

Recent records of waders in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, north-western China.

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Due to its inaccessibility and political instability, the desert regions of central Asia remain largely unexplored by ornithologists. This paper presents the most recent information on the occurrence of waders in Xinjiang, the westernmost province of China. A total of 38 species was recorded, and breeding was confirmed for ten of these. The status of an additional 11 species is uncertain. There is small-scale migration of arctic breeding waders through the area. Drainage of many lakes due to irrigation is likely to have a severe effect on both breeding and migrating wader populations.

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INTRODUCTION

The vast expanses of central Asia, from the Caspian Sea through the former republics of the southern Soviet Union and northern China to Mongolia, have been little explored by ornithologists. The region consists mainly of deserts and high mountain ranges, but there are many lakes and rivers that provide suitable habitat for waders. To what extent these are actually used by waders for breeding or staging is unknown.

Xinjiang is the westernmost region of China (Figure 1). It borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tadjikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Tibet. With an area of over 1.6 million square km, it is the largest province in China. Most of this area consists of deserts (Taklimakan and Gurban Tunggut Desert) and mountains (Altay, Tianshan and Kunlun Ranges). Several large rivers cut through these, namely the Tarim, Ili, Irtys and Ulungur Rivers. Only one of these, the Irtys, runs to the sea. The others feed lakes, many of which, such as Ebinur and Lop Nur, are now dry or saline due to irrigation. The two largest lakes, Bosten and Ulungur Lakes, are still fresh.

A total of 425 bird species have been recorded in Xinjiang in the past, for about half of which there is very little information (Ma 1995). This paper summarises recent observations of waders in the province.

METHODS

Data was compiled from observations made by MM between 1985 and 1999. Records were obtained during frequent fieldwork on other birds and during bird-watching trips. No systematic counts have been conducted in Xinjiang and the 'status' as recorded in Table 1 represents nothing more than a subjective assessment of encounter frequency. Some species are only known from specimens. Breeding was confirmed when nests or dependent chicks were found. When adults in summer plumage were observed during the breeding season in suitable breeding habitat, we suspected breeding. Further information was obtained from Hornskov (1995) (June / July), Carey (1998) (September / October), Lem *et al.* (1996, 1999) and Perlman (pers. comm.) (August-October).

RESULTS

The total list of waders for Xinjiang is presented in Table 1. We recorded 38 species. The status of a further 11 species is uncertain (Table 2). Most of the species in the latter list are derived from information in Hayman *et al.* (1988), Johnsgard (1981) and Cheng (1987), but we know of no recent records. Breeding was confirmed for ten (26%) species and suspected for a further nine (24%). The remaining 19 (50%) species are either migrant or vagrant. Below, we present additional details which we consider of interest for some of the species.





Figure 1: Map of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, showing the areas mentioned in the text.

Eurasian Oystercatcher - Uncommon, but regular in northern Xinjiang. Breeding has not been confirmed, but up to twenty individuals have been recorded during May and June.

Ibisbill - Only known from a single, unlabelled specimen (at the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography in Urumqi), although we suspect that it must occur in the Tianshan and Kunlun Mountains.

Collared Pratincole - The identification of these birds was not confirmed and the possibility of confusion with Black-winged Pratincole could not be excluded.

Eurasian Curlew - Widespread and common in some years. Records probably concern *N. a. orientalis* (G. Carey, pers. comm.).

Spotted Redshank - Large numbers of up to a hundred are sometimes observed during migration.

Marsh Sandpiper - Single birds were recorded in January 1990 at Hotan River and June 1995 at Ulungur Lake.

Ruddy Turnstone - Recorded twice: May 1999 (3 individuals in Tianshan) and 26 August 1999 (1 individuals

at Karakul (Pamir). These constitute the first records for Xinjiang.

Red-necked Phalarope - Twenty birds at Ulungur Lake in August 1998 was the largest group observed.

Long-billed Dowitcher - A single bird at Yarkant-Markit on 28 September 1998 was the first record for Xinjiang and only the third for China away from Hong Kong (G. Carey, pers. comm.).

Sanderling - One bird in May 1989 near Kashi.

Little Stint - A group of 50 birds were observed near Karakul (Pamir) on 26 August 1999, which is the first record for Xinjiang (Y. Perlman, pers. comm.). The correct identification of stints passing through Xinjiang in late summer requires further investigation.

