

Slender-billed Curlew: promising discovery in the Danube delta

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Despite the hard work of the world conservation community to study the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, discover its nesting sites and bring it back from the brink of extinction, it still remains a mystery bird. Currently, it is one of the rarest birds of the Old World and is critically endangered. Therefore, any information about recent records is of vital importance. Here, I report on the status of the species at one of its most important migrating stopover sites, the Danube delta, where promising observations were made in 2003 and 2004. As a consequence, plans are being made for follow-up studies and conservation activities.

INTRODUCTION

The Danube delta, as well as the whole of the N and NW Black Sea coast is located on the main Slender-billed Curlew migration route between its supposed W Siberian nesting sites and its supposed Mediterranean wintering sites (Gretton 1991; Heredia *et al.* 1996).

Recently, there have been several records of Slender-billed Curlews during migration, particularly on the Black Sea coast. Past records, as well as recent ones confirm the importance of the Danube delta as a Slender-billed Curlew stopover site (Slender-billed Curlew Records Database 1998; Zhmud, 1997, 1990b; Nankinov, 1997; this paper). It should be also noted that the intensity of ornithological fieldwork is much lower in the Danube delta compared with most wetlands in W Europe (though it is considerably greater than in the vast area of W Siberia and Kazakhstan where the species probably breeds). While such a sought-after species is unlikely to go unnoticed by bird watchers in W Europe, perhaps only one in ten may be recorded in the huge and rarely visited Danube delta.

While records of Slender-billed Curlews in the Romanian part of the Danube delta are mainly from the sandy grasslands of the island of Letya, those for the Ukrainian part of the delta are from low islands and sand spits covered with *Salicornia europea*, as well as shores and sandbars in lagoons. There are a good number of historical records from the Romanian sector of the delta (Gretton 1991), but not from the Ukrainian part.

During 1983–2002, the only records of Slender-billed Curlews in the Ukrainian delta wetlands were of single birds (Zhmud, 1997, 1990b). In 2003 and 2004, however, small groups were recorded, as described below giving some hope that a viable breeding population may still survive.

OBSERVATIONS OF SLENDER-BILLED CURLEWS DURING 2003–2004

On 25 Jul 2003, I saw four Slender-billed Curlews together on the north-west end of the Taranova spit (45.443°N, 29.775°E) in the northern part of the delta between the channels Prorva and Potapovo, about 16 km north-east of the town of Vilkovo (Fig. 1). I watched them for over half an hour with 10× binoculars in a 1.5 ha area of 15 cm high *Salicornia*. When disturbed, they only flew a short distance and invariably landed within the same area. In contrast, when Eurasian Curlews *N. arquata* (both a flock and a bird on its own) were disturbed, they left the site altogether. In earlier observations of Slender-billed Curlews I had noted their less cautious behaviour in comparison with their commoner relatives, Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel *N. phaeopus* (Zhmud 1999c,d).

While I observed them, the Slender-billed Curlews were quite dispersed on the spit, and only on one occasion when they were disturbed did two birds briefly come together. Generally, they never come closer to one another than 6–8 m. In contrast, Eurasian Curlews, even when initially dispersed, quickly formed a flock when put to flight. The Slender-billed Curlews were only seen on the *Salicornia* spit and never on the open sandy coast or in the extensive shallow waters, which are areas that are frequently used by Eurasian Curlews.

When approached on foot, it proved easy to get to within about 100 m of the Slender-billed Curlews. At this stage they would fly up to 200 m. When two birds took off and flew together, they called with a distinctive jerky *bi-bi-bi* or *vi-vi-vi* quite unlike any other species. Otherwise the birds were silent. When they flew, I clearly saw the white underparts with large dark spots on the flanks (more contrasting than in Eurasian Curlew). I also noted the distinctive slender bill and had the opportunity to make comparisons with nearby





Fig. 1. Location by date of Slender-billed Curlew records in the Ukrainian part of the Danube delta, 1985–2004.

Eurasian Curlews which were obviously larger.

The observation of four Slender-billed Curlews on 25 July is important, but its significance is increased by a further observation of four at the same place 27 days later on 21 Aug 2003. Although the site was not visited between these dates, it would seem very likely that they were the same four birds. Their behaviour was similar, including disturbance distance, distinctive whistling of two individuals during flight and close attachment to the site. No Slender-billed Curlews were seen on my next visit to the site on 22 Sep 2003.

