

Sighting of Globally Threatened Bird Highlights International Importance of Penang's Coastal Wetlands

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The sighting of a rare Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* with a combination of coloured bands on its legs (see Plate 1) at Penang's Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda Important Bird Area (IBA) has confirmed the international importance of the site for globally endangered migratory shorebirds.



Plate 1: The leg-flagged Nordmann's Greenshank (right).

The sighting was made on 26 December 2022 by a team of researchers working with the Shorebirds Peninsular Malaysia Project (SPMP), during one of their regular surveys of the site (see Figure 1).

The special bird in question has a unique combination of lightweight plastic bands attached to each leg. Completely harmless to the bird, these bands enable the bird to be identified individually, thus helping researchers understand more about the vital requirements of the species for its continuing survival. The bird, a female, was originally captured and fitted with the bands on 30 June 2020 while it was raising young in Northwestern Schaste Bay, Khabarovsk Krai, in the Russian Far East by a team of Russian and American scientists (see Figure).

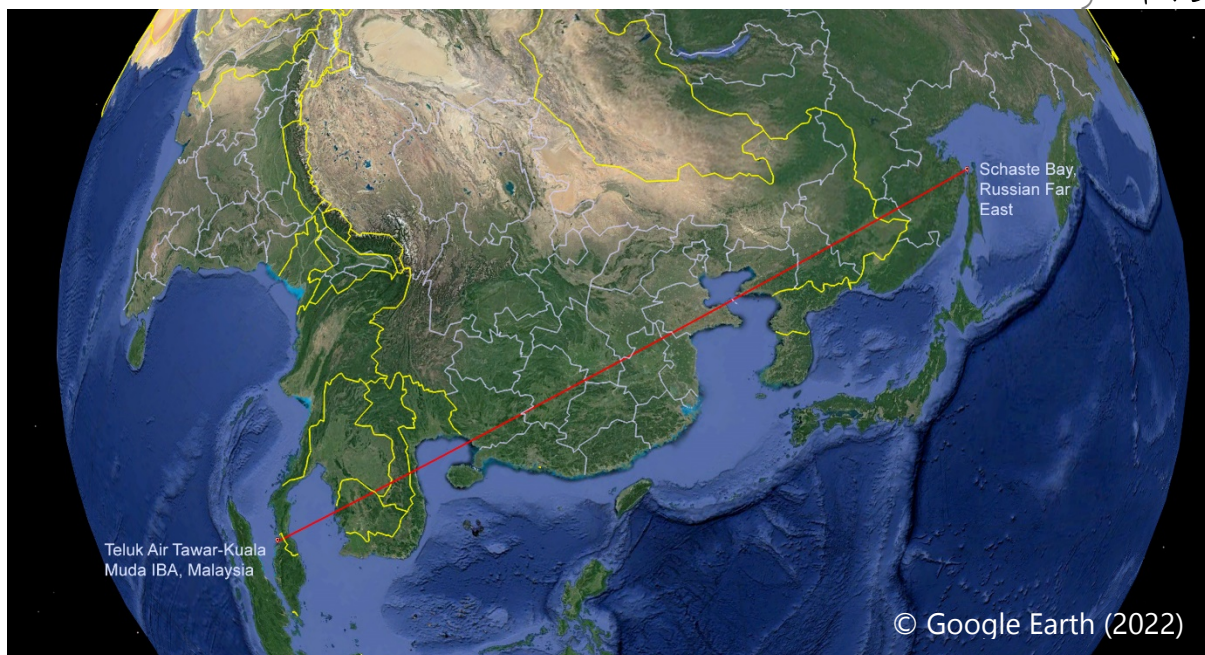


Figure: Map showing Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda, Malaysia, where the banded Normann's Greenshank was sighted and Schaste Bay, Russian Far East, where it was banded.

On hearing of the sighting, project researcher, Philipp Maleko said: *"Simply incredible! For this banded Nordmann's Greenshank to nest in remote Schaste Bay but then spend a non-breeding period 6,500 km away in Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda IBA really highlights how vital the network of critical, but imperiled, sites throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway are for the survival of these Endangered birds."*

Nordmann's Greenshank is classified as Endangered by BirdLife International and is protected under Schedule 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (BirdLife International, 2023). The world population is thought to number only 1200-2000 birds (Cao *et al.* 2023).

The coastline of Teluk Air Tawar – Kuala Muda was recognized as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International in 2004. It regularly supports 12,000-15,000 waterbirds during the northern hemisphere winter months, including up to 90 Nordmann's Greenshanks (up to 7.5% of the world population).

Many shorebirds breed in north-east Asia and migrate to the southern hemisphere between the months of September and March each year (Crossland *et al.* 2007). To do this, they depend on many key stopover sites along the coastline of Asia, which form part of what is known as the East Asia-Australasian Flyway. In recognition of the international importance of the site, on 15 December 2022, it was made part of the 676ha of mangrove forests gazetted as permanent forest reserve in the state of Penang. The Seberang Perai Draft Local Plan 2030 has also gazetted the mangrove area as a RAMSAR site. These gazettlements are a significant move by the state government and a hopeful sign that this crucial ecosystem will be given top priority for protection and conservation in the state's future development plans. Mangroves are not only important for shorebirds, they are the life-giving system along our coastlines that connect

the land and sea. Like the shorebirds, fishing communities in Teluk Air Tawar – Kuala Muda depend on them for their livelihood, and protection from tropical storms and waves, as witnessed when the tsunami that hit the area in 2004. With the looming threat of climate change, the mangroves at Teluk Air Tawar – Kuala Muda are one of the key ecosystems which can mitigate its impacts, and can continue to provide vital refuge for migrating shorebirds.

SPMP have been conducting regular shorebird surveys in this area since 2017. In addition to the latest sighting of the banded Nordmann's Greenshank, we have seen birds tagged in Taiwan, China, Russia, Singapore and Thailand at Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda IBA among the thousands of waterbirds which use the area each season.

As part of our efforts to build awareness and support for shorebird conservation, we also carry out community engagement and education activities with the communities which depend upon the area for their livelihood. Recently, Canon Malaysia Sdn Bhd have awarded SPMP a sponsorship which will enable us to continue monitoring the shorebirds, as well as boost our community-based efforts.

References

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