

# Surveys for wintering shorebirds in Koh Kapik, Cambodia: final report to the Oriental Bird Club

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## Executive Summary

An Oriental Bird Club Emergency grant supported two wintering shorebird surveys which were conducted around the Koh Kapik Important Bird Area, Cambodia in January and May 2018. This report summarises observations during these surveys and also provides updated shorebird counts from additional surveys conducted by NatureLife Cambodia during the 2017/18 winter and an additional visit to the site in January 2021. A total of 20 shorebird species have been observed at Koh Kapik since December 2017 including 2 threatened (great knot *Calidris tenuirostris* and Nordmann's greenshank *Tringa guttifer*) and six Near Threatened species. None of the surveys detected the Critically Endangered spoon-billed sandpiper *Calidris pygmeus*. The only record from Cambodia remains a single individual at Koh Kapik on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014. Whilst survey conditions at Koh Kapik are difficult we believe survey coverage was fairly comprehensive and significant numbers and variety of birds were not missed during any surveys. Whilst Koh Kapik is likely the most significant coastal site in Cambodia for wintering shorebirds overall numbers are relatively low and appear to be declining. Small-scale hunting of shorebirds and habitat deterioration remains a threat to the conservation value of Koh Kapik IBA.

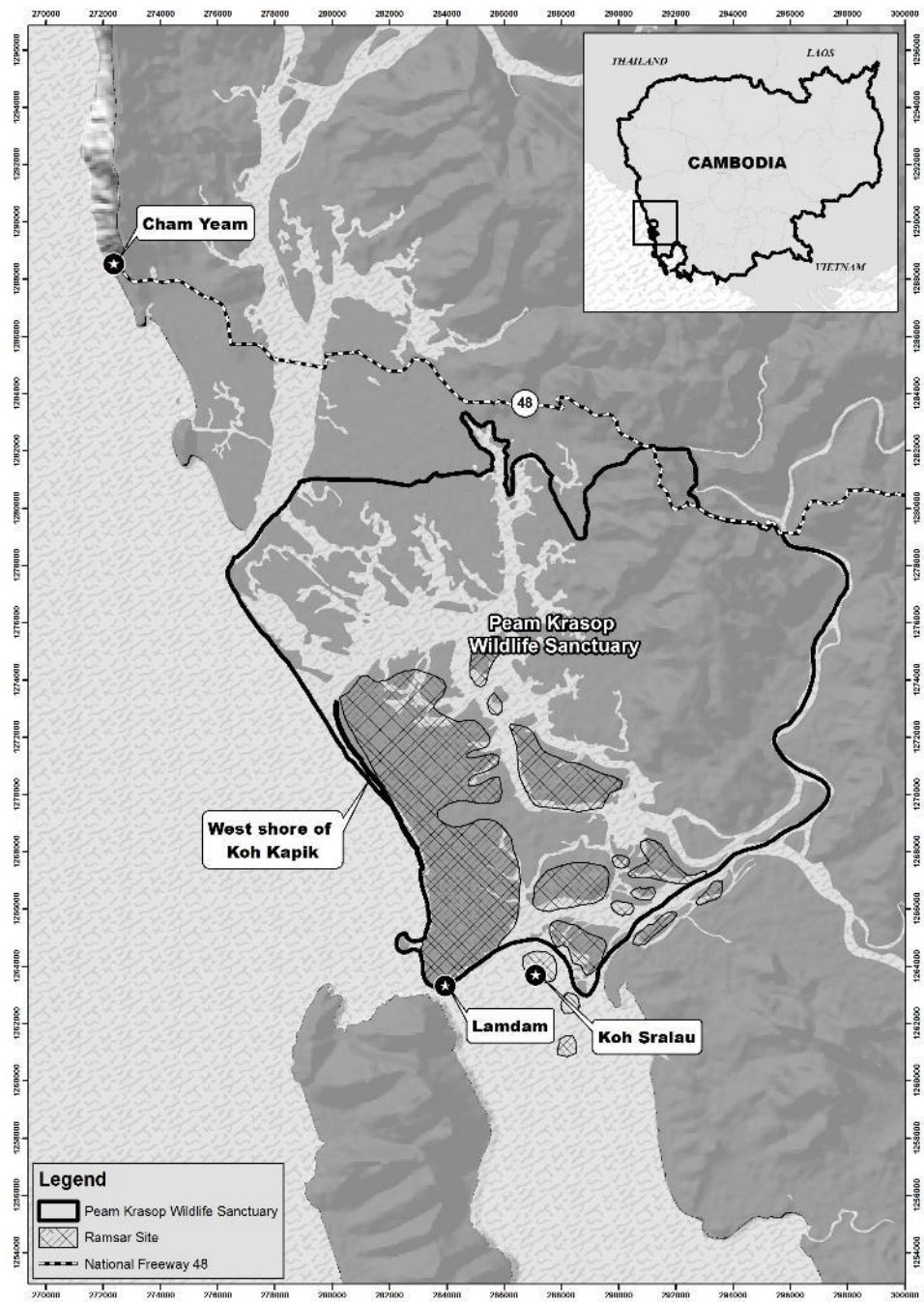


## Introduction

Koh Kapik and Associated Islets is a 12,000 hectare Ramsar site, comprising of mangroves and sandbanks, in Koh Kong Bay, South-West Cambodia. The site is relatively poorly studied but is likely the most significant site for wintering shorebirds in coastal Cambodia. A ten-day survey in January and February 2014 found a single individual spoon-billed sandpiper (CR), ~30 Nordmann's greenshank (EN), plus larger numbers of Asian dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* (NT) and great knot *Calidris tenuirostris* (EN) together with Cambodia's first records of Chinese egret *Egretta eulophotes* (VU). Wintering numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, Greater Sand Plover *C. leschenaultii*, Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*, Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* and Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* were also significant and appear sufficient to trigger RAMSAR status. This Oriental Bird Club Emergency grant was awarded in order to conduct the first surveys of Koh Kapik since 2013/14 and followed anecdotal evidence of increasing threats to birds at the site most notably hunting using nets and habitat degradation due to unsustainable fishing practices.

## Survey Methods and Results

A detailed interim survey report described the first Oriental Bird Club supported survey which was conducted between 24 to 27 January 2018 by a six-person team. The team consisted of Paul Everingham (Koh Kong Touk), Taing Porchhay (Nature Life), Sen Kethysar (Cambodia Nature and Birding Club), Thomas Gray (Wildlife Alliance), Rob Overtom and Fred Goes. The second Oriental Bird Club supported survey occurred between 12 and 14 May and was conducted by a four-person team comprising Taing Porchhay (Nature Life), Thomas Gray (Wildlife Alliance), Rob Overtom and Paul Batchler. In contrast to the first survey a single small boat was used which allowed relatively close approach to shorebirds. During the second survey we stayed in Koh Sralao village but visited similar areas.



*Survey location map showing boundaries of Peam Krasop Wildlife Sanctuary and the Koh Kapik Ramsar Site: majority of survey effort focused on the western shore of Koh Kapik but additional limited surveys of Koh Sralau (January and March) and Cham Yeam (January survey only).*

Table 1 summarises the results of multiple surveys conducted in Koh Kapik between December 2017 and January 2021. All surveys had at least Taing Porchhay (Nature Life) or Thomas Gray (Wildlife Alliance) involved. We compare results with previously published surveys conducted by Phillip Edwards in January 1996 (Edwards, 1999) and Howie Nielsen and Senglim Suy in January 2014 (Nielsen *et al.*, 2014). Whilst the search effort differed considerably between the surveys we do not feel, given the nature of the site and shorebird movements, that this would considerably influence numbers of shorebirds detected and all surveys likely gave a relatively accurate estimate of the numbers and species composition of shorebirds present.

As Fig. 1 shows the numbers of shorebirds detected during surveys at Koh Kapik appears to have consistently declined. Whilst this likely parallels overall declines in shorebird numbers across the Asia-Pacific flyway the interplay of local and global threats driving this decline is unclear. Whilst Koh Kapik still supports small numbers of globally Endangered species (notably great knot and Nordmann's greenshank) the site's contribution to the overall global conservation of these species appears low. The lack of additional records of spoon-billed sandpiper (which was detected during the first of 10 days' survey in 2014 and not subsequently) suggests this species is likely a very rare visitor to Koh Kapik and that the IBA is not significant for this species.

