of Stratius Bourdakos on p.12).
- Fully inform all such bird identification experts about the international survey and encourage them and their friends to participate.
- Maintain a list of contact details of these experts.
- Allocate a team of one to four such experts to accompany each individual, team or group of teams covering suitable habitat in their country for

Slender-billed Curlews during the January count (and/or in countries which may have potential moult sites, in August). Where resources allow, it is preferable for the Slender-billed Curlew identification teams to have their own transport so that they can move between count teams to check *Numenius* flocks as they are located.

- Inform the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group [Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk) if insufficient identification experts are available in the country, so that experts from other countries can be recruited.
- Inform the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group if surplus identification experts are available, so that these experts can help in countries with a shortage of expertise.
- Ensure that identification experts are equipped with suitable photographic, sound recording and other necessary equipment in addition to normal birding gear.
- Encourage identification experts to meet the counters before the January count to discuss logistics and details of areas to be covered.
- If appropriate, use the visiting bird identification experts to build capacity for bird identification among regular IWC teams.
- Identify any experts who would be available and prepared to travel, including to other countries, at short notice to verify unconfirmed reports.

## 2. Where to look (For more details, see article by Tom van der Have on page 6).

Searches should be conducted at all the following types of site in the country:

- Sites where Slender-billed Curlew has been recorded in the past and where suitable habitat remains.
- Sites where Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel have been recorded in the past.
- Coastal sites with inter-tidal habitats, saltmarshes, and adjacent grasslands and arable fields.



- Steppe and grassland sites known to be used by waterbirds.

### 3. How to do the surveys

Each counting team or individual counter conducting a count in suitable habitat should be accompanied by, or associated with an identification expert:

- Counters should conduct the census in the same way as they do every year.
- Complementary logistical arrangements should be made between counters and identification experts before the count.
- Identification experts should ensure they are familiar with the identification characteristics of Slender-billed Curlew, *Numenius tenuirostris*, and also of all forms of Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata arquata*, *Numenius arquata orientalis*, and *Numenius arquata suschkini*), and Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*, *Numenius phaeopus islandicus* and *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris*) occurring within the range of Slender-billed Curlew.
- Identification experts should concentrate wholly on finding, identifying and counting species of Curlew, and their data should be recorded separately from those of the counting team, on simple recording forms that will be provided. The opportunity should be taken to keep an eye out, as appropriate, for other key globally threatened species especially Sociable Lapwing, Siberian Crane and Northern Bald Ibis.

### 4. What to do when an unusual Curlew is found

**An “unusual Curlew” is a small, pale one showing a dark legs and in an adult, dark bill.**

- Take care not to disturb the bird(s).

- Obtain digital photographs and/or video recordings and/or sound recordings
- Identify, count, and if possible age and sex any individuals and record any moult details.
- Obtain precise geographical coordinates, with a GPS if necessary.
- Inform complementary counter(s), national and international coordinators as rapidly as possible, including the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group: [Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk) +44 1767 680551 or Tim [Cleeves@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Cleeves@yahoo.co.uk) +44 7920 050670.
- If necessary, request expert assistance in confirming identification including from national rarities committee where available (a list of contacts will be available on [www.slenderbilledcurlew.net](http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net)).
- Assess whether it is likely to be worth attempting to catch the bird (see protocol for catching).
- Where possible, collect behavioural information (see protocol for recording behaviour).



*Slender-billed Curlew, Yemen, January 1984*  
Richard Porter

## Reward offered for finding Slender-billed Curlew!

Richard Porter, SBC International Verification Panel, UK

Four members of the Cley Bird Club in North Norfolk, UK, are offering US\$1,000 for a photograph of a live Slender-billed Curlew taken in the Middle East. Because of the identification challenges posed by the species, any photograph will have to be verified by the Slender-billed Curlew International Verification Panel, which comprises wader experts with past experience of the species.

Richard Porter, who has organised this reward, and is helping with the forthcoming winter surveys in the Middle East, plans that \$500 will go to the photographer and \$500 to a conservation cause in the country where the photograph was taken.

