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***THE NORTHWARD MIGRATION STOPOVER
ECOLOGY OF BAR-TAILED GODWITS AND
GREAT KNOTS IN THE YALU JIANG ESTUARY
NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE, CHINA***

A thesis presented
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Ecology
Massey University
Palmerston North, New Zealand

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January 2015

*To my family and friends,
whose understanding, patience and continual selfless support
have allowed me to soar with the birds*

ABSTRACT

Stopover ecology is the scientific study of the behaviour of migrants, the interrelationships among migrants, and between migrants and their environment, at stopping sites. Many shorebird species are long-distance migrants and require high quality stopping sites to rest and refuel during migration. The suitability of a stopping site depends mostly on food availability, level of competition, and predation or disturbance pressure. Events at stopover may not only affect migration performance, but also the subsequent reproduction or survival, and therefore become the limiting factor for the population sizes of migrants. The stopping sites in the Yellow Sea along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway are used extensively by long-distance migratory shorebirds along the flyway, but very little is known about the stopover ecology of these birds. Moreover, the stopping sites within the Yellow Sea region are under serious threats; some of them are being lost before their importance to shorebirds is fully understood.

In this thesis, my aim was to study the stopover ecology of Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica* and Great Knots *Calidris tenuirostris* at an important stopping site in the northern Yellow Sea, the Yalu Jiang coastal wetland, during northward migration between 2010 and 2012. I estimated the number of these shorebirds transiting and their passage dates using repeated counts incorporated with Thompson's modelling approach. I described the type, abundance and characteristics of their benthos resources by benthos sampling. I investigated their dietary compositions, foraging patterns and mechanisms of coexistence by behaviour scans, focal bird observations and faecal dropping analysis. Finally, I studied their predation impact on their main bivalve prey, *Potamocorbula laevis*, using exclosures.

My results indicated that at least 42% of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway's northward migrating *L. l. baueri* godwits, 19% of *L. l. menzbieri* godwits, and 22% of the Great Knots used Yalu Jiang coastal wetland, thereby indicating the importance of the study area to these species. Polychaetes and bivalves numerically dominated the benthic communities, while one bivalve species, *P. laevis*, constituted more than three quarters of total macrobenthic biomass during the study period. Great Knots, Red Knots *Calidris canutus* and Far Eastern Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus osculans* selected mostly the bivalve *P. laevis* while Bar-tailed Godwits had a broader diet and selected mostly polychaetes, even though most of their intake was of *P. laevis*. Moreover, the size of *P. laevis* preferred by godwits and Great Knots overlapped. Their coexistence seems to be enabled by high resource availability rather than niche separation. The different dietary

selections between godwits and knots possibly led to different foraging patterns on the tidal flats. There was clear behavioural evidence that a digestive bottleneck existed in the bivalve-feeding shorebirds. Such digestive constraints of hard-shelled prey, decreased prey quality (amount of energy per dry mass of shell taken), and increased handling and searching time were potential reasons behind a decline in total biomass intake rate in godwits and Great Knots from 2011 to 2012, despite similar numerical and biomass density of their main prey in both years. Finally, there was evidence that predation by shorebirds had a significant impact on the number of *P. laevis* in one of the years studied.

My thesis showed the importance of Yalu Jiang coastal wetland to Bar-tailed Godwits and Great Knots during northward migration. These two species competed for the same bivalve prey and their coexistence in the years of study was enhanced by ample food resources rather than niche differentiation. The lack of young *P. laevis* recruitment in the final year of study and the significant predation impact detected indicated a potential decline in food resources after my study. Long-term monitoring will reveal how these species respond to the changes in prey availability. My study provided important scientific information on the numbers of birds using Yalu Jiang coastal wetland, their prey resource availability, their dietary compositions, and behaviours that are crucial for their conservation management in the reserve and potentially in other stopping sites in the Yellow Sea.

PREFACE

Ecology is the science which says what everyone knows in language that no one understands. (Elton 1927)

This quote captured precisely how I saw scientific research when I was in the planning stage of my project. Scientific stories on popular science magazines are often well written and capture readers' attention successfully. In contrast, a PhD thesis on the same topic can sometimes be so difficult to understand that it easily deter even the most enthusiastic readers. I remember reading the PhD thesis written by one of the most influential scientists in my field and I kept falling asleep time after time. It was not until I had done all my fieldwork, laboratory measurements, and statistical analyses that I was finally able to appreciate and relate my work to that brilliant scientist's. The most enjoyable way to read ecological research work is perhaps through reading some ecology textbooks that are not only easy to read, but also provide a more general perspective that allows readers to grasp the significance of such work.

Perhaps the other reason why I kept falling asleep was because I had not finalised my research topic at that stage, which meant I did not have the right questions in mind before reading. There were a few potential projects that I might have undertaken. These included the stopover ecology of Bar-tailed Godwits at the Yalu Jiang coastal wetland, stopover ecology of Red Knots at the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the foraging ecology of Wrybills in New Zealand. These are all interesting topics but logistics were extremely difficult at the Gulf of Carpentaria and there were more crocodiles than people living there. Wrybills are adorable but there was more urgency to understand shorebirds' stopover ecology in the Yellow Sea that may contribute to the conservation of shorebirds that have been declining along the whole flyway. Before the start of my PhD project, only two stopping sites in the Yellow Sea (Chongming Dongtan and Bohai Bay) were studied and many stopping sites were shrinking rapidly due to coastal development. Yalu Jiang coastal wetland has been shown to support a significant proportion of shorebirds along the flyway, but we knew nothing about the basic questions such as the function of this place to shorebirds, what food resources are available to the birds, why is it so attractive to shorebirds and what are the threats in this site.

My adventures at the Yalu Jiang coastal wetland were an eye-opening experience, at least for me, who had only seen shorebirds in flocks of hundreds or a few thousand before visiting Yalu Jiang. This thesis will describe the life of some of the hundred thousand shorebirds during their one and a half month stopover at Yalu Jiang, using the language that most, if not everyone, understands (*hopefully!*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I have to thank my supervisors Phil Battley, Murray Potter and Zhijun Ma for their patience and support throughout my five years of research. Phil's passion, knowledge and experiences on shorebirds provided very important guidance in my research. Murray's different research expertise and logical mind have improved my research planning, analysis and writing enormously. Dr Ma, my mentor in shorebird study, introduced me to this fascinating field of research ten years ago and has set the excellent work ethic for his students to follow. My research benefited tremendously from their constructive criticisms. I would not be able to follow the shorebirds and complete their annual cycle, from breeding grounds in Alaska, wintering grounds in New Zealand, and stopovers in China, without the support from my supervisors, as well as Richard Lanctot.

Before the start of my first field season, I benefited greatly from the knowledge of the study site shared by the Miranda Naturalists' Trust, especially Adrian Riegen and Keith Woodley, and also from local birdwatcher Qingquan Bai.

My research could not be completed without the help from David Melville, Qingquan Bai, Dezhong Xin, Hebo Peng, Ying Chen, Julia Melville, Peter Brakels, Parinya Sukkaewmanee, Xiaojing Gan, Ning Hua, Yingtai Cai, Xuan Zhang, Chungyu Chiang, Shih-han Hsu, staff from the Yalu Jiang Estuary National Nature Reserve, especially Na Jia and Guangming Zhang, and volunteers from the Miranda Naturalists' Trusts, in both field and laboratory work.

During my research planning, data sorting, data analysis and write-up, I benefited greatly from advices and feedback given by Wenliang Liu, Ken Rogers, Danny Rogers, Hongyan Yang, Ian Henderson, Dianne Brunton, Jim Briskie, Jan van Gils, Zutao Ouyang, Jesse Conklin, Nick Murray, Xiongzhaoh He, Hebo Peng, Theunis Piersma, Sjoerd Duijns, Alice Ewing, Heather Gibbs, Roger Standen and Clare Morton. I would also like to thank Jesse Conklin for sharing his figure, and Kayla Friedman and Malcolm Morgan for sharing the template used in this thesis.

I am also indebted to The Australasian Wader Studies Group, Chris Hassell and Danny Rogers in particular, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, Qingquan Bai, for allowing me to examine their count data, Chris Hassell, Clare Morton and Rob Schuckard for allowing me to examine their colour-banding data, and Lee Tibbitts, Rob Gill and the US Geological Survey for allowing me to examine the satellite tracking data.

My study in New Zealand was supported by the New Zealand International Doctoral Research Scholarships. I also received financial support from the Institute of Agriculture and Environment (formerly the Institute of Natural Resources), Massey University, Conservation Leadership Programme, Miranda Naturalists' Trust and The Ornithological Society of New Zealand, for field costs and to attend conferences and a short course.

Our current shorebird knowledge along this flyway benefited tremendously from dedicated volunteers and workers, including those no longer with us, Mark Barter and Heather Gibbs. Mark's early counting effort along the East China coast provided very important reference materials for monitoring and research work that follows.

On a more personal note, I am grateful to the inspiration and encouragement I got from my friends, many of them from the Miranda Naturalists' Trust and the Conservation Leadership Programme, in particular, David Melville, Adrian Riegen, Keith Woodley, Gillian Vaughn, Estella Lee, Yufang Gao, Simba Chan and Wah Guan Lim. Their selfless dedication and enthusiasm to conservation or their passions, often reminded me why I am doing what I am doing, especially during periods when I was drained by my research work and losing my head.

Would it be weird to be grateful to the Mother Nature? Not only for supporting our lives but also creating the wonderful world for us to study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family – my parents for sending me to Australia, where I discovered my lifelong passion, giving me the freedom to follow my heart and providing the support and shelter whenever I need; my wife for her patience, understanding, inspiration and 'light of wisdom' that allows even the innocents to shine. I would not be where I am today without them.

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