

media *release*

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The African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA); BirdLife International;
Convention on Migratory Species; and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds;

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WISE MEN SCOUR THE MIDDLE EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN IN THE HOPE OF FINDING 'LOST' BIRD

The largest ever attempt to rediscover a possibly extinct species will be mounted this winter with teams of skilled volunteer observers scouring more than 35 countries around the Mediterranean, Middle East and the Indian subcontinent in the hope of confirming the continued existence of the slender-billed curlew. Some observers from Britain will be making the trek over Christmas to assist with the search in some of these countries.

This crow-sized wading bird, which used to be abundant in winter around the Mediterranean 150 years ago, is now one of 47 'lost' bird species that may possibly have become globally extinct. Habitat loss and overhunting are likely to be key causes of the slender-billed curlew's decline. However, neither conservationists nor birdwatchers are giving up yet, while there is still a chance that the bird could be found and saved.

The RSPB's Nicola Crockford is the chair of the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group. Commenting on the quest, she said: "The allure of this bird is such that, thanks to the goodwill and voluntary assistance of many people on a shoestring budget we have managed to achieve the seemingly impossible: coverage in virtually every country of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The race is well and truly on to prove the continued existence of this mystical species. Whoever finds the bird will have earned their place in ornithological history."

“No record of the bird has been verified since 2001, but the rediscovery of other ‘lost’ species gives us continued hope that this bird continues to exist. We’re not prepared to write the death certificate without checking for a pulse one last time!”

The slender-billed curlew is the most enigmatic of Europe’s birds, and it used to winter in large flocks around the Mediterranean. Only one nest location has ever been discovered, in southwestern Siberia in the early 1900s. The last known wintering site was in Morocco, where the birds have not been seen since 1995

In the event of a slender-billed curlew being located, a rapid-reaction team will be deployed to catch the bird and fit it with a satellite tag in the hope that it can be tracked back to its breeding grounds next spring.

The African- Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) is a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) backed international treaty dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds across Africa and Eurasia. Thanks to the AEWA treaty four satellite tags are ready for use. The slender-billed curlew is one of the four most threatened (Critically Endangered) species listed under AEWA and has the smallest population estimate amongst them with no confirmed records since 2001.

Nicola Crockford added: “Although, there haven’t been any confirmed sightings in the last eight years, there are plenty of reasons to remain optimistic, especially because the bird can be difficult to identify and tends to occur in areas away from principal wetland birdwatching sites. Additionally, the bird may occur in countries, such as Iraq, posing access problems for birdwatchers.

“The ultimate Christmas present for everyone involved with this mysterious bird will be to find one that we can track back to the breeding grounds, where more may exist and from where we can start a species recovery programme. If our dreams come true, then we may be able to save this bird, and prevent the first extinction of a European bird since the disappearance of the Canary Islands oystercatcher, three decades ago.”

The search for the presence of the slender-billed curlew will be taking place this winter in the following countries:

- all North African countries: Morocco; Algeria; Tunisia; Libya; Egypt;
- additional African countries of the Red Sea: Sudan, Djibouti; Somalia
- all Middle Eastern countries: including Iran; Iraq; Oman; Saudi Arabia; Syria and Turkey
- all European Mediterranean countries, especially Italy, and Greece
- countries of the subcontinent: India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

The British Birdwatching Fair, through BirdLife International's Preventing Extinction Programme, has donated £10,000 to cover travel expenses for more than ten search teams including, one international expedition to Morocco, one to Tunisia, four to Egypt, one to Syria and four national search teams in Algeria. In addition, the Swedish BirdLife Partner, SOF, is funding an international search team to Sudan. The RSPB/Birdfair Small Research Grants Programme is also helping fund the searches in Egypt and Iran. However, many of the searches are self-funded.

The framework of the search is provided by the International Waterbird Census of Wetlands International. Where possible, international searchers are joining regular midwinter waterbird counting teams.

Furthermore, in spring there will be a coordinated spring survey of the Adriatic, and beyond. Then, in autumn, if funds can be raised, there will be search expeditions to potential moult sites around the Aral, Caspian and Black Seas. Additionally, there will be search coverage of Hungary's Pannonian plain and Serbia.

Any potential record of slender-billed curlew has to be approved by an international verification panel set up by the Slender-billed Curlew working group and co-ordinated by the newly appointed Ken Shaw, formerly of the RSPB.

Birdwatchers are urged to keep an eye out for the bird in suitable habitats within the potential range and to report any possible sightings, including historical ones. To assist the search, an identification leaflet has been produced in twelve languages.

A new tool to assist the launch has been created by the British Trust for Ornithology to help lure the birds: a recording of a flock of slender-billed curlews, synthesized from the only known recording of the species; the call of an individual bird at the Moroccan wintering location.

Further information is available from www.slenderbilledcurlew.net

The Slender-billed Curlew Working Group is established in the framework of an intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding for the Slender-billed Curlew under the United Nations Environment Programme's Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

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For further information and to arrange an interview, please contact:

Grahame Madge, RSPB press officer, on 01767 681577.
Out of hours, please telephone: 07702 196902 (mobile)

Photographs:

Photographs are available to download free of charge from the RSPB Images website. To download images, click on the hyperlink below and please enter the username and password when prompted.

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Please note these pictures are only to be used in conjunction with this story.

Broadcast-quality radio interviews:

To arrange an ISDN broadcast-quality radio interview with an RSPB spokesman please contact Grahame Madge at the RSPB press office.

Sound clips

Sound clips of slender-billed curlew, are also available. These can be obtained as MP3 files by email, or via the RSPB's ISDN line. Please contact Grahame Madge at the RSPB press office.

Editor's notes:

1). Any records of slender-billed curlew, including from the past, or negative records from areas thoroughly searched, should be sent to nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk and ken@shaw3.freeserve.co.uk

2) BirdLife International comprises more than 100 conservation organisations working together to promote sustainable living as a means to conserve biodiversity. BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme is identifying the individuals and organisations best equipped to carry out the work to save each of the world's 190 Critically Endangered birds. These Species Guardians

are then matched with Species Champions –individuals, organisations or institutions able to provide the money to enable the work to be carried out. For more information go to www.birdlife.org/extinction

3) Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS; also known as the Bonn Convention) aims to conserve terrestrial, aquatic and avian migratory species throughout their range. It is an intergovernmental treaty concluded under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Since the Convention's entry into force, its membership has grown steadily to include 113 (as of 1 January 2010) Parties from Africa, Central and South America, Asia, Europe and Oceania. In 1994 a Memorandum of Understanding concerning conservation measures for the Slender-billed Curlew was developed under the auspices of the Convention to foster cooperation between the 30 countries which lie within the species historical range. In addition, an expert working group for the species, chaired by BirdLife International was also established in the framework of the MoU. For more information please see: www.cms.int

4) The African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) is a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)-backed treaty dedicated to the protection of 255 species of waterbirds which migrate along the African-Eurasian flyways. Developed under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), AEWA provides the framework for countries in the region to work together to conserve species such as ducks, waders, storks, flamingos and many other migratory waterbirds, including the Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*). Countries that have become Parties to the Agreement commit themselves to putting measures in place to conserve the region's waterbird populations and the habitats on which they depend. Currently 63 of the 118 Range States in Africa and Eurasia are Parties to AEWA. The Slender-billed Curlew is listed in Column A of Table 1 of the AEWA Action Plan and fulfils the categories 1a, b and c. Category 1a indicates that the Species is also listed in Appendix I to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals and 1b that it is categorized as threatened on the IUCN Red List. Category c indicates that a species number less than around 10,000 individuals (1c). In the AEWA Strategic Plan 2009-2017, the Parties to AEWA have set a number of indicators for the successful implementation of the Agreement and one of them is “zero extinction” , i.e. that no AEWA waterbird population will become extinct. In order to meet this target, it is necessary to make every effort to find and protect the last Slender-billed Curlews and their critical sites along the flyway. The AEWA Secretariat is an active member of the working group and the core steering group for the Slender-billed Curlew and is providing both logistical and institutional support to the international search campaign. In addition, AEWA has provided funding for the Slender-billed Curlew Identification Kit as well as for four satellite tags. For more information please see: www.unep-awea.org

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

• The Lodge • Sandy • Beds SG19 2DL
Press office telephone 01767 681577
Website: www.rspb.org.uk

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