

**Report to OSME, RSPB and Viking Optical Limited**  
**on the Spring 2008 Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* survey of Lake Ayaqaghitma, Uzbekistan**

**Introduction**

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* is one of the world's 190 Critically Endangered species, with a global population estimated to be <50 individuals. The only confirmed breeding records for the species are from near Tara, north of Omsk in Siberia, Russia, between 1914 and 1924, though it is possible that it may also breed in northern Kazakhstan. It migrates west-south-west from its presumed breeding grounds in Siberia through central and eastern Europe, predominantly Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia to southern Europe, Greece, Italy, and Turkey, and north Africa, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. It has also been reported from Slovenia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (BirdLife International, 2007).

In Uzbekistan, the species has been reported sporadically during the last 100 years:

- 10 to 15 birds in the lower reaches of the Amudariya River in August 1911 (Molchanov, 1912);
- in spring and autumn on the eastern coast of the Aral Sea (Zarudniy, 1916; Spangenberg and Feigin, 1936; Dolgushin, 1962; Berezovskiy, 1983);
- two in the upper Surkhan River valley in southern Uzbekistan on 6 June 1975 (Ostapenko *et al.*, 1978);
- a total of 8 birds, maximum flock size 3, in the Sudochie Lake system on 23-25 April 2000 and 27 April to 1 May 2001 (Kreuzberg-Mukhina and Lanovenko, 2003);
- 33 'small curlews' in the middle reaches of the Syrdarya River on 13 April 2003 (Kashkarov, 2004).

In most cases the observers expressed some doubts over the identity of the birds and none of the records were supported by skins or photographs.

Since 2005 there have been annual reports of the species on spring migration from the Ayaqaghitma depression, an area of extensive alkaline lakes in the southern part of the Kyzylkum desert:

- a report of a flock of 50, seen in flight, in May 2005 by O V Mitropolskiy.
- during fieldwork for the Uzbekistan IBA project between 30 April and 4 May 2006, observed on 17 occasions, totaling 170 birds. Unfortunately because of a lack of high quality optics and low quality photographs these observations were not confirmed.
- between 30 April and 4 May 2007, again as part of Uzbekistan IBA fieldwork, an experienced German ornithologist, Peter Köhler together with a young ornithologist, Maxim Mitropolskiy, reported the species. Peter Köhler considered that he saw 4 birds which could have been Slender-billed Curlews and heard them call. Again no photographs were obtained.

Based on this series of recent observations from the same locality, a dedicated survey was carried out at this site with the objective of trying to confirm the occurrence of the species and, if possible, obtain photographic documentation.

Initially the survey was planned to commence on 23 April but since migration of southerly *Numenius* populations is known to commence in the first half of April, and Peter Köhler was available, the actual survey dates were from 15 April to 4 May 2008.

## Participants

From 15 to 23 April (period 1): Alexander Filatov, Katya Filatova, Peter Köhler

From 24 April to 1 May (period 2): Tim Cleeves, Roman and Oleg Kashkarov, Peter Köhler, Oleg Mitropolskiy, Geoff Welch;

From 2 to 4 May (period 3): Tim Cleeves, Roman Kashkarov, Oleg Mitropolskiy, Geoff Welch.

## Study site

Lake Ayaqaghitma is situated at c40.40 N, 64.30 E, c100 km north of Bukhara. The lake itself was created a few decades ago from the flooding of a natural depression with surplus irrigation water, however, the Kazakh village of the same name, located on the northern shore of the lake, can be found on much older maps. Based on measurements from Google Earth, the lake surface is approximately 10 x 10 km. Due to strong winds the water is generally very turbid. Local fishermen, using gillnets, report daily catches per boat of 20-25 Carp *Cyprinus carpio*, c.1.5 kilogrammes each, and less than ten boats operate regularly.

In general, the shores of the lake are shallow and muddy. In the west, there are approximately ten islets or mud shallows partly vegetated with thin stands of *Phragmites* and *Juncus*. In the north-eastern corner, larger reedbeds provide nesting opportunities for waterbirds. Much of the shore is largely covered by salt deposits supporting a sparse cover of small succulent species (eg *Salicornia sp*), some dead annual herbaceous plants and *Tamarix* bushes further inland. There are more extensive stands of *Tamarix* around the north-western, south-western and parts of the northern shore – see images 1, 2 and 3.

## Weather

For most of the survey period, the weather was bright, sunny and, at times, very hot with temperatures ranging from c20C at night to c40C during the day, though reaching 51C at noon on 29 April. Winds were variable and generally light - force 1 to 3-4 (Beaufort Scale), occasionally gusting stronger. The exception to this pattern was a prolonged storm from 17 to 19 April, with steady north-east winds gusting to force 8+ (100 km/h on 17 April) and temperatures near freezing according to a local weather report, and heavy thunderstorms on 22 April which for 24 hours turned the camp and the salt steppe of the western shore into a slippery mudflat.

## Materials and methods

### 1. Observation activities:

**Period 1:** 15 April: 30 min. observation at dusk around campsite on western shore.

16 April: 05.30 to 09.00 along northern half of western shore (PK). Reconnaissance trip by car, observations along northern and eastern shores plus the central section of south coast. Camped in the south-east.

17 April: found hospitable shelter from the storm in the wagons of the fishing team “Brigat Kambarov Imran”, no observations possible.

18 and 19 April: due to continuing strong winds, car-based observations only along the eastern shoreline.

20 April: car-based observations along the entire northern half of the lakeshore to the west shore campsite, from which observations made 3 km south (KF) and north (PK). Bad weather forecast, returned to fishing camp.

21 April: moved to west shore campsite. Reconnaissance trip by car to south-western shore and Radon well, afternoon observations 3 km south (KF) and north (PK).

22 April: 05.30 to 08.00 observations 2 km south (KF) and north (PK), rest of day observations impossible (thunderstorms).

23 April: moved camp to a drier place, observations around campsite only. Arrival of second party at end of day. End of period 1.

**Period 2:** From 24 April to 1 May on each morning three excursions c3 km south, north, and west (inland) respectively, c05.30 to 10.00, and afternoon observations of lake and shoreline in front of camp, c15.00 to 19.00 (TC, PK and GW).

**Period 3:** From 2 to 4 May daily excursions along the shoreline north and south, c05.30 to 10.00, very occasional late-morning observations inland, and afternoon observations of lake and shoreline in front of camp, c15.00 to 19.00 (TC and GW).

## **2. Photo documentation**

PK: c360 images of c120 individual Curlews and 9 Whimbrels using a Canon EOS 450D + Tamron 300 mm lens.

GW: 2 roosting Whimbrel using a Canon EOS 50E + Sigma 170-400 mm lens.

## **3. Tape Luring**

In an attempt to attract overflying birds, calls of Slender-billed Curlew were played from the top of a lorry, located c300 m from the shoreline at the campsite, in the middle sector of the western lake shore. The recording also included calls of *N.arquata*. The recording was taken from the CD "Vogelstimmen Europas, Nordafrikas und Vorderasiens" (compiled by Schulze, A. & Dinger, K.-H.), played on a Philips MP3 player (amplified, two loudspeakers). The recording was audible to human ears to a distance of 200-300 m. Due to some windy weather and limited availability of electric power supplied by the lorry, the system could not be operated on a regular basis. It was played on six days from 20 to 27 April in the late afternoon (c17.30 to 19.30), and on 22 April from 05.30 to 06.30. There was some evidence that both passing solitary Curlew and Whimbrel reacted to the call.

It should be noted that the calls of Slender-billed Curlew on the CD (Type two: seconds 31 – 43) fully matched the description of the calls heard by PK on 30 April 2007 from a flock of four birds seen alighting in the company of one Whimbrel (see report of PK 2007).

## **Results**

### **1. Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris***

No records. The only remotely 'possible' observation was a flock of 14 *Numenius* observed flying north-west over the lake in the late evening of 2 May which appeared to consist of 8 'large' and 6 'small' birds. These were seen to land in the extreme north-west corner of the lake and an immediate search was made but, due to failing light, they were not relocated. A dawn search was made the following day and 14 Whimbrel were flushed from the same area and it is therefore assumed that these were the same birds and that the apparent size differences in the birds seen on 2 May was an optical illusion. This observation highlights one of the potential pitfalls of records of birds only seen in flight in this region where light conditions and heat haze can give a false impression of size.

### **2. Eurasian Curlew *N. arquata***

#### **Phenology**

Curlews were noticed from the very first evening of the survey (15 April) with several heard at night, (shown as "2" in Fig. 1), suggesting that migration had started earlier. Despite reduced observation time and adverse weather, a total of 167 Curlew was counted in period 1, as opposed to 92 in period 2 (from daily log entries) and 17 individuals in period 3. The peak totals counted on 19 and 20 April may, however, be influenced by the onset of the storm, causing migration to be temporarily halted locally. Also larger areas of land around the lake were surveyed during this period.

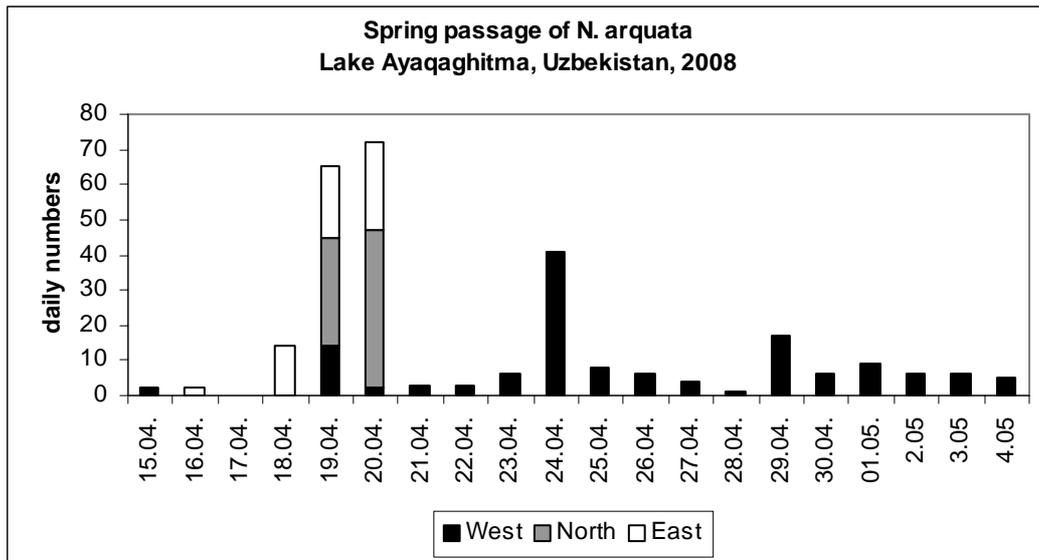
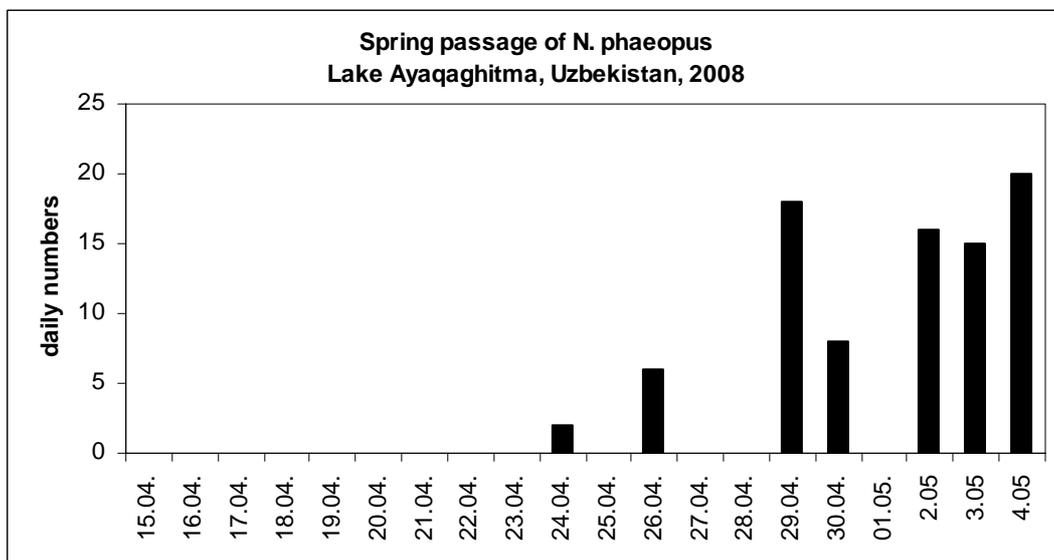


Fig. 1: Spring passage of Eurasian Curlew in the second half of April 2008

### 3. Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

#### Phenology

Whimbrels were recorded almost daily from 24 April in gradually increasing numbers, with a maximum of 20 on 4 May.



#### Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey period appears to have coincided well with the main passage of Eurasian Curlew but only covered the start of the passage of Whimbrel. Therefore any future surveys should, if logistically possible, cover a longer period of 4 to 6 weeks - mid-April to mid/late May. However, what is not known is whether Slender-billed Curlew has a 'preference' to migrate with other *Numenius* species, alone or in single species flocks. Given the extreme rarity of the species it is possible that it will associate with its congeners or at least be attracted by their presence, therefore timing surveys to coincide with the passage of other *Numenius* species is likely to increase the likelihood of birds being detected.

Despite the lack of records in 2008, Peter Köhler's increased confidence that the birds he heard and saw in 2007 were Slender-billed Curlews gives an incentive to continue searching for the species in Uzbekistan. Whether Lake Ayaqaghitma is the optimum site to survey is open to discussion and the logistics of covering a range of sites eg include Sudochie Lake during the main passage period requires further investigation. Assuming any future surveys focus on Lake Ayaqaghitma, it may be preferable to establish the main camp in the north-western corner of the lake, as this area appeared to be favoured by both Eurasian Curlews and Whimbrels for roosting, but it would also be necessary to have reliable transport so that observers could also cover other parts of the lake on a daily basis.

### **Additional publications**

Two papers, based on the observations made during this survey, are proposed – a general one on the Birds of Lake Ayaqaghitma for submission to the UzSPB Bulletin, and a review of recent records and updated identification features of Slender-billed Curlew for submission to Sandgrouse.

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**Image 1: Western shore of Lake Ayaqaghitma, Uzbekistan, south of camp site, April 2008 (Geoff & Hilary Welch)**



**Image 2: Reedbeds and tamarisk scrub in north-western corner of Lake Ayaqaghitma, Uzbekistan, April 2008 (Geoff & Hilary Welch)**



**Image 3: Salt deposits and vegetation on western shore of Lake Ayaqaghita, Uzbekistan, around camp site, April 2008** (Geoff & Hilary Welch)



**Image 4: Eurasian Curlew, Lake Ayaqaghita, Uzbekistan, 30 April 2008** (Peter Köhler). Note bolder flank spotting, differing from many *N. a. orientalis*.