Satellite Tracking Report from North-West Australia 2019

Number 8

23.04.19

What an unbelievably exciting time we are having with our Oriental Pratincole satellite transmitter results. No sooner has it gone all quiet and we speculate that all four birds have become relatively static near possible breeding areas than two of the birds 'explode' and move long distances in diametrically opposed directions!! One bird (SUN) flew eastwards and settled on the western shores of Taiwan, near where our only previous report of a flagged Oriental Pratincole had occurred (in 2008). After a couple of days, it then proceeded to the east coast of Taiwan, to an area where only last year Chung-yu Chiang had photographed an Oriental Pratincole nest in the shingle of a large riverbed (see photos). But then, as if not to be outdone, another Oriental Pratincole (SEP) flew westwards to north-east India and then, after a short pause, onwards to south-west India. Not surprisingly, it is the first Australian-marked wader to be recorded in that region. There is not much land to the west of it so presumably it has now reached the area in which it is going to breed!

The latest assessment of the third Oriental Pratincole (SHE) (the first one carrying a satellite transmitter to migrate to the Asian continent) confirms that it is still (after nearly eight weeks) at the same large lake in Cambodia. The pattern of recent movements seems to be more or less centered around one particular location, suggesting it is now breeding there. What will the fourth satellite transmitter-carrying bird (SEC) do? Stay put and breed or make a further movement? How long will this saga continue? Who would have believed, when discussing species for possible satellite transmitter deployment this year, that we'd have such a rewarding set of results from our decision to select Oriental Pratincoles as one of our targets for the AWSG NWA 2019 Expedition?

By comparison, the Little Curlew results are 'tame'! But we are also getting nice results from the two birds which are still transmitting. One (LU) made a flight to Mainland China in Guangdong Province in a single (5,000km non-stop) stage. Another (LS) has just left Australia in 23 April morning on its way north. We pray that these birds can continue providing tracking information through their stopovers in eastern Asia, hopefully right through to their breeding grounds in central Siberia.

Whimbrels are yet to join this year's party! But with big visible emigrations of Whimbrel from Broome in the last two days (information from Broome Bird Observatory) it can't be long before our two veterans, KU and LA, start their move northwards.

The portfolio of Eastern Curlew satellite transmitters, coordinated by Amanda Lilleyman from Charles Darwin University, is now large and wide, with all but one bird having set off on northward migration. Most – from Broome, Moreton Bay, Westernport and Darwin – seem to have reached the Yellow Sea region (China AND Korea) in a single, long, non-stop flight. However, one of the Eastern Curlew from Victoria unfortunately ran into cyclone Trevor and was forced down in the Northern Territory. It appears to have abandoned its northward migration and subsequently fled to the coast of Queensland, near Townsville.

It is going to be particularly interesting to see whether there is any apparent pattern in the breeding areas in Siberia/north-east China selected by Eastern Curlew from the different non-breeding areas.

It is intended to continue these more or less weekly satellite tracking reports until all the wader species we are following have reached their breeding locations. After that weekly changes in location are probably less likely for several weeks and the spacing of reports may be extended.

(Contributed by Clive Minton)

ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE
REPORT NO. 8
20/4/19

Grace Maglio

Look for water and agriculture - that's where you'll find them.

The Oriental Pratincole, Australia's most numerous migratory shorebird and is proving to have a very wide breeding range. Breeding populations are reported as occurring from Vietnam in the south to Russia in the north and from Pakistan in the west to Japan in the east.

Their adaptability and ability to utilise modified agricultural land and various water sources most likely contributes to their healthy populations. Yet we have very little knowledge about the movements and breeding habits of Oriental Pratincoles over-wintering in Australia. With this project so far, we have gained a small but significant insight to their northward movements and now we wait with anticipation for these birds to reveal their choice of breeding sites.

