

Project Update: August 2010

Alexey Dondua (project leader) and Natalia Vartanian (participant) started from Saint-Petersburg to Chukotka on April 20 and May 09 accordingly having no information whether the project was supported by RSG or not. On May 11 we took a flight from Anadyr (the capital of Chukotsky Autonomous Region) to the Egvekinot Town (airport Kresta Bay). On May 14 we hired a caterpillar track and left for the Vankarem village where we arrived on May 15 (Photo 1).



Photo 1. On the way from the Egvekinot town to the Vankarem village, 14 May, 2010 Photo: Natalia Vartanian. Photo 2. On the way from the Vankarem village to the Nutepel'men village, 16 May 2010 Photo: Alexey Dondua

On May 16 we left Vankarem for the Nutepel'men village on the same track and arrived on the same day (Photo 2).

After necessary preparation (equipment, buying food and fuel) on May 21 we hired another caterpillar track in the Nutepel'men village and left it for the study place – the Belyaka Spit (Photo 3).



Photo 3. Arrival to the study place – The Belyaka Spit, 21 May 2010. Photo 4. The view from the beacon on tundra and a hunter's hut – the base camp of the expedition, 21 May 2010 Photo: Alexey Dondua

At the moment of the arrival of the expedition almost 100% of tundra's surface was covered with snow (Photo 4).

Starting from May 22 we made daily excursions in the Western part of the Belyaka Spit, in the area where the highest nesting density was recorded in 1970-es, 1980-es and 2000-s. In 2010 an arrival of waders started on May 27. Dunlin, Rock, Western and Pectoral Sandpipers, Common Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Long-billed Dowitcher were recorded on that day.

Active snow melting started on May 29, and on the same day intensive courtship displays of a number of waders were observed. Fall of temperature started on May 31 and was accompanied by strong NNW wind and snowstorm, which started in the evening of June 2 and lasted till the morning of June 4 (Photo 5).



Photo 5. Snowstorm, 03 June 2010 Photo: Natalia Vartanian. Photo 6. Arrival of the hunters from Nutepel'men village to the Belyaka Spit, 4 June, 2010 Photo: Natalia Vartanian.

Undoubtedly 2-days snowstorm negatively influenced breeding success and most possibly decreased the number of birds that started to breed.

Only on June 3 we were informed by the satellite phone that our project was supported by RSG. We connected the hunters from the Nutepel'men village and suggested them to participate in the project. In the evening of 4 June three hunters Alexander Kergitval', Ali Tynarentyat and Eugeny Vukvurosgyn arrived at the Belyaka Spit by two dog sledges (Photo 6).

Unfortunately, the news that our project had received financial support came too late, and we could not fully discuss the hunters' participation in the project in advance. The owners of the dog sledges, Alexander and Ali, did not have an opportunity to work with us all the desired period of time, they could only stay for 10 days. June 5 through June 10 they made daily visitations of the Belyaka Spit and the local area in their sledges searching for holes of Arctic foxes (*Alopex lagopus*) – the main predators that are dangerous for nests and aeries of waders (Photo 7).



Photo 7. Alexander and Ali started for Arctic Fox' dens search, 8 June 2010, Photo: Natalia Vartanian. Photo 8. Crossing the straight between the Belyaka Spit and Juzgny Island, 10 June 2010 Photo: Alexey Dondua.

No inhabited holes were found.

From June 5 Alexey and Natalia started searching for nests of SBS. Evgenij participated in the daily walking research together with us and got some practical experience of recognizing waders visually and by voice.

On June 10 we made a count at the Juzgny Island, the biggest in the archipelago of the Islands of Grey Geese (Photo 8). No cases of seeing waders (SBS) were registered.

On June 15 Alexander and Ali left the Belyaka Spit, and all the following work was carried out by the three of us.

On June 22 we made a survey along the Northern coast of the Belyaka Spit. The survey was made according to the methodology that had been created in the 1980-es: the participants move in a rank along the zone of seaside tundra (the potential dwelling place of SBS) in parallel courses in a distance of 100-150 m from each other (Photo 9).



Photo 9. SBS survey along the Northern coast of The Belyaka Spit, 22 June 2010 Photo: Alexey Dondua. Photo 10. The field camp in the vicinity of SBS' nest, 22 June 2010, Photo: Natalia Vartanian

During this survey we found the first and, as it were known later, (alas!) the only nest of SBS in 5.5 km from the main camp. After finding the nest we immediately organized a field camp (a little tent and a fire place) in close vicinity to the nest by the sea coast and started twenty-four-hour protection of the nest (Photo 10).

The camp was 180 m from the nest, which allowed to observe the approaching predators without disturbing the nesting birds (Photo 11).



Photo 11. Natalia and Eugeny observing the flock of Long-tailed Jaegers approaching to SBS' nest , 23 June 2010 Photo: Alexey Dondua. Photo 12. Male Arctic Fox shot by Eugeny Vukvurosgyn in the vicinity of SBS' nest, 1 July 2010 Photo: Natalia Vartanian.

After finding the nest we forbade ourselves to approach it, because we did not want to leave a smell trace, by which the nest could be found by land predators. At the end of the second decade of June, Arctic foxes appeared at the Belyaka Spit, and we observed them daily until leaving the Belyaka spit, up to three animals simultaneously. Though the Arctic foxes did not breed, their existence presented a serious danger to the SPS's nests. In the summer of 2010, during the search of SPS's nests, we found over 70 nests of sandpipers of different kinds. A considerable amount of nests were destroyed by Arctic foxes, and definitely in some cases it was provoked by our visits of the nests (exact figures will be given in the final report).

Two Arctic foxes that were approaching the SPS's nest were shot (Photo 12).

One more Arctic fox was caught in a trap that had been put by Evgenij, who, unfortunately, had only several traps.

In the last decade of June, flights of migratory Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* up to 35 units appeared at the Belyaka Spit, and they presented a serious danger for the waders' nests. We tried to frighten away the birds with gun shots and signal bombs, and several birds were shot (Photo 13).



Photo 13. One of the Long-tailed Jaegers shot in the vicinity of SBS' nest, 3 July 2010 Photo: Natalia Vartanian. Photo 14. Neither drizzle and rain nor cold wind did not stop the twenty-four-hour guarding of SBS' nest Photo: Alexey Dondua.

The protection of the SPS's nest was carried on 24 hours daily, not depending on weather conditions, June 22 through July 13 (Photo 14).

On June 11, the behavior of adult SPSs changed, they became more nervous, and on appearance of danger they gave alarm signals. We made a decision to look at the nest and found the first wet nestling (Photo 15). On July 13 the nestling left the nest. Up to July 23 inclusive the couple of adult SPSs, who were definitely worried about their nestlings, stayed in the seaside tundra, no more that 150 m from the nest. The future of the brood remained largely unknown: on July 26 for the first time we did not find the brood in the area around the nest. After July 28 no SPSs were found at the Belyaka Spit.

On July 31, all the participants of the expedition left the Belyaka Spit by the boat of the hunters from the Nutepel'men village, and on August 1 we took away all the remaining camp equipment.



Photo 15. The first Spoon-billed Sandpiper' chick hatched, 11 July 2010, Photo: Alexey Dondua. Photo 16. Participants of the project (from the left to the right): Alexey Dondua (project leader), Eugeny Vukvurosgyn, Alexander Kergitval', Ali Tynarentyat and

We are grateful to Rufford Foundation which supported our project and we are proud we were the first team in Russia that made small but really practical step to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper from extinction in its breeding grounds.