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Seasonal and population differences in migration of Whimbrels in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway

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Abstract

Background: Conserving migratory birds is challenging due to their reliance on multiple distant sites at different stages of their annual life cycle. The concept of “flyway”, which refers to all areas covered by the breeding, nonbreeding, and migrating of birds, provides a framework for international cooperation for conservation. In the same flyway, however, the migratory activities of the same species can differ substantially between seasons and populations. Clarifying the seasonal and population differences in migration is helpful for understanding migration ecology and for identifying conservation gaps.

Methods: Using satellite-tracking we tracked the migration of Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus variegatus*) from nonbreeding sites at Moreton Bay (MB) and Roebuck Bay (RB) in Australia in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. Mantel tests were used to analyze the strength of migration connectivity between the nonbreeding and breeding sites of MB and RB populations. Welch's *t* test was used to compare the migration activities between the two populations and between northward and southward migration.

Results: During northward migration, migration distance and duration were longer for the MB population than for the RB population. The distance and duration of the first leg flight during northward migration were longer for the MB population than for the RB population, suggesting that MB individuals deposited more fuel before departing from nonbreeding sites to support their longer nonstop flight. The RB population exhibited weaker migration connectivity (breeding sites dispersing over a range of 60 longitudes) than the MB population (breeding sites concentrating in a range of 5 longitudes in Far Eastern Russia). Compared with MB population, RB population was more dependent on the stopover sites in the Yellow Sea and the coastal regions in China, where tidal habitat has suffered dramatic loss. However, RB population increased while MB population decreased over the past decades, suggesting that loss of tidal habitat at stopover sites had less impact on the Whimbrel populations, which can use diverse habitat types. Different trends between the populations might be due to the different degrees of hunting pressure in their breeding grounds.

Conclusions: This study highlights that conservation measures can be improved by understanding the full annual life cycle of movements of multiple populations of Whimbrels and probably other migratory birds.

Keywords: Conservation, Flyway, Migration, Migration connectivity, Stopover, Tracking, Yellow Sea

Background

The annual life cycle of migratory birds depends on distant breeding, nonbreeding, and stopover sