

# In search of the Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*)

## Preliminary results of an expedition to wetlands and waterbirds of the Baraba and Karasuk steppe in the south of West Siberia, Russian Federation, 17 May - 22 June 1997.

*Gerard C.Boere and Aleksandr K.Yurlov*

Boere, G.C. & Yurlov, A.K. 1998. In search of the Slender-billed Curlew, *Numenius tenuirostris*. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 85: 35-38.

*G.C.Boere, Voorstraat 7, 4153 AH Beesd, the Netherlands (correspondence);*

*A.K. Yurlov, Institute of Ecology, Siberian Branche Russian Academy of Sciences, 11 Frunzestreet, 630091 Novosibirsk, Russian Federation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* is one of the rarest birds in the world; total population estimates vary between only 100-400 individuals. The species is included in many Red Data Books and in the highest conservation categories of many international conventions such as Annex I of the Bonn Convention. In the case of the Bonn Convention, there is even a separate Memorandum of Understanding between the governments involved.

A full historical status report was given in the ICBP (now BirdLife International) publication by Gretton (1991). More recently Dr Nowak of the Bonn Convention Secretariat summarised the data collected since 1991 (1996, unpublished report Bonn Convention Secretariat). Nowak's report mentions a group of about 20 birds wintering in south Italy in 1995/1996 and flocks of up to 50 birds wintering along the southern coast of Iran. Almost every year, single birds or 2-3 individuals together are observed in countries in the Mediterranean region. EU subsidies, under the LIFE Programme, have been given to some of these countries, for example Greece, to conserve areas where Slender-billed Curlews have regularly been observed.

The present breeding area is unknown. The last nest was discovered in 1924 by Ushakov, in the marshes south-west of Tara, a town on the river Irtysh about 250 km north of Omsk. Several attempts in the period 1990-1996 to rediscover the breeding area have so far failed. Recently, Danilenko *et al.* (1996) analysed and discussed the causes of the decline of the Slender-billed Curlew and concluded that the breeding area is not in the taiga but instead in wet areas in the forest-steppe and northern steppe zones of west Siberia. Based on biogeographical information, these authors described 22 areas where the chance of finding breeding Slender-billed Curlews might be higher than average.

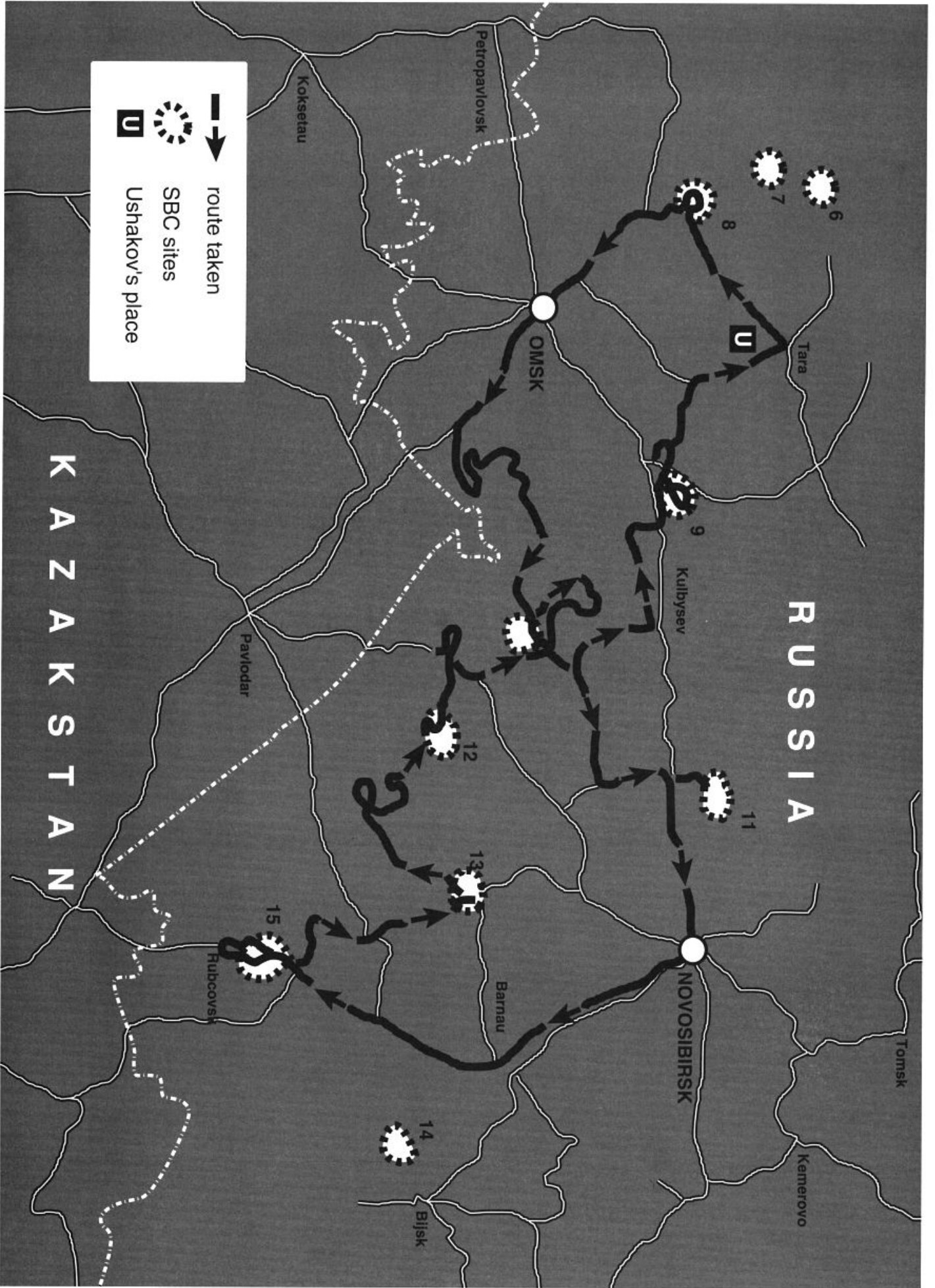
In the period 17 May - 22 June 1997, Gerard Boere (in a private capacity as WIWO co-worker) and Sasha Yurlov (Siberian Branche Russian Academy of Sciences) undertook an expedition with a Russian four-wheel drive UAZ 469 army car in order to try to visit 11 out of the 22 areas identified by Danilenko *et al.* (1996). in the Novosibirsk, Altaisk and Omsk regions. This report gives some preliminary results of the expedition; a full account will be published as a WIWO report, expected to be ready by the end of 1998.

### ROUTE, CONDITIONS AND AREAS VISITED

The expedition covered about 5,000 km following a route (see Figure 1.) through Barnaul to the southern Altaisk Region, via many marshes and lakes, to Lake Kulundinskoe, Karasuk and the surrounding area. From there it led on to the Lake Chany region (islands, lake shores and surrounding steppe areas); then north to Barabinsk, Ust-tarka and then Tara and the marshes where, in 1924, the last Slender-billed Curlew nest was found. From Tara, we went south to Lake Tennis and via Omsk and Tsjerlak to the vast steppe region on the border with Kazakhstan. Finally, we travelled via Lake Chany to Kargat and Lake Ubinskoe back to Novosibirsk. The weather was generally hot and dry with much dust and many mosquitos. Heavy rainfall forced us out of the Lake Ubinskoe area. Road conditions were very Siberian: a few were bitumen, the rest were sandy tracks and/or cross-country routes which we followed with the help of reasonable topographic maps and in particular, the local people and herdsmen. Nonetheless, the general road conditions and navigation consumed a considerable amount of our time during this expedition.

We managed to visit seven out of the eleven target areas which were, in principle, within our range. However, four turned out to be too far out of the maximum range that we could cover given the time available. These seven areas were: Altaisk Krai/Altei river (no.15); area south of Novosibirsk water





reservoir (no.13); Burla river valley (no.12); south shore of Malye Chany (no.10); area between Om and Irtish rivers (no.9) northern area of Lake Tenis (no.8) and the east corner of Lake Ubinskoe (no.11).

We found that four of these areas have been completely destroyed by human activities such as over-grazing, building of drainage/irrigation channels through large steppe areas, change of steppe into arable land etc. These were area numbers: 15, 13, 10 and 9. The Burla river area should remain on the list of potential areas. Two areas are a high priority to be revisited and searched more carefully; these are the areas north of Lake Tenis and north of Lake Ubinskoe. We also visited the marshes where Ushakov found the last known breeding site. This area has previously been visited by Dr Yurlov together with Dr Gretton and Dr O'Sullivan; the last visit was three years ago. This area had also changed completely. Remaining steppe plots on the higher parts of the marshes have been turned into wheat fields; new birch tree roads (in Russian: Gat) have opened up the area and the original open marsh of the last breeding site was now completely covered with young forest.

Local farmers, who we met at the place where, in 1924, there was a village, informed us that the village was totally abandoned and destroyed in the late 1960s and that the water table in many lakes had dropped due to agricultural activities, thus stimulating the growth of trees on the former wet marshes. The local museum in Tara did not have a stuffed Slender-billed Curlew, but did have Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* and Common Curlew *Numenius arquata*.

## RESULTS, WADERS AND OTHER BIRD OBSERVATIONS

No breeding Slender-billed Curlews were discovered nor observed. During the expedition, we interviewed tens of people: 'cowboys', hunting inspectors, fishing inspectors, farmers, local wardens of nature and hunting reserves etc. In all cases we showed them a postcard picture of a Slender-billed Curlew (a large stock was kindly made available by the Secretariat of the Bonn Convention) and left it with the people with the address of Dr Yurlov. It was remarkable that everyone knew the other two Curlew species, but none had ever seen the Slender-billed Curlew. Many of these people knew their birds extremely well, identifying correctly many other waders such as Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and Redshank *Tringa totanus*; both species were common in the whole area covered by our expedition.

The same was true for species like Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*. Common Curlew and Whimbrel were observed regularly. In one case, a Whimbrel was identified as the rare steppe subspecies *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris*. Arctic breeding waders were still migrating through the area and in late May/early June in particular, we observed many flocks of species such as Dunlin

*Calidris alpina*, Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*, Little Stint *Calidris minuta*, and Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*.

In total, 120 more or less systematic point counts were made covering a range of steppe and marsh/lake habitats. All are on separate census sheets and will be fully recorded in the final report. A summary of all birds counted is presented in Table 1. Many lakes and marshes, shown on the maps, no longer existed. This is not only due to human influence but also because of the so far little-understood natural cycles of water levels in a wide range of the Siberian lowlands (Krivenko 1991). Large lakes in the 1960s are now marshes or dry valleys and excellent wader breeding sites. We discovered with colonies of up to 200 pairs of Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* in large valleys with shallow waters, which had been dry dusty places for more than several years. Some rivers in the Novosibirsk region had levels of 1-2 m above normal, flooding huge areas of grasslands, whereas in other areas the water level in the rivers was lower. This makes comparison in time between areas very difficult and many of the breeding waterbirds must be nomadic with respect to their annual breeding sites.

We discovered a number of new breeding sites of waterbirds listed in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation, for example:

- Dalmatian Pelican *Pelicanus crispus*; group of about 20 non-breeding birds in the Burla valley.
- Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria*; one pair, with nest, near Karasuk.
- Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*; many new colonies discovered, some of them with hundreds of breeding pairs.
- Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*; five new breeding sites discovered: one north of Lake Tenis (with nest/one egg), which is far beyond the presently known breeding range.
- Avocet *Recurvirostra avocetta*; fewer than Black-winged Stilt, but found in small numbers at many more places than ever known before.
- White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*; particularly common this year; many very large colonies discovered; in total a minimum of 12,000 breeding pairs counted.
- Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*; new colony discovered on a small island in Lake Kulundinskoe. We estimated about 450-500 breeding pairs. It is the second colony of this rare species in the south of West Siberia.

Clearly the south of West Siberia is an extremely important wetland and waterbird area, both for breeding and migrating/moulting waterbirds and worth much more attention than presently is the case; even without a rediscovered breeding site of the Slender-billed Curlew!



**Table 1.** Total number of birds counted during expedition (20 May-18 June 1997)

<i>Gavia arctica</i>	3	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	34
<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	89	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	1
<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	5	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	5
<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	95	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	20
<i>Pelicanus crispus</i>	23	<i>Chettusia gregaria</i>	2
<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	5	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	655
<i>Egretta alba</i>	1	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	204
<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	48	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>	32
<i>Cygnus olor</i>	14	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	138
<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	180	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	342
<i>Anser anser</i>	215	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	343
<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	10	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	57
<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	310	<i>Gallinago media</i>	1
<i>Anas penelope</i>	1254	<i>Limnodromus semipalmatus</i>	9
<i>Anas strepera</i>	92	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	409
<i>Anas crecca</i>	377	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	3
<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	60	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	8
<i>Anas acuta</i>	2123	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	370
<i>Anas querquedula</i>	418	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	178
<i>Anas clypeata</i>	1311	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1
<i>Aythya ferina</i>	850	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	2
<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	66	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>	30
<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	116	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	10
<i>Mergus albellus</i>	2	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	23
<i>Milvus korchun</i>	1	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	255
<i>Circus aeruginos</i>	40	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>	812
<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2	<i>Larus minutus</i>	3038
<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	1965
<i>Aquila clanga</i>	1	<i>Larus canus</i>	717
<i>Aquila rapax</i>	1	<i>Larus cachinans</i>	736
<i>Falco vespertinus</i>	4	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	3
<i>Crex crex</i>	2	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	3
<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	681
<i>Grus grus</i>	130	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	1667
<i>Fulica atra</i>	155	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	8810
<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	387	Ducks sp.	3968
<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	802	<i>Calidris</i> sp.	100
<i>Glareola nordmanni</i>	3	Gulls sp.	375

**Notes:** 1. The table only includes the totals from the 120 point counts; total numbers observed of most species were much higher; total estimates in final report; 2. The table does not include numbers of the delta's Kargat and Chulym river within Lake Chany area; there, for example, 4,000 pairs of *Chlidonias leucoptera* were breeding this year with at least 1,000 *Chlidonias niger*; see final report.

## REFERENCES

Danilenko, A.K., Boere, G.C. & Lebedeva, E.A. 1996. Looking for the recent breeding grounds of Slender-billed Curlew: a habitat-based approach. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 81: 71-78.

Gretton, A. 1991. *Conservation of the Slender-billed Curlew*. ICBP Monograph No.6. International Council for Bird Preservation. 159 pp. Cambridge.

Krivenko, V.G. 1991. [*Waterbirds and their conservation.*]. Moscow, Agropromizdat. 271 pp. (In Russian).