Already two photographs have been submitted - taken in Iraq last winter - but sadly they were not proven to be Slender-billed Curlews.

**Tips on identification of Slender-billed Curlew**  
**Tom van der Have, Paschalis Dougalis & Chris Gomersall**



***Slender-billed Curlew, Merja Zerga, Morocco, February 1995.***  
***Photo by Chris Gomersall/rspb images.***

*Note that the legs are completely dark and short (both tibia and tarsus) independent of age and sex. The bill is dark in adults. Other characters such as short bill and pale plumage are important but not unique. Plumage details, such as the spots on the breast (only in adults) and fine bill are usually only visible at short range. It is recommended to take pictures or video recordings of any pale, smallish looking curlew with a short bill in the Mediterranean or Middle East, as details often become only visible when zooming in digitally*

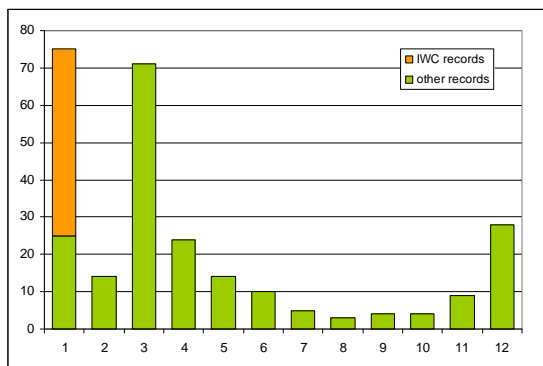
**Slender billed Curlew – painting by Paschalis Dougalis**



## Detecting rare birds during IWC counts – the Italian experience

Nicola Baccetti, Waterbird count coordinator, ISPRA, Italy

IWC field activities do usually provide an excellent opportunity to detect waterbirds belonging to rare species, firstly because they require a reasonably complete coverage of the territory (i.e. not limited to the best spots), and secondly because they are mainly carried out by skilled and motivated observers, which is not necessarily the case in 'free' bird-watching. In countries lacking solid birding traditions, such as Italy, IWC counts may represent the only occasion within any year to survey many wetlands, particularly remote ones and those with access restrictions. Consequently, the number of January records of waterbirds in ornithological databases may overwhelm or even bias their seasonal phenology, at least for locally uncommon/rare species



*Seasonal pattern of a locally uncommon waterbird (Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*) from the files of an Italian ornithological group (Centro Ornitologico Toscano, courtesy: Luca Puglisi). Number of records in the database of Tuscany for years 2000 to 2008 (y axis) and months (x axis). IWC records contribute twice as many records to the January figure as all other ornithological activities and bring this month above March, when the peak of migration occurs.*

This suggests that, within the winter range of the Slender-billed Curlew, should a new record be obtained outside a specific searching effort, it would quite likely be via the IWC network. There are, however, a few methodological requirements of waterbird counts that are in conflict with the detection probability of a rare species and/or one that is difficult to identify (and

the Slender-billed Curlew is an extreme example of both these attributes).

Time constraints are one: you cannot spend too long looking at any single individual or a small group, when the risk is that large flocks will move before they have been entirely counted. Understandably, some sort of paranoia often spreads among observers in order to speed up the counts, in the fear that any adverse factor (weather, disturbance, etc) will decrease the accuracy of number estimations, if not make the work of the day totally useless.

Observation distances are another limit; again, assessing the population size of the most representative species may not allow approach of rare/difficult birds as closely as needed, because of the risk of moving large numbers of birds and missing the possibility to count them.

A (small) number of methodological solutions have sometimes been put into practice by local teams within the Italian IWC network to prevent such problems. First is the 'off-duty team', highly appreciated by its members for the excellent birding possibilities that it offers. It is simply a small team moving in relative freedom around a wetland, while the standard teams cover their fixed counting sections. These may call by phone the lucky guys and ask for their intervention wherever a better check is needed. Or, this not being the case, the off-duty team may decide on its own what to do and what to look at with a twitching approach. A few scarce species usually turn up, and at the end of the day, we discover how many were missed by the standard teams of counters.

Separate counts can be another way to improve the detection of 'rarities'. Their use in Italy is rather aimed at shortening the census duration by skipping some species-groups that will be counted on the next day. But such an approach has also been tested in favour of all scarce species: on a second day, one whole wetland is surveyed again, but all commonest species are ignored.

Finally, repeated counts at roosting and feeding areas (or time) are done for several species that form social roosts (cormorants, egrets, curlews



etc), not necessarily in tidal areas. One of our classic routines when counting Apulian salines in S Italy (absolutely non-tidal), with teams reaching the area from long distances and for very few days, is to place by mid-afternoon enough observers near all curlew roosts known from previous years, while the remaining observers finish the general survey. Even if the roost count does not improve the number already counted on the feeding areas, the evening watch usually gives a good opportunity to individually check many birds engaged in

conspicuous behaviour (flying, landing etc) and hearing vocalizations. Of course many of them will join the roost when it is too dark, but early arrivals can be quite numerous.



Morocco, January 1988 Arnoud van den Berg

## The Hellenic Slender-billed Curlew Working Group

**Stratis Bourdakis**, Hellenic Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (Hellenic Ornithological Society, Greece)

Greece has a worldwide importance for the migration of Slender-billed Curlews, with more than one hundred records. Monitoring and conservation efforts for the most threatened species in Europe was one of the first priorities of the Hellenic Ornithological Society (HOS) and Greek ornithologists, with the implementation of two projects in 1988 and 1999.

The tracking campaign for the Slender-billed Curlew launched by RSPB was the motive for the voluntary establishment of the Hellenic Slender-billed Curlew Working Group within HOS for the promotion of this international effort in Greece. Its basic aim is to motivate and inform birdwatchers on the identification of the species, the sites and dates they should visit in order to have better coverage of the wetlands where Slender-billed Curlew were seen most regularly, and provide guidance on the steps that should be followed if a possible Slender-billed Curlew is recorded.

The main results of the voluntary work of our working group are so far:

- The Hellenic Rarities Committee checked all the Greek specimens at museums abroad, and historic records in the literature.
- The working group, in close cooperation with the International Working Group, elaborated existing data and results of previous projects. These were used to create maps, time-charts and together with visual and audio material were distributed in hardcopies and/or were available in electronic format for download among the Greek birdwatching community.
- A website ([www.ornithologi.gr/gr/numeniustenuirostris](http://www.ornithologi.gr/gr/numeniustenuirostris))

was created within HOS website (in Greek and English) with all relevant information and links to the main Slender-billed Curlew websites.

- The toolkit for finding Slender-billed Curlews was translated and printed in Greek in a leaflet and poster that were distributed at the information centres of the main wetlands.
- A network of experienced birdwatchers was established in all wetlands with records of Slender-billed Curlew, in order to have a first evaluation of all possible records.
- In order to have the best possible coverage of the wetlands and participation of the relatively few Greek birdwatchers, the 2009 Slender-billed Curlew spring survey was advertised among the Greek bird watching community.
- It was decided that all national Photo Bird Race prizes, organized by HOS last April, would be offered to anyone that would take a photo of a Slender-billed Curlew.

The first period of the project (Spring 2009) did not produce any Slender-billed Curlew records, but motivated many birdwatchers, who searched 22 wetlands during 51 visits, an excellent achievement for such a voluntary exercise in Greece. Interesting data were collected for Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel. The search will be continued and we are trying to achieve better coverage of the wetlands, hoping that we will contribute to international efforts for the conservation of the species.

## The first Slender-billed Curlew in Britain - Tim Cleeves

At approximately 17.50 hours on 4th May 1998, my wife Ann and I entered the Budge Hide at the Northumberland Wildlife Trust Reserve at Druridge Bay, Northumberland. As we opened the hide shutters, a light aircraft flew over scaring some curlews, a Black-tailed Godwit and a smaller, curlew-like wader, which I assumed was a Whimbrel. Switching from binoculars to my 'scope, I followed the unidentified bird down and simply expected to see the stripy crown, darker chest and steeply-curved bill of a classic Whimbrel. Not so; although superficially like a small curlew, the most striking features were its very pale wing-coverts, which contrasted sharply with dark-centred scapulars, and a fine, thin bill. I looked at it long and hard, but couldn't work it out. Both puzzled and intrigued, I started to make some sketches and take field notes.

