

Title
Rufous-backed Bunting *Emberiza jankowskii* was once common on grassland with scattered Siberian apricot scrub across North East China, to Russia and North Korea. But because of conversion of its breeding habitat to farmland, by the late 1990s it was assessed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

This little-known passerine continued to decline at an even more rapid rate, and was uplisted to Endangered in 2010; making it Asia's rarest bunting. It is now known to exist only at a few pockets of shrubby grassland along the border between Jilin Province and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China.

Prof Wang Haitao from the north-east Normal University, Changchun, Jilin Province, gives an estimated population of about 250 birds for all known sites. Although some populations may remain to be discovered, very few have been recorded during extensive ornithological surveys by the Beijing Bird Watching Society (aided by the Oriental Bird Club, the BirdLife International China Programme and the RSPB, BirdLife in the UK) and other survey teams.

One of the last known populations is at Tumuji National Nature Reserve in eastern Inner Mongolia, which was established for conservation of the Great Bustard *Otis tarda* in 1996; with support from BirdLife Partner the Wild Bird Society of Japan. The lands were already leased to private entrepreneurs, which makes law enforcement and conservation complicated. Livestock grazing and forage harvesting during the breeding season have not yet been totally controlled, even in core areas of the reserve.

BirdLife International organised the first conservation workshop at Tumuji in June, 2012, inviting relevant conservation and research organisations in China to discuss an emergency plan to save this species. Officials from the Ke'erqin (or Horqin) National Nature Reserve, also in eastern Inner Mongolia, were invited, because of the recent discovery of a population of buntings on leased grassland nearby.

The workshop agreed a communication network to be established among conservation organisations, researchers and reserve managers, for monitoring and new discoveries. As this is a little-known species that enjoys very limited protection in China, education material such as posters and booklets targeting the general public and government officers will be published by mid-2013.

Surveys for unknown populations will continue at sites with suitable habitats. Perhaps the biggest challenge is protection and management of the sites where the bunting still exists, including restoration of the Siberian apricot shrub habitat. This will require greater support from local governments.

A conservation action plan must be drafted, and more financial support secured. But there is already some good news. At the site visit to Ke'erqin National Nature Reserve, Mr Wang Tiejun, a land leaser, announced that he was willing to give up his benefits and preserve the apricot scrub for the Rufous-backed Bunting, after learning of the importance of this species.

"With a better awareness and education programme, we hope more people will be joining Mr Wang", said Simba Chan, BirdLife's Conservation Officer in Asia.