

# Can you help find the Slender-billed Curlew?

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## Background

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* is the rarest bird species in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, following major declines from the second half of the 19th century onwards that were apparently due to both over hunting and habitat loss. The last fully verified record of this critically endangered species was of a single bird in Hungary in April 2001.

Concerted action for the species was re-launched, following some six years of dormancy, by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group in December 2008 in Rome during the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The Working Group was originally established in 1997 in the framework of the 1994 CMS Memorandum of Understanding Concerning the Conservation of the Slender-billed Curlew. Currently this intergovernmental agreement for international co-operation has 19 range states as signatories out of a possible total of about 45. The launch attracted worldwide media attention.

## The search

In this last push to find the bird, a comprehensive survey of the non-breeding range will be undertaken during 2009/2010 and beyond as necessary. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is currently undertaking stable isotope research in the hope of narrowing the search for the breeding grounds to a reasonably small area. If this succeeds, the search will be extended to that area in 2010. The only known breeding site in SW Siberia held Slender-billed Curlews between 1908 and 1924, but appears to have been abandoned since.

There is enthusiasm for the non-breeding survey to extend all the way from Morocco (including the last known regular wintering site at Merja Zerga, where no Slender-billed Cur-

lews have been seen since 1995), beyond the current eastern edge of the known non-breeding range in Iran, to the subcontinent of India, as well as China and Japan (from where there are said to be a small number of historical records).

Existing records indicate that the birds may be found around the Mediterranean, Red, Black, Azov and Caspian Seas, the Pannonian Plain of central and SE Europe, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (see map). However, for a species as easily overlooked as the Slender-billed Curlew there is also a good chance that there may be birds further to the east, for example, in areas where coverage by birdwatchers is lower. As Slender-billed Curlews may forage away from the sort of wetlands sites most targeted by birdwatchers, there is also hope that they persist even on the European shores of the Mediterranean.

The focus is on searches of potential wintering and moult sites. No moult sites have yet been discovered, but early indications from the RSPB's stable isotope research hint that there may be at least four such areas.

## Satellite tagging

The focus on wintering and moult sites is because a major objective of the search is to satellite-tag Slender-billed Curlews and thus the emphasis should be on locating sites where the birds may be present long enough to catch and to settle down with their tags before needing to migrate. Such tagging is, of course, vital to identify the sites used by the bird during its annual cycle – not least the breeding grounds – so that we can take urgent action to save it from possible extinction.

So far, we have funding from the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement and the RSPB for four tags (which we will spend on two 9.5 g tags to be ready in September 2009 and then, when they are available at the end of the year, on two of the newly developed 5 g tags).

The Steering Group of the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group is seeking agreement on a draft Protocol on trapping, handling and satellite-tracking Slender-billed Curlews.

## Rapid reaction to any probable sightings

We have established a pool of experts to form a rapid reaction team to travel, within a day or two, to the location of any confirmed Slender-billed Curlew sighting. 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,
- ▶ scientists experienced in undertaking behavioural and ecological observations of waders (especially *Numenius*) and quantifying their habitats.



Slender-billed Curlew, Yemen, January 1984; note characteristic flank spots on white underparts and slender, all dark bill. (Photo: Richard Porter)

## Survey methods

The framework for the survey is the International Waterbird Census of Wetlands International. Skilled birdwatchers are being encouraged to travel to join in the search, including by actively co-operating with teams of local ornithologists.

As regular waterbird workers tend not to have the time to search through *Numenius* flocks with the necessary level of attention to detail, one model is to have small squads (say one or two people) of dedicated Slender-billed Curlew searchers supplementing teams of regular waterbird counters including, where logistically appropriate, roving between a number of such teams.

The Steering Group is currently drafting a protocol on the search methodology to provide guidance to those joining the search.

We currently have funding (via BirdLife International from the 2008 British Birdwatching Fair) for one Slender-billed Curlew search expedition and are urgently seeking funds for more to ensure the fullest possible coverage.

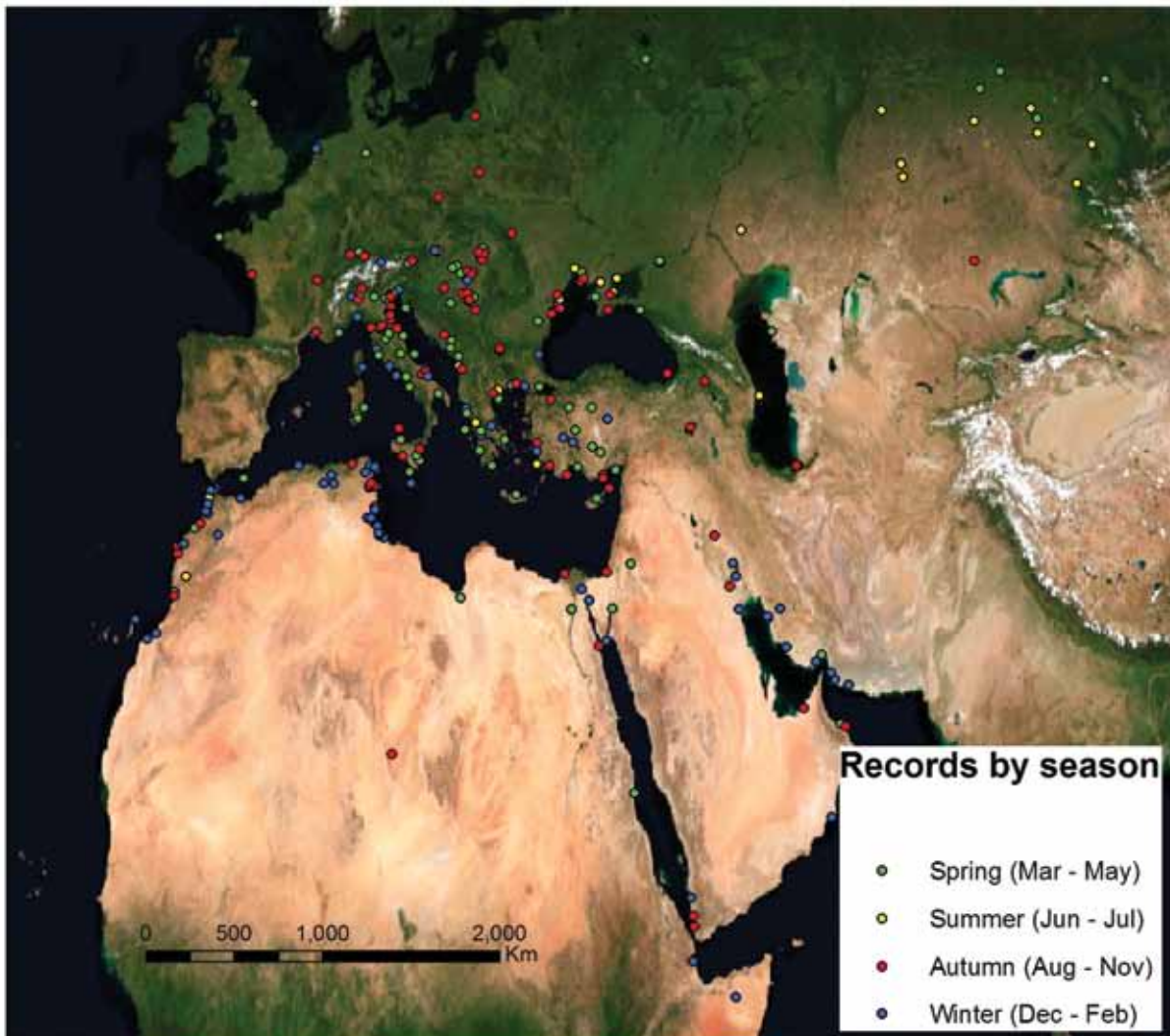
## Additional objectives

We want to ensure that the Slender-billed Curlew does not become the first extinct bird in this part of the world since the Great Auk *Pinguinus impennis* in June 1844 and the Canary

Islands Oystercatcher *Haematopus meadewaldoi* in 1981. The worst-case scenario is that the Slender-billed Curlew is already extinct, but if we, in this affluent part of the world, cannot mount a really thorough search for a lost species and then take the necessary conservation action, then what hope is there for the other 45, mainly tropical, “lost” bird species in the world? The Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, its close relative in the Nearctic, is already classified by BirdLife International as “Critically Endangered (possibly extinct)”, there having been no verified sightings since the early 1980s.