Having watched it carefully for a while, I thought it was not a Eurasian Curlew. Some extra help seemed a good idea so we contacted Tom Tams, Colin Bradshaw, Jimmy Steele and Mary Carruthers. We continued to watch the mystery bird, and increasingly, amid growing excitement, we felt that it had features consistent with Slender-billed Curlew. The five of us watched it until 20.25 hours and took extensive field notes and sketches.

On the evening of 4th May, I had to return south to work in Bedfordshire, so was unable to visit Druridge again while the bird was still present. It remained until 7th May.

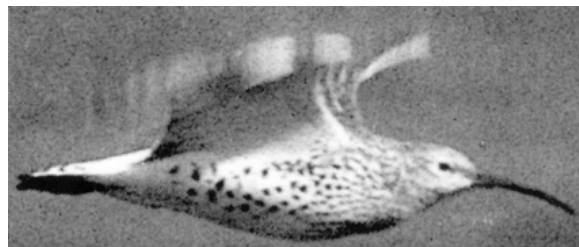
Later the same month, I visited the Natural History Museum at Tring and examined the collection of 21 Slender-billed Curlew skins there, as well as a number of Eurasian Curlew skins. By that time, I had also been given two videos of the Druridge bird and I was able to watch these on the same day as looking at the skins. Most of the Slender-billed Curlew skins at Tring are of birds obtained in the Mediterranean in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (between 1857 and 1918). There are 12 males and 9 females, and six of the skins appeared to be first-years, which looked more streaked than spotted below. Just one skin appears to be a first-summer, a male from Siellbar, near Gotha, Germany, which is dated 12th May and was collected before 1864. This specimen looks most like the Druridge bird because it has worn

Extracted and edited from a paper that first appeared in the journal *British Birds*

wing-coverts contrasting with dark scapulars. It is also interesting that it was found in northwest Europe in May. Virtually all illustrations of Slender-billed Curlews, in field guides, in Birds of the Western Palearctic and in other reference books show only adults and/or juveniles, and I could not find an illustration of a first-summer. Eventually, I did find a painting by Christopher Schmidt, which was produced in 1992 and used in Greece to help people recognise and report this globally threatened species at Greek coastal sites. This illustration of a juvenile/first-winter Slender-billed Curlew is, in fact, quite similar to the Druridge bird but instead of spotting on the breast and flank sides it shows the typical streaks of a juvenile.

In summary the video material (four videos in total), the still images and the field descriptions from a number of skilled birders confirmed my belief that the Druridge bird showed the key identification features of Slender-billed Curlew.

Most importantly, it had a noticeably fine bill, which was both thinner in depth and width compared with Eurasian Curlew. The bill tip in particular was very fine, and lacked any expansion laterally near the tip. The sides of the breast and flanks were spotted, and lacked any cross-barring or arrow-shaped markings at all, unlike Eurasian Curlew. The tail was strikingly pale-looking, with large areas of white between the neat grey tail-bars. This feature is not diagnostic of Slender-billed Curlew, but is a useful supplementary feature (see, for example, the line drawings and description in Glutz et al. 1977, *Handbuch der Vogel Mitteleuropas*). It did not show the very fine flank streaking associated with the eastern race of Eurasian Curlew *N. a. orientalis*, which is, on average, paler and larger than nominate *arquata*, and thus much larger than even the largest female Slender-billed curlew. The overall size of the bird, and the pattern of the upperparts, with the bleached, worn wing-coverts all pointed towards a first-summer Slender-billed curlew.