Further observations of Slender-billed Curlews were made in 2004, in the course of a waterfowl survey of the Ukrainian part of the Danube delta I carried out in collaboration with Professor A.I. Koshelev of Melitopol Pedagogical University and O.N. Formanyuk of the Azov-Black Sea Ornithological station.

On 11 Aug 2004, on the long strip of land dividing the Black Sea from the Sasyk lagoon, the Danube delta water reservoir (45.577°N, 29.711°E), we saw two groups of Slender-billed Curlews of two and four individuals respectively several hundred metres apart. The characteristics of the habitat were similar to those of the 2003 observations: a shore

dominated by *Salicornia* in the more elevated areas. It was a time of reduced water levels and the lower lying parts of the shore consisted of dry or drying mud. The Slender-billed Curlews were dispersed and spent most time on the *Salicornia* or the edges of drying mud. Unlike the Eurasian Curlews that were also present, the Slender-billed Curlews did not make use of the extensive sandy shores or shallow waters.

When disturbed, the Slender-billed Curlews flew a few hundred metres, but remained within the habitat described above. In contrast, Eurasian Curlews would fly away until they were out of sight. Unfortunately, observation conditions were difficult because the birds were actively feeding and there was a strong wind. However, using vegetation as cover, one bird was approached to within 30 m. This allowed close examination, using binoculars, of its size, plumage and distinctive bill. The other birds appeared to be similar to the one that that had been observed closely. None of the birds was heard to call.

As with the four birds in 2003, when approached on foot these birds did not allow an observer to come closer than 80–100 m. During earlier observations, I found that single birds usually allow an observer to come much closer (Zhmud



1997, 1999b). This confirms the general rule that in my experience single birds (of many species) are less cautious than birds in flocks.

On 12 Aug 2004, we saw a single Slender-billed Curlew in flight over the spit Dalnyaya at the mouth of the Poludennoye channel (45.397°N, 29.767°E), about 6 km from the site where the four birds were recorded in 2003 and 20 km from the sightings of the previous day. The bird was observed under conditions of good illumination and calm weather. Before it was first seen, its distinctive *bi-bi-bi* call was heard. It flew northwards along the shore and passed us within about 40 m. This allowed good views of the characteristic plumage on the flanks and the thin bill. Although the bird did not land, it flew over similar habitat to that of the previous observations: a low shore dominated by *Salicornia* backed by sand dunes.

DISCUSSION

The importance of the Danube delta for Slender-billed Curlews

The observation of the four Slender-billed Curlews in the Danube delta in 2003 and the total of six or seven in 2004 is a great encouragement to those who fear that the species may become extinct before any positive conservation measures can be taken.

Of the nine observations I made of Slender-billed Curlews in the Ukrainian part of the Danube delta during 1985–2004, there were five of single birds, one group of two birds and three groups of four birds (Table 1). Calls were heard on only four of the nine occasions. All were recorded along the coast of the northern (Ukrainian) Danube delta with a maximum distance between observation sites of 26 km. Most records relate to just one site, the Taranova spit between the mouths of the Prorva and Potapovo channels (Fig. 1). These include the four birds that may have stayed for a month from 25 Jul to 21 Aug in 2003. Clearly this limited area is of prime conservation importance for the species.

The monthly distribution of all 26 known records of Slender-billed Curlews in the whole of the Danube delta (both Ukraine and Romania) highlights the importance of the area for the species during autumn migration from July to October, particularly in August (Fig. 2). Surprisingly, there are two records for what should be the breeding season (May–June). These are discussed in Zhmod (1999a, b).

If the four birds seen on 25 Jul 2003 were the same as those seen on 21 Aug 2003 – and it is admitted that although

this seems likely, it cannot be proved – it would suggest that the birds were not just stopping over to gain resources for further migration (which would probably take a much shorter period), but were staying to moult. Possibly therefore the Danube delta (in this case a buffer zone of the Danube Biosphere Reserve) is of particular importance to the species because it is a large, relatively safe area where they can stop over for a long period every autumn both to store resources for migration and carry out the whole or part of their annual primary moult.

Future studies

In the interests of preserving the remnant population, it is vitally important to establish exactly how many Slender-billed Curlews pass through the Danube delta each year and what sites are of most importance for them. To achieve this, more comprehensive observer coverage will be necessary so that all likely habitats are searched on a regular basis during the main passage period, July to October.

Once birds have been found, it will be valuable to determine how long they stay, where and on what they feed, where they roost, whether they undergo primary moult and whether they include juveniles (to show whether they have successfully bred). It should be possible to establish the answers to most of these questions through detailed field observations with telescopes. However, some important breakthroughs will only be possible if some birds can be captured; for example to determine breeding and wintering areas through radio-tracking and/or stable isotope studies. It would seem likely that the Danube delta, particularly the Taranova spit, would be the best place to attempt such a capture, possibly using a cannon- or clap-net.

Identification issues

The identification of Slender-billed Curlews in the field is difficult and there is a high probability of mistakes. Therefore the issue of the reliability of published records is highly relevant and there can be little doubt that several do not relate to Slender-billed Curlews. This is particularly likely in the case of birds flying high above the observer without calling or 'small' individuals in curlew flocks. During the past 22 years of my work along the north-east coast of the Black Sea, mainly in the Ukrainian part of the Danube delta, I have often seen 'suspicious' small curlews. However, I have only been

Table 1. Records of Slender-billed Curlews made by the author from 1985 to 2004 (Zhmod, 1997, 1999a,b, this paper).

Date	Number seen	Calls heard
20 Oct 1985	1	No
18 Aug 1994	1	Yes
17 Sep 1996	1	No
16 Oct 1996	1	No
25 Jul 2003	4	Yes
21 Aug 2003	4	Yes
11 Aug 2004	2	No
11 Aug 2004	4	No
12 Aug 2004	1	Yes

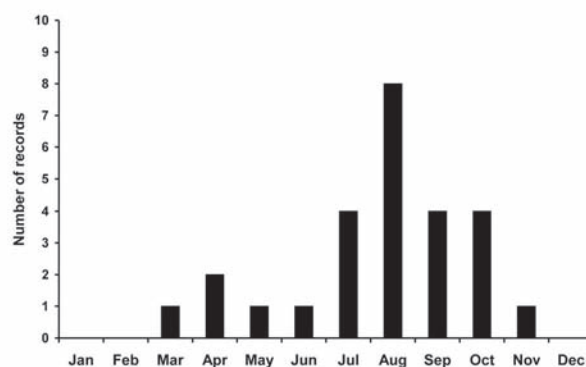


Fig. 2. The monthly distribution of the 26 records (not numbers) of Slender-billed Curlews in the Danube Delta (Slender-billed Curlew Database 1998; Zhmod, 1997, 1999; Nankinov, 1997; this paper).



convinced that they were Slender-billed Curlews in respect of the nine records listed in Table 1. In these cases, I regard the probability of misidentification as minimal.

Currently, it is more important to discuss the reliability of future Slender-billed Curlew records. In the past, the best confirmation of identification was from birds shot and studied in detail in a laboratory. However, shooting is no longer permissible and would imperil the species even more. Nowadays, the best and most ethically acceptable methods include photography and video-recording, as well as detailed field observations with high-quality optical devices, especially with Eurasian Curlews nearby for comparison. Unfortunately not all birdwatchers, especially in Eastern Europe, have the high quality cameras and high resolution telescopes that are necessary.

I consider that one of the most reliable methods of identifying Slender-billed Curlews in the field is through voice. It is well known that the Slender-billed Curlew's calls are quite different from those of the other curlew species, but unfortunately they call more rarely both on passage and in winter. However, when calls are clearly heard, the possibility of mistaken identification is greatly reduced. Therefore, when small suspicious-looking curlews are encountered, it is worthwhile to disturb them in the hope that they will call as they take off.

When considering the reliability of identifying Slender-billed Curlews, it is also important to take into account the possibility of its hybridization with the Eurasian Curlew under the present conditions of low population density. With the nesting range of the Slender-billed Curlew well within that of the Eurasian Curlew, the possibility of hybridization should not be discounted. This may possibly explain recent records in NW Europe of birds very like Slender-billed

Curlews, such as a bird seen in SE England in late 2004 (M. Smart, pers. comm.).

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