Red-necked Stint - Three juveniles in the Taklimakan Desert on 23 September 1998 were the first for Xinjiang.

Ruff - A group of 20 in the Tianshan in May 1999 included displaying males. Further records: 1 male on 27 June 1995 at Haba He and 3 individuals 26 August 1999 at Karakul (Pamir).



Table 1. List of waders recorded in Xinjiang between 1985 and 1999.

Species	Scientific name	Status	Breeding	Distribution
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	uncommon	?	Ulungur River; Haba He; Urumqi
Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>	rare	?	?
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	common	?	Bosten Lake; Puhui; Barkol Lake; Urumqi; Ulungur Lake and others
Eurasian Thick-knee	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>	fairly common	yes	Gurban Tunggut Desert; Ili River
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	rare	?	Ebinur Lake?
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	common	no	Tarim River; Ebinur Lake; Tianshan; Ili River
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	uncommon	no	Ebinur Lake
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands
Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	fairly common	yes	Kunlun Mountains; Tianshan; Altay Mountains; Pamir
Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	uncommon	no	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	common	?	everywhere near wetlands
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	uncommon	no	Tianshan
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	uncommon	no	Tianshan
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	common	?	Barkol Lake; Ulungur Lake; Haba He and others
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	uncommon	no	Tarim River; Tianshan
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	rare	no	Hotan River; Ulungur Hu
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	common	no	Yarkant River; Tianshan
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	very common	?	everywhere near wetlands
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	rare	no	Kunlun Mountains?; Karakul (Pamir)
Terek Sandpiper	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>	fairly common	no	Kashi; Tianshan
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	very common	yes	everywhere near wetlands in mountains

Table 1 List of waders recorded in Xinjiang between 1985 and 1999 (cont.)

Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	rare	no	Tianshan; Karakul (Pamir)
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	uncommon	no	near Ulungur Lake
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	uncommon	?	Alta
Pintail Snipe	<i>Gallinago stenura</i>	common	yes	Tianshan
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	common	yes	Altay; Tianshan; Ulungur Lake; Haba He
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>	rare	no	Yarkant-Markit
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	rare	no	Kashi
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	rare	no	Karakul (Pamir)
Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>	rare	no	Taklimakan desert
Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>	common	no	Tianshan; Tarim River
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	uncommon	no	Tianshan
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	uncommon	no	Hami; Karakul (Pamir)
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	rare	?	Tianshan; Haba He; Karakul (Pamir)

DISCUSSION

Very few people watch or study birds in Xinjiang, so the information presented here is likely to be far from complete. However, our data indicates that the high mountains of Xinjiang hold sizable breeding populations of several wader species (eg Northern Lapwing, Lesser Sand Plover and Common Redshank). The most important breeding areas are the Tianshan Mountains, Altay (e.g. Haba He) and Pamir. Intense grazing pressure, mainly by sheep, poses a severe threat to nesting waders.

The existence of an overland migration route through central Asia between the tundras of Siberia and the mudflats of eastern and southern Asia has been the subject of recent debate. Our records indicate that quite a large variety of waders regularly migrate through Xinjiang and more detailed data, especially counts, are desperately needed. Most species occur in small numbers, but several boreal species, such as Spotted Redshank, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and Temminck's Stint pass through in relatively large num-

Table 2. List of species mentioned for the Xinjiang region by some authors (eg Hayman *et al.* 1988, Johnsgard 1981 and Cheng 1987), but for which no confirmed records were obtained.

Species

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*
 Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*
 Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*
 Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*
 Eurasian Dotterel *Eudromias morinellus*
 Solitary Snipe *Gallinago solitaria*
 Swinhoe's Snipe *Gallinago megala*
 Great Snipe *Gallinago media*
 Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minima*
 Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*
 Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*



bers. Temperate species like Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwit are also common during migration. The most important sites for migrating waders are probably Ulungur and Bosten Lakes. However, many lakes and rivers hold waders at times and we suspect that the lakes that are now unsuitable due to irrigation, such as Lop Nur, Ebinur and Manas Hu (near Ulungur Hu) used to be important in the past. Other lakes, such as Barkol Lake and Yiwu Lake, may face similar threats in the future.

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