February 1968 Aiguillon Bay, France. Michel Brosselin

## What we will do if we catch any Slender-billed Curlews

**Nigel Clark**, British Trust for Ornithology, UK

Waders are difficult to catch at the best of times but trying to catch a single bird or very small group is considered impossible by many. So why would we want to try? If we are to have any chance of bringing the Slender-billed Curlew back from the brink of extinction we need to know where they breed, winter and their migration routes. Only then will we be able to put conservation measures in place to give them a chance.

When the strange Minsmere Curlew appeared in 2005 we realised that satellite transmitters were now small enough to put on a Slender-billed Curlew. A prototype was sent over from the USA, but by the time it arrived the bird had gone (subsequent analysis proved that it was an unusual Eurasian Curlew!).



*Unusual, small short-billed Eurasian Curlew at Minsmere, England, 2005 Dick Newell*

We took the opportunity to see what information we could get if we put the tag on a Whimbrel. A bird was caught on the Wheldrake Ings in England on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2005. It was a stunning success – Wally as the bird was named migrated to Iceland then returned south in the autumn and wintered in West Africa. You can investigate its movements at <http://www.whimbrel.info/>. If Wally had been a Slender-billed Curlew we would have, within a few months, known the critical places in their life cycle and we would

now be putting our efforts into conserving them on their critical sites.

### When would we try?

We have prepared a team of expert curlew catchers to be on standby. As soon as the identification experts let us know that there is a chance that a sighting is really a Slender-billed Curlew we will get 3-4 of us who can drop everything and fly to the country within 48 hours if possible! We will take with us a wide range of catching equipment and as soon as we arrive we will discuss with local experts which techniques would be worth trying. The bird's safety will be paramount, which is why we are bringing together those who have the greatest expertise in catching curlews.

### What do we do when we have caught a Slender-billed Curlew?

The first thing is that we would put on a satellite tag, as well as metal and colour rings, but this is not all. We will take some feather samples to analyse their stable isotopes. This will enable us to quickly understand where the bird had moulted its feathers just in case the satellite tag does not work. We will also take small blood samples for DNA analysis together with a series of pictures. It sounds a lot but it will only take a few minutes.

Once the bird is released we will observe it in the field to gather as much information about its ecology and behaviour as possible. When the bird leaves the site it is down to the satellite tag to do its job and we will all be waiting for every location report so that we can start ensuring that all conservation efforts can be taken in the countries where they occur.

In case, it becomes possible to consider captive-breeding Slender-billed Curlew, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust is beginning to build the expertise to undertake this, starting with Whimbrels.

We have got two tags prepared and ready to go. It's just down to that army of birdwatchers to find a Slender bill. We are waiting for the call!



Edited by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group established under the U.N. Convention on Migratory Species. You may contact individual authors at the following addresses

Nicola Baccetti	<a href="mailto:nicola.baccetti@infs.it">nicola.baccetti@infs.it</a>
Stratis Bourdakis	<a href="mailto:numenius@ornithologiki.gr">numenius@ornithologiki.gr</a>
Graeme Buchanan	<a href="mailto:Graeme.Buchanan@rspb.org.uk">Graeme.Buchanan@rspb.org.uk</a>
Nigel Clark	<a href="mailto:nigel.clark@bto.org">nigel.clark@bto.org</a>
Tim Cleeves	<a href="mailto:timcleeves@yahoo.co.uk">timcleeves@yahoo.co.uk</a>
Nicola Crockford	<a href="mailto:nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk">nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk</a>
Simon Delany	<a href="mailto:simony.delany@wetlands.org">simony.delany@wetlands.org</a>
Tom van der Have	<a href="mailto:Tom.vanderHave@wur.nl">Tom.vanderHave@wur.nl</a>
Richard Porter	<a href="mailto:richardporter@dialstart.net">richardporter@dialstart.net</a>

You will need to replace "at" with the @ symbol in each address

### Finally...

**Please do what you can to help the search for the Slender-billed Curlew!**

**The recommended dates for the 2010 IWC counts are 16-17 January and any searches in the next 12 months, and beyond, will be invaluable.**

**Many thanks indeed for your continuing contribution to the IWC**