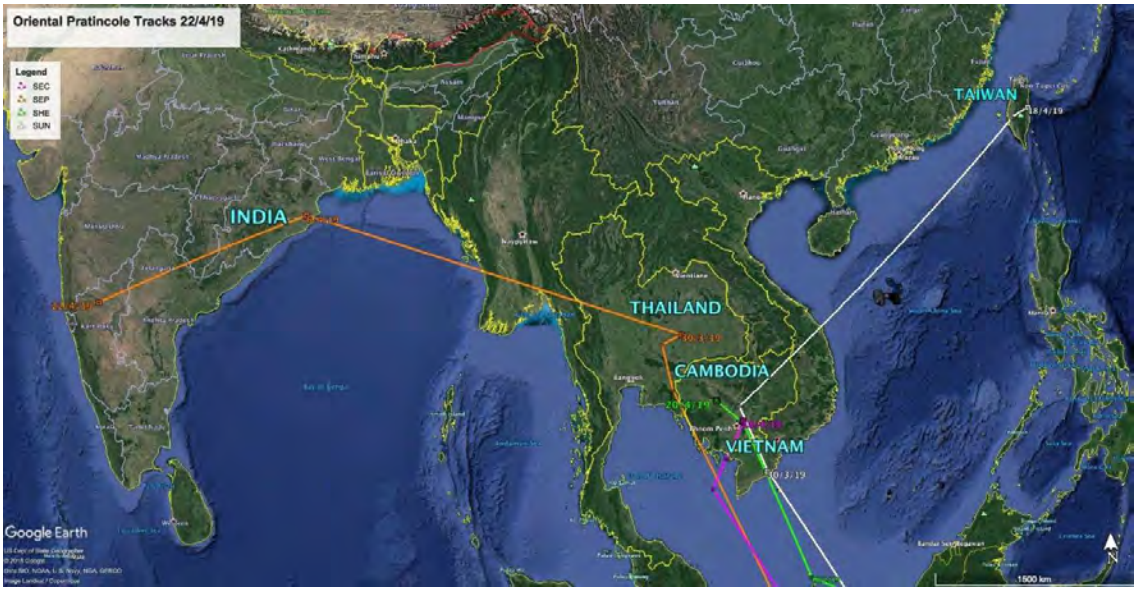

Figure 1 – Tracks of Oriental Pratincole from Mainland Southeast Asia

According to reliable location data, SEP and SUN have made significant moves. SUN is now in East Taiwan and data has just been received to confirm SEPs location in South West India. Chung-Yu Chiang (Taiwan Wader Study Group) has once again provided information on the habitat of SUN's current position. While SEC continues to inhabit Cambodia's "Great Green Belt", we now believe that SHE may be breeding in the Tonle Sap Biosphere.

Photo 1– Oriental Pratincole on dry riverbed, Taiwan
(Credit - Chung-Yu Chiang)

DISTANCE FROM RELEASE LOCATION 20/4/19

Bird ID	Distance from 80 Mile Beach release location (approx.)
SUN	4800km
SEP	6350km
SHE	4000km
SEC	3840km

SUN (PTT 83591) – Somewhere over east.

With Chung-Yu Chiang

Chiayi County, Taiwan, is where SUN was located approximately 9 to 12 April, probably hawking for insects over the sugar cane, rice and corn fields that surround the Ba-Chang River. Bad weather in Taiwan over the last week may have affected the performance of the satellite tag, as the next location reading was on 18 April, 132km east of the Chiayi County location in Shoufeng township, Hualien County.

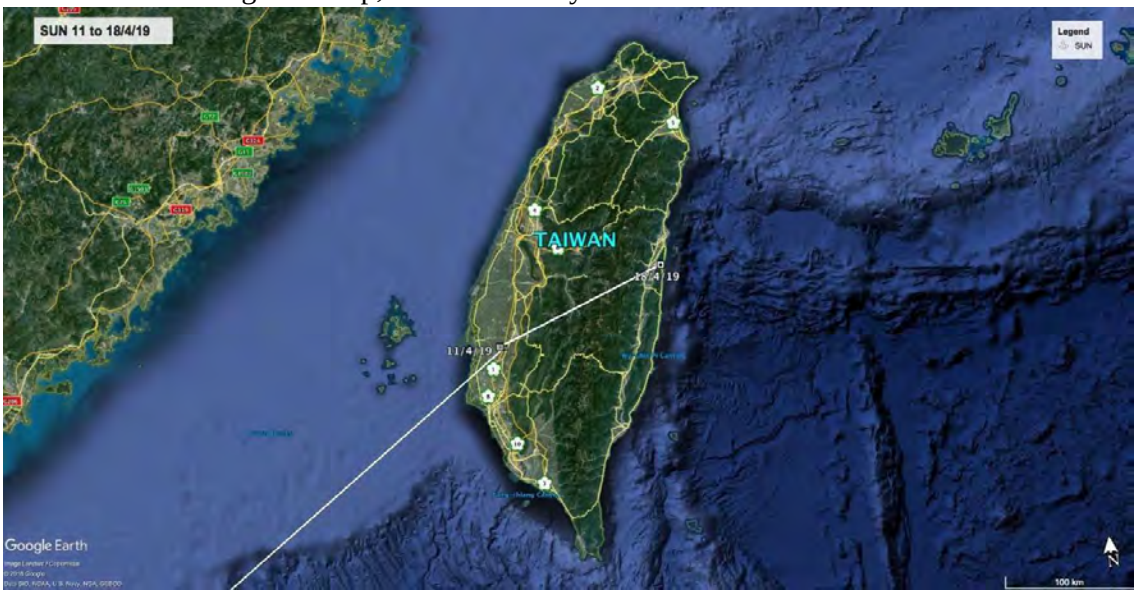

Figure 2 - SUN – from West Taiwan to East Taiwan.

Although the current data positions SUN in the Coastal Mountain Range, it is most likely situated in the vicinity of the Shoufeng and Hualien Rivers, where breeding attempts have occurred in previous years. Historic breeding records seem to show a preference for dry riverbanks in Eastern Taiwan (and harvested agricultural fields in Western Taiwan).

SUN is currently approximately 4800km from the 80 Mile Beach release site in North West Australia.

Figure 3 - SUN – Approximate location Hualien County, Taiwan

Photo 2 - Hualien River, Taiwan, dry riverbed, 2018 breeding site.
(credit Chung-Yu Chiang)

Photo 3– Hualien River, Taiwan, 2018 breeding record.
(credit Chung-Yu Chiang)

SEP (PTT 83593) – So that's where you are!

Possibly due to bad weather or SEP's constant movement affecting satellite tag performance, we were forced to wait for 15 long days for reliable data to more accurately determine its location. On the morning of 22 April we finally discover that SEP is in South West India in the state of Karnataka, approximately 1220km from its previous site in Odisha. Less accurate data suggests that SEP flew approximately 500km along the coast before heading inland to its current site. SEP is now located on the banks of the Krishna River, within the boundary of Heggur Village, Bagalkot District, Karnataka, where the economy is driven by agriculture and sugarcane fields dominate the landscape.

Figure 4 – SEP – from Odisha to Karnataka, India

Figure 5 – SEP Heggur Village, Bagalkot District, India

SHE (PTT 83595) – Lakeside living – a great place to raise a family?

After eight weeks in the Tonle Sap Biosphere, we are now cautiously optimistic that SHE's movements in this area do suggest signs of breeding behaviour. The tracks are developing a 'centre point', which may indicate a nest site. There are some historical breeding records of Oriental Pratincole for Cambodia and in particular other parts of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve and as we have mentioned in previous reports, the area around Tonle Sap Lake consists of floodplains and agriculture, habitat features preferred by the Oriental Pratincole.

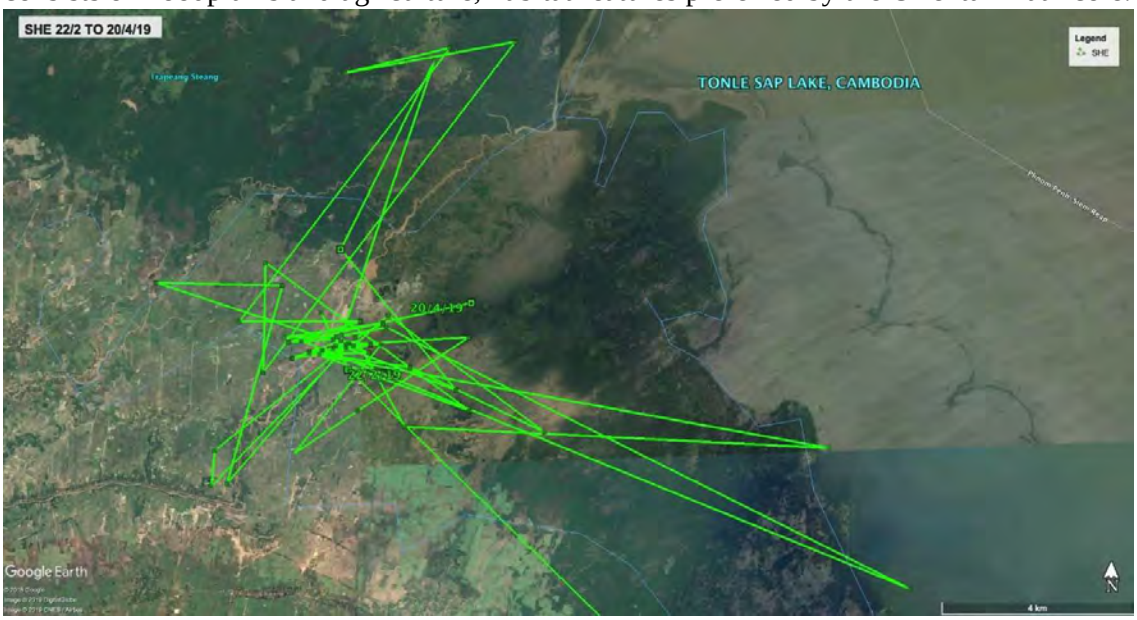

Figure 5 – SHE, 8 weeks in the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve

SEC (PTT 83596) – Another potential breeding site?

Day 31 and SEC is still in Prey Veng Province; the “great green belt” of Cambodia, approximately 40km east of Phnom Penh. Is this area suitable for breeding? Time will tell.

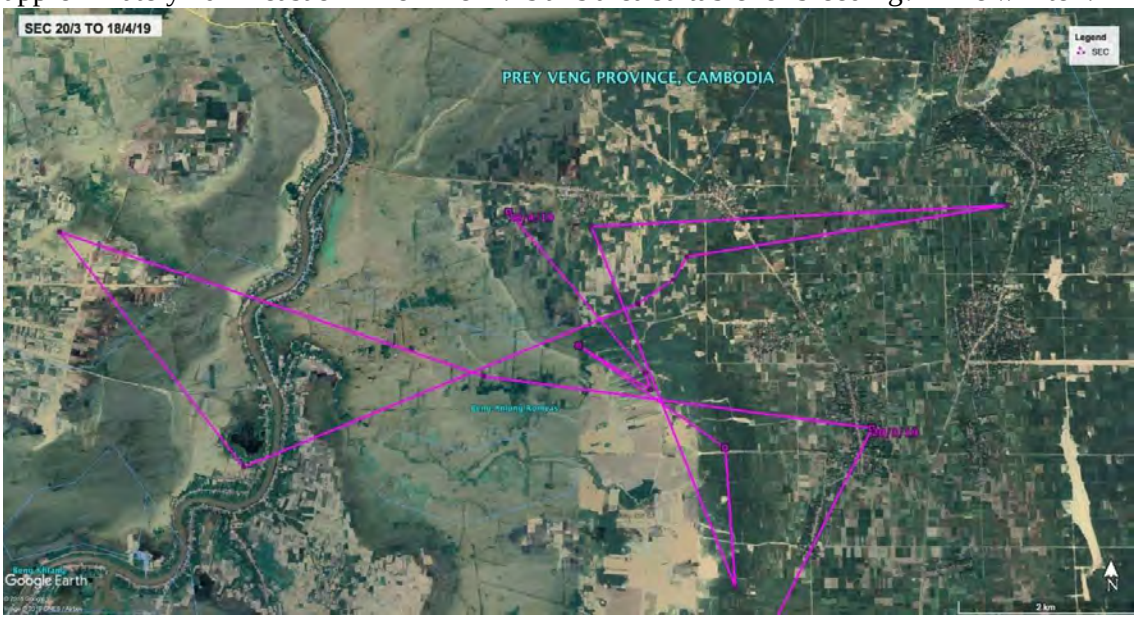

Figure 6 – SEC, Day 31 in Prey Veng Province, Cambodia

LITTLE CURLEW

Contributed by Inka Veltheim

Amazingly, the next Little Curlew (LU) to depart Anna Plains, 80 Mile Beach, has flown to mainland China in one direct, 5,000 km, flight. The last fix of this bird at 80 Mile Beach, Australia, was on 14 April, and the first fix on migration was on 16 April.

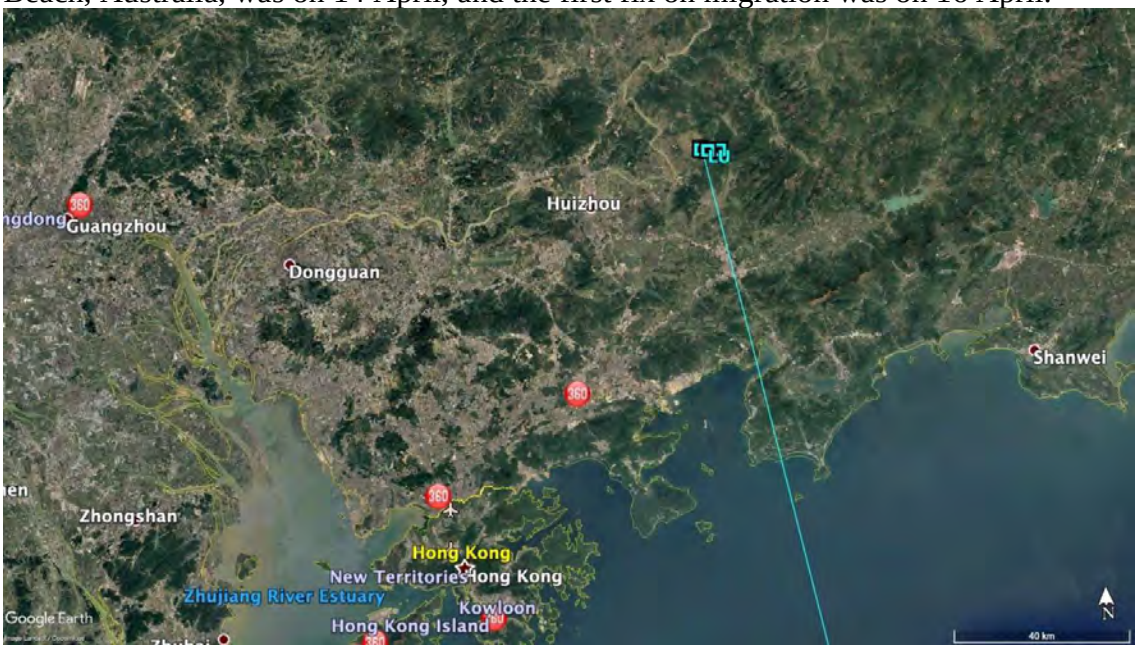

Fig 8 – LU's landing on Mainland China

LU landed approximately 100 km north east of Hong Kong five days later, on 21 April and appears to have stopped over in a mountainous area near Ditian and Shangbeileng.

Fig 9 – LU's movement near Guanyin Mountain

Unfortunately, the transmitter of the first Little Curlew to depart Australia (LL) has not transmitted since last report. It is unclear what may have happened to the transmitter or the bird.

Meanwhile, LS has just departed Australia. This individual initially flew to Roebuck Plains and back in March. LS has transmitted early Tuesday morning (23 April) and is currently some 1,500 km north-west of Australia. This Little Curlew looks to be following similar migratory path to LU, and we eagerly wait its landing in China.

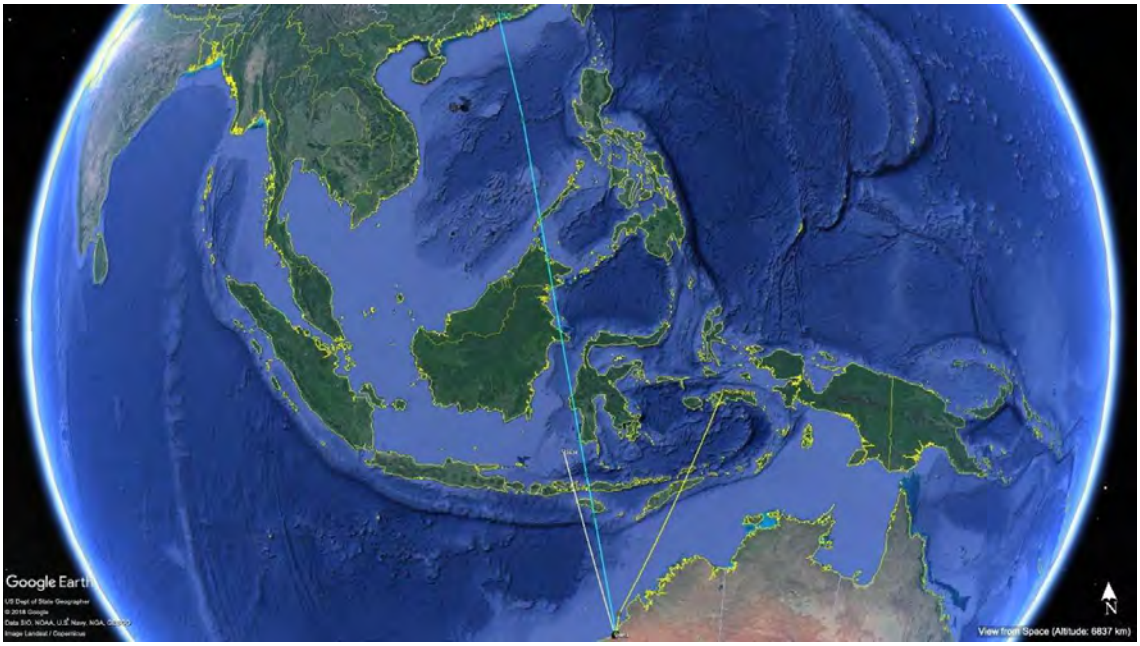

Figure 10 – Migration tracks of LU, LL and LS


Photo 4 – We pray that LS and LU can continue providing tracking information through their migrations (by Pat Macwhirter)

WHIMBREL

Contributed by Katherine Leung

Broome Bird Observatory witnessed a LOT of Whimbrels departing Broome this week, see and listen to this fascinating video taken by BBO staff:
https://www.facebook.com/broomebirdobs/videos/vb.203556159723771/2288988138042021/?type=2&theater

We are expecting KU and LA joining them within the coming few days.

Far Eastern Curlew

Contributed by Amanda Lilleyman

Latest report can be downloaded from this link:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IJq5ryYE-vUHYrgUQOxQvTndtnu2cjFM/view?usp=drivesdk