Where on earth does the Slender-billed Curlew breed?

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Differences in man-made ecological changes in the steppe zone and West Siberian forest zone suggest that Slender-billed Curlew are more likely to nest in the former. Possible breeding areas are suggested.

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[**Translator's note**: this article has been translated from the Russian version that appeared as 'Gdye zhe obitayet tonkoklyuviy kronshnep?', in *Informatsionniye materialy Rabochey gruppy po kulikam* [Bulletin of the Wader Working Group] (Tomkovich, P.S. Ed.), no. 7, pp. 30-32, published in Moscow 1994 by the Menzbier Ornithological Society.

The original article did not possess a list of references, and these have been supplied by the author. In addition he has asked that an additional word, inadvertently omitted from the original, be inserted in the translation, namely 'northern' in paragraph 7. Scientific names have been added to the translation as appropriate.

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For several decades the predicament of the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* has been a matter of concern to the Palaearctic ornithological community. The catastrophic decline in its numbers, now optimistically assessed at 100-400 individuals from counts at its Mediterranean wintering grounds (Gretton 1991), led to its inclusion in the second edition of IUCN's *Red List of Threatened Animals* (1988). However the absence of reliable information on its reproductive biology and ignorance of its breeding range are preventing the effective protection of this species. So locating its remaining breeding sites is an urgent task. Unfortunately all efforts to find where it is now nesting have so far been unsuccessful (Yurlov & Gretton 1990; Yurlov 1992).

I believe the reason for this is the incorrect interpretation of summer records of the species. Nineteenth century ideas concerning its range (Menzbier 1893) were later re-examined by Buturlin (1934) and then fully revised by Dolgushin (1962) who in his idiosyncratic way assessed the significance of breeding records given by Ushakov (1916, 1925) in West Siberia. These ideas gained a foothold and subsequently dominated the thinking of many ornithologists over three decades. This has been particularly evident in the organisation of recent international efforts to search for the Slender-billed Curlew in the bogs of West Siberia (Yurlov & Gretton 1990).

However the drastic reduction in range and population of the species cannot be explained by ecological changes in its supposed habitat in the Siberian forest zone, since development of the region has so far remained comparatively slight (Sorokin 1984; Yurlov 1992). As before the Common Curlew *N. arquatus* usually nests there and the Whimbrel *N. phaeopus* is also encountered (Yurlov 1992). On the other hand a very different situation obtains in the steppes of Siberia, Kazakhstan and East Europe, which have hitherto been regarded as the area occupied by the Slender-billed Curlew after the breeding season (Dolgushin 1962). Widespread ploughing and intensification of grazing on the remaining virgin lands in the mid-20th century led to a rapid decline in the Kazakh population of the Common Curlew (Ryabov 1982), to the disappearance of the majority of other steppe populations of this species, and to the extinction of the steppe race of the Whimbrel *N. phaeopus alboaxillaris*.

However the man-made influences I am aware of which affect birds in the steppe zone could hardly have a serious limiting effect - even less an eliminating effect - on curlews moving around after the breeding season. Curlews, like all other species of waders, especially late-nesting ones, experience unusually high pressure from animal and avian predators in the steppe pastures. They also suffer from trampling of nests and nestlings by stock, and are highly vulnerable to hunters - but only in the breeding season. It is mainly this which accounts for the degradation in the breeding sites of the Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria* and Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*. The same has happened to the Common Curlew: it was formerly a characteristic inhabitant of the virgin steppe lands, but is now mainly confined to sandy expanses relatively unexploited by humans.

It is highly likely that the Slender-billed Curlew too could suffer seriously from human activity only during the nesting season, and this would have been possible only in the steppe pastures. So it is quite possible that many summer records of the species in the steppes of East Europe, Siberia and Kazakhstan relate in part to breeding birds. The outright rejection of clear indications (although not supported by definite records) of breeding by Slender-billed Curlews in the steppe zone, which are found in the literature of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, should be considered at the very least as irrational. It is on account of this rejection that recent searches for the

Slender-billed Curlew have been mainly restricted to the oligotrophic bogs of the forest zone which are not very favourable habitats for curlews and which were in the past evidently only marginal habitats for them.

Indirect evidence for a steppe range of the Slender-billed Curlew comes from its migration routes. It is known (Dobrynina 1985; Kastepyld 1985) that north-European populations of the Common Curlew and Whimbrel winter mainly on the European Atlantic seaboard while the Urals and West Siberian populations fly more or less south towards the Indian Ocean. Slender-billed Curlew, like the steppe populations of Common Curlew, migrate in a latitudinal direction along the coasts of the southern seas to Mediterranean wintering grounds.

In searching for the Slender-billed Curlew's remaining breeding sites it now makes sense to direct attention to the virgin steppe lands, and in particular to the sandy expanses. The most likely area is the northern border zone of the Volga-Ural Sands. It is an extensive and very under-exploited region where the Slender-billed Curlew could be nesting together with the Common Curlew in the sandy meadows of the numerous depressions and lake basins. The region has been little studied by ornithologists. Moreover identification there of the Slender-billed Curlew by chance observers is made unlikely not only by its resemblance to the Common Curlew but also by the fixed ideas of the observers themselves regarding the various species' ranges. Evidence of possible breeding by Slender-billed Curlew in this region includes, in particular, recent summer records on the border between Saratov oblast and Kazakhstan (Moseykin 1992).

The Slender-billed Curlew might also turn up in other sandy areas, for example the extensive Archedino-Donskiy Sands in Volgograd oblast. I have heard from hunters about curlew of different sizes in the Don-Tsimlyanskiy Sands where a small relict population of Common Curlew was recently discovered (Belik, 1988). It cannot be ruled out that Slender-billed Curlew might also be present there, especially since right up until recently it was recorded flying past over the Lower Don valley (Belik, 1990).

So we are still hopeful of finding Slender-billed Curlew breeding. And the sooner it happens, the greater will be our chances of saving this relict Palaearctic species which is on the verge of extinction.

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