Even if we are unable to locate birds in the current push, the survey effort will still be worthwhile because the methodology will include the following objectives:

- ▶ Keeping an eye out for all other potential globally-threatened species in the same range such as Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* and Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*
- ▶ Collecting information on the two little known and apparently rare and/or declining eastern subspecies of Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata orientalis* and *N.a. sushkini*, and the Steppe Whimbrel *N. phaeopus alboaxillaris*
- ▶ Building local capacity for collecting observations of Slender-billed Curlew, eastern *Numenius* subspecies and globally threatened species.



Verified Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* records since 1990. Records from the Seychelles and Canada are not shown.

## Research

Besides the RSPB's stable isotope research, which will hopefully be written up in 2009, the Working Group is engaged in, or considering, various other lines of 'forensic' research to try to determine where any remaining Slender-billed Curlews might be found:

- ▶ Using a "birdtrack" type approach to analyse the records during autumn to spring, to come up with a more precise, perhaps quantitative picture of where (on the route) the birds are expected to be and when,
- ▶ Comparing *morphology* of Slender-billed Curlew with other *Numenius* species to achieve insights as to their likely ecology, location, habitat etc.,
- ▶ *Comparative study of other declining waders* such as Steppe Whimbrel and Sociable Lapwing with potentially similar habitat and migration routes and also with the Eskimo Curlew,
- ▶ Compiling historical data on *habitat preference, diet* throughout range and trying to identify *distribution of current suitable habitat*,
- ▶ Collecting and compiling data on *moult* to help identify moult sites,
- ▶ Investigating *sex ratios* of museum skins and implications of *drought* on the breeding grounds,
- ▶ Using *trace elements* and *pollen* from museum specimens to help narrow the search.
- ▶ *Population genetic analysis* to answer questions such as whether Slender-billed Curlew specimens of middle-eastern origin are genetically distinct from Mediterranean birds; in addition to seeking genetic distinctions between the eastern subspecies of Eurasian Curlew,
- ▶ Collecting photographs/wings of *Numenius* from hunters.

We are also considering the feasibility of Slender-billed Curlew captive breeding (from eggs or from birds caught in the non-breeding range). As a means of developing the neces-

sary expertise we are investigating the possibility of captive breeding another *Numenius* species, such as Whimbrel.

## There is hope!

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 been discovered just recently – 3,000 Sociable Lapwings in Turkey (when the world population was thought to be only 200 pairs), and an entirely new breeding colony of Northern Bald Ibis in Syria, making it the only known natural colony in the world, outside Morocco.

## Further information

On the website of the Slender-billed Working Group ([www.slenderbilledcurlew.net](http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net)), you can find:

- ▶ a copy of the database of Slender-billed Curlew records,
- ▶ an article that came out in the January 2009 issue of *Bird-watch* magazine with further background to this quest for the Slender-billed Curlew,
- ▶ a "toolkit" leaflet with guidance on identification of Slender-billed Curlew and what to do when you have found one. Hard copies of this toolkit are also available free (A5, on water resistant paper, designed to fit into a field guide); it is also being translated into French, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Greek, Italian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Chinese,
- ▶ a downloadable MP3 file of the only known recording of the call of the SBC (the ultimate mobile phone ring-tone!),
- ▶ soon, links to video footage of the bird and a gallery of other images, including museum skins.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

There is huge urgency to find this enigmatic bird and take active steps to conserve it before it is too late. There are many ways that members of the International Wader Study Group can contribute to the search including:

- Taking time to carefully check all *Numenius* that you encounter within the potential range of the Slender-billed Curlew
- Undertaking holidays and expeditions to search for the bird
- Participating in forensic research to try to narrow the search
- Volunteering to join expeditions and/or, if suitably qualified, the pool of experts from which the rapid reaction team will be selected in the event of any verified sightings.
- Funding
- Submitting any records, including from the distant past and "confirmed zeros" i.e. places and times thoroughly searched for Slender-billed Curlew without success.
- Undertaking expeditions, to catch "surrogate" waders in key Slender-billed Curlew potential moult sites to help "ground truth" the origin of the stable isotopes found in the RSPB's samples of Slender-billed Curlew feathers from museum skins.
- Participating in the Slender-billed Curlew workshop on the evening of Monday 21 September 2009 at the IWSG Annual Conference in the Netherlands.

If you can help in any way, or wish to have further information including copies of the Slender-billed Curlew identification "toolkit", please contact the chair of the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group, Nicola Crockford ([nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk))