Title

Three previously unknown breeding sites of Asia's rarest bunting have been discovered by a team from the Beijing Bird Watching Society working with BirdLife's China Programme.

Rufous-backed Bunting *Emberiza jankowskii*, also known as Jankowski's Bunting has declined drastically because of conversion of its habitat to farmland, and it is now known only from a restricted area in north-east China

In April and May this year, breeding buntings were found at six sites, including three new, in the Xing'an League of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China. At least 70 birds were identified, mostly singing males. At one previously known site near the Ke'erqin (Horqin) National Nature Reserve, the population had doubled to 41 birds since 2011 after the area was fenced to prevent livestock trampling in the breeding season.

In June 2012, BirdLife's China Programme and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society organised the first local workshop on the conservation of this species. Most of the recommendations have been implemented: production of education material; formation of a communication network of local government agencies, nature reserves and researchers; and surveys in suitable areas of sandy grassland with Siberian apricot bushes.

To further raise the profile of the bunting, a second workshop was held in November 2013, in Ulanhot, capital of Xing'an League. Key outcomes included agreements by the local government to work for the conservation of Rufous-backed Bunting and to provide information on Siberian apricot habitats to inform future surveys. The conservation of the species will be promoted during "Love Birds Week", a nationwide event held every spring. Nature reserve staff and local volunteers will be trained to assist with surveys and conservation projects.

In addition, it has been recommended that Rufous-backed Bunting be listed as the official symbol of the Xing'an League. An award-winning documentary film by local wildlife photographers Mr Dong Guijun and Ms Du Shuxian will be used to promote this species within and outside China. Studies of the winter distribution of the Rufous-backed Bunting have been discussed with the National Bird Banding Center of China, including colour-ringing to monitor local movements.

"These discoveries are very encouraging. When new sites are found we must work with the local government and landowners to protect them" said Vivian Fu, Assistant Manager of the China Programme.

Terry Townshend, a BirdLife Species Champion, who has been campaigning for action for the species, attended the workshop and commented, "The outcomes of the workshop demonstrate a genuine commitment from the local officials in Xing'an to help protect and conserve this beautiful bird. I am optimistic that, provided we can secure further support, Rufous-backed Bunting will be saved from extinction."

This work has been aided by the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust and Oriental Bird Club and is being undertaken with the support of the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme.

If you'd like to help this important conservation action too please make a donation here.