

ENVIRONMENT

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Finding the Spoon-billed sandpipers in large numbers—around 100 of them, about 25 percent of the world population—here in Bangladesh, made the country a part of the international conservation effort. Meanwhile in Russia, scientists embarked on an epic mission to collect the eggs of Spoon-billed sandpipers from its nests, hatch them in captivity, and release them into the wild to boost populations, hence kick-starting what is now known as “headstarting” of the bird.

This process of artificially incubating the eggs, hand-rearing and releasing them into the wild was possible mainly because Spoon-billed sandpipers are genetically hardwired to take up their

alternate livelihood ideas based on the hunters' preferences. From a small grant supported by a private donor to the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force, the project provided fishing nets, watermelon seeds or sewing machines in return of a pledge not to hunt; in fact, they promised, they would monitor the sites and protect the birds.

The solution was not fool proof in any way, but the conservationists held hope. This was between 2011 and 2012 and the results were beginning to show soon.

“Hunting had been reduced in Bangladesh by almost 90 percent,” mentions Sayam.

Bangladesh has the laws in place to protect any and all wild birds, but it



Bar-headed Geese

migration from Russia to their wintering grounds in south-east Asia with stopovers at China and Korea among others. And here, conservationists started to look for reasons behind their decline and whether Bangladesh had any role to play in their conservation.

The first, relatively easy solution, was to collect data to identify key areas in Bangladesh and ensure its protection. Under the Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project (BSCP), Sayam U Chowdhury, the principal investigator of the project and his team took up the task of finding key areas and identifying threats.

“It was a long and hard process—a combination of interviews with villagers around Sonadia and scanning the sites at nearby villages whereupon we came across something shocking. Some very poor villagers were hunting these birds! It was not that they were targeting just the sandpiper, they were hunting whatever they could find to earn some money and for an easy source of meat,” says Md Foysal, co-investigator of the project.

The conservationists had their work cut out for them. Sayam, Foysal and others had to make many trips to the villages around Sonadia and nearby in Moheshkhali before they managed to earn the trust of the residents and subsequently the hunters.

The team divided up the hunters, many of whom were dirt-poor, into categories based on their dependence on this income source. They then came up with

becomes impossible to put the same legislation into action. The Forest Department that had been tasked with this job is already underequipped and the coordination among relevant stakeholders is virtually non-existent.

Mitigating hunting alone would not work though, believe experts. The habitat needs to be protected as well.

Sonadia and its nearby wetlands are not just an important habitat for this critically endangered bird, it is home to many other forms of wildlife; the island is an ecologically critical area (ECA). The creeks, channels, and near-shore and offshore areas of Sonadia Island support at least four species of globally threatened coastal and marine cetaceans, including finless porpoise, Irrawaddy dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, and Indo-Pacific Humpbacked dolphin, according to an article by Zahirul Islam of MarineLife Alliance. All are listed in the IUCN Red List. Here in this island, the threatened Olive Ridley and green turtle also nest.

While efforts continued in Bangladesh, work was also going on around the bird's flyway. In Myanmar's Gulf of Mottama (Martaban), conservationists were also fighting the threat of hunting in the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's wintering grounds and a part of it has now been declared a Ramsar site. In China, a major stopover for these birds, development and hunting are huge threats and work continues there as well.

Alongside all of this, the efforts for



Shorebirds on the mudflat.

head-starting the Spoon-billed sandpiper population were also showing fruit. In its breeding ground in Chukotka, conservationists were busy collecting the first clutch of eggs laid by the sandpiper and artificially incubating them. Upon hatching, they were then released back into the wild with a tiny flag attached to their feet. In 2017, the first of the head-started birds were sighted in Bangladesh.

The plight of the Spoon-billed sandpiper is far from over though. As new and novel threats continue to get added to the list, this little charismatic bird which has now come to represent an entire flyway and possibly a beacon for its protection, still remains under threat.

Researchers in Bangladesh have also continued their yearly surveys to identify

Circle of the Bangladesh Forest Department.

A RARE SIGHTING CLOSE TO THE HEART

As the spotting scope focuses on the barren landscape of Sonadia, I manage to push back all thoughts of threats and watch the scene come alive. In the seeming nothingness, I watch the mudflat come to life. Shorebirds of all shapes and sizes are busy feeding on the soft mud. The sea roars behind me, and suddenly through the scope I watch a Spoon-billed sandpiper, tiny as ever, walking all over the mudflat, feeding constantly.

While I watch the bird, and the thousands of others in this landscape, I am reminded of the fragility and the contrasting resilience of nature.

All ethical reasons to save this species

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possible wintering grounds in the country. And their search bore fruit as new sites were discovered in the Bay of Bengal, near Sandwip.

“Policymakers have already been informed of our discoveries,” says Sayam.

The need to ensure the protection of biodiversity hotspots cannot be stressed enough. Even the Bangladesh Forest Department agrees on the matter.

“Sonadia, where the Spoon-billed sandpipers are found has been declared as a flyway site in Bangladesh and it is crucial for migratory birds. We have been working to ensure that it is protected. However, possible construction of hotels and such here is of grave concern to us. We have already given our comments and have strongly opposed the matter,” says Jahidul Kabir, Conservator of Forests, Wildlife & Nature Conservation

take a backseat and the emotional ones come forward. And reasons there are:

“We are largely dependent on ecosystems in order to sustain on Earth. The loss of a species only disrupts this balance which is in a most fragile condition now more than ever. You never know what benefits or what portion of the food web a certain species occupies until it is gone forever and you are left grappling with the loss,” Sayam laments.

It is not just saving the Spoon-billed sandpiper; it is about millions of other shorebirds and their intertidal habitats across the flyway. These intertidal habitats are not only important for these migratory birds but also for local communities who are dependent on these ecosystems (fisheries, crab, shrimp, intangible values etc).

All Photographs by Sayam U Chowdhury