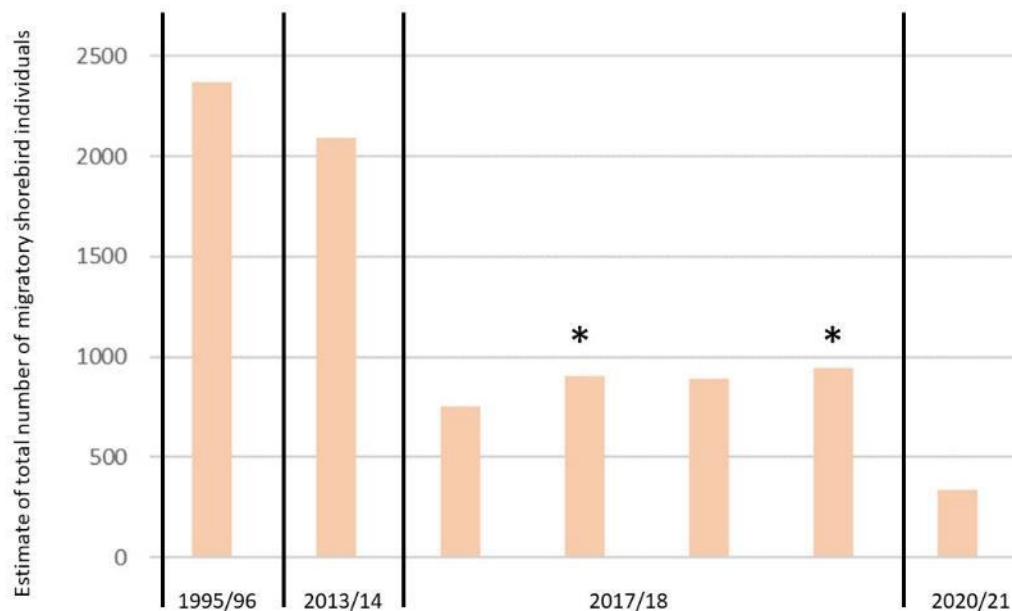


			Date of survey						
			Jan-96	Jan-14	Dec-17	Jan-18	Feb-18	Mar-18	Jan-21
Survey days			1	10	2	5	2	3	1
Number of observers			1	2	2	4	3	4	3
Species		IUCN							
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	LC	15						
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	LC	97	150	5				
Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	LC	466	1,000	480	500	600	750	200
Greater Sand-plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultia</i>	LC	448	300	120	125	150	50	50
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	LC				25	30		20
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	LC			40	72	38		3
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	NT	526						
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	NT		150	41	2		1	5
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	LC	20	1		70	4	30	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	NT	9	1		5			1
Asian Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus semipalmatus</i>	NT	16	3		1		1	
Terek Sandpiper	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>	LC	136	55	7	15	13	15	20
Grey-tailed tattler	<i>Tringa brevipes</i>	LC						7	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	LC	1	1	4	6	6		10
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	LC	129		2	2	1	35	15
Nordmann's Greenshank	<i>Tringa guttifer</i>	EN	13	30	9	13	2		1
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	LC	91	10	32	4		1	
Great Knot	<i>Calidris tenuirostris</i>	EN		15	2	6	6	2	2
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	NT		1					
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	LC		10					
Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>	NT	6	150	4	10	20	50	3
Spoon-billed Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pygmeus</i>	CR		1					
Curlew Sandiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	NT	180	200	3	30	10		6
Broad-billed Sandpiper	<i>Limicola falcinellus</i>	LC	190	15	4	20	15		1
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	LC	27						



Table 1. Estimate maximum count of each shorebird species detected during surveys of Koh Kapik IBA. Maximum count in bold; grey cells for non-detection during survey.

Survey details: **Jan-96**: 28-Jan 1996. *Edwards, P. J. (1999) Recent waterbird surveys in Cambodia. Forktail 15:29-42.* **Jan-14**. 24 Jan - Feb 2014. Nielsen, H. (2014) *Spoon-billed Sandpiper Survey Report, Koh Kapik, Koh Kong, Cambodia. Unpublished report.* **Dec-17**. 29-30 Dec 2017. Taing P. / NatureLife Cambodia, unpublished. **Jan-18**. 24-27 Jan 2018. Survey funded by Oriental Bird Club (Gray, T.N.E. 2018. *Threatened Shorebird surveys in the Koh Kapik Ramsar Site, Southwest Cambodia: narrative progress report to OBC*). **Feb 2018**. 12-13 Feb 2018. Taing P. / NatureLife Cambodia, unpublished. **May-18. 12-14 May 2018**. Survey funded by Oriental BirdClub (this report). **Jan-21**. 26 Jan 2021. Gray, TNE; Mahood, S; Eames JC, unpublished.



*Figure 1: Total number of migratory shorebirds estimated within the Koh Kapik IBA across seven surveys conducted between 1996 and 2021. Survey details provided in Table 1. Surveys supported by this Oriental Bird Club grant indicated by asterix.*

## Threats to Shorebirds

Recent surveys of Koh Kapik have confirmed evidence of netting for shorebirds (using fishing nets struck between poles). Whilst none of the traps we observed were operational pieces of net were attached to some. Additional surveys conducted by Paul Everingham (which included two visits to the site during darkness) found that some nets were active and being moved. Local people reported that nets were largely set at night on a full moon with whistles used to scare/attract(?) birds into the nets. The targets appeared to be larger waders (e.g. whimbrel / curlew / godwits) which are sold (for between 0.6 and 1.8 USD) for consumption in local markets. Of concern (though logical) were that nets were set in the areas with higher numbers of shorebirds including both Endangered species. The follow-up surveys also found some evidence



from local people that levels of netting increase during both autumn and spring passage: presumably in response to larger numbers of birds being present at the site. During the single day in January 2021 survey no nets were seen and Ministry of Environment rangers from Peam Krasop Wildlife Sanctuary were noted to be active and mentioned that they did remove nets. However the rangers confirmed that hunting of shorebirds was continuing.



*Nets set to capture shorebirds along the shore of Koh Kapik*

In addition to targeted hunting habitat degradation is also suspected to be impacting the site and its attractiveness for waders. Push-net fishing (in which weighted drift nets are pushed by boats scrapping the mud-flats at high-tide to catch crustaceans), which is prohibited under Cambodian law, was regularly observed within 20 meters of the Ramsar site shore. During the January 2021

survey large numbers of push-net fishing boats were noted in Koh Kong Town harbour and presumably this illegal resource extraction continues. We also observed evidence of mangrove encroachment into some of the mudflat feeding areas.

## Conservation Recommendations

Koh Kapik Important Bird Area forms part of Peam Krasop Wildlife Sanctuary which is managed by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment. This largely mangrove protected area supports Cambodia's only known population of fishing cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* (globally Vulnerable) and the likely largest population of smooth-coated otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* (globally Vulnerable) in Cambodia (Thaung *et al.*, 2018). The ecosystem servicing values of the mangroves are also significant. Conservation efforts within Peam Krasop and largely supported through the Cambodian Fishing Cat Project and Wildlife Alliance. These should continue and Ministry of Environment rangers should be supported to continue preventing habitat degradation and netting to capture shorebirds. Whilst small numbers of globally threatened bird species (also including wintering Chinese egret) do occur within the Koh Kapik IBA the current importance of the site for global shorebird conservation appears marginal.



## References

- Edwards, P. J. (1999) Recent waterbird surveys in Cambodia. *Forktail* 15:29-42.
- Gray, T.N.E. (2018). *Threatened Shorebird surveys in the Koh Kapik Ramsar Site, Southwest Cambodia: narrative progress report to OBC*
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- Thaung, R., Muñoz, V. H., Holden, J., Willcox, D., & Souter, N. J. (2018). The Vulnerable fishing cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* and other globally threatened species in Cambodia's coastal mangroves. *Oryx*, 52(4), 636-640.