

Census finds unexplained fall in Black-faced Spoonbill numbers

Title

The 2011 International Black-faced Spoonbill Census has found a large decrease in the known wintering populations since last year's census. Overall numbers fell from 2,347 birds in January 2010 to 1,848 in January 2011, a decline of 21%. Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* is currently considered as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. It was downlisted from Critically Endangered in 2000. The census covered many coastal wetland areas in East Asia, including western Japan, the southern part of Korean Peninsula, the east and south China coast including Chinese Taiwan and Hainan islands, northern Vietnam, and scattered sites in Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines. The census was very much a collaborative effort, with help given by BirdLife Partners in Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong (China) and Chinese Taiwan (China) and by the BirdLife Programme offices of Vietnam and Cambodia. As in previous years, the biggest wintering population was recorded in Chinese Taiwan, but it was here too that the largest drop in numbers was seen, from 1280 in 2010 to 843 (34%). The second most important wintering area, China's Deep Bay (including both Hong Kong (China) and Shenzhen) saw numbers fall from 462 to 411. There were small increases in Japan, Macao and Vietnam, and the species was also found at a new census site in Cambodia, but not enough to offset the major falls elsewhere. "This is the largest decrease in wintering numbers of this species since the census began in 1993", said Simba Chan of BirdLife in Asia. "It may be related to the severe winter in the northern area, and there are hints that some birds have gone further to the south. A large number of birds were seen in Chinese Taiwan earlier in the winter, but they disappeared. No large numbers of dead spoonbills have been found." He added that breeding success was reported to have been low in 2010. The increases recorded by the census in previous years may have represented a genuine population increase or displacement of birds from other, unknown wintering sites. Although numbers have improved dramatically from the known global population of 300 in 1993, the abrupt fall in this winter's counts emphasises that this species is still at risk of extinction. Habitat destruction and degradation are still the main threats to the Black-faced Spoonbill. Many coastal wetland areas in this region are being destroyed for development (for example, in Hainan, Macao and Korea), and Black-faced Spoonbills are suspected to have been hunted for food around Vietnam's Red River Delta as recently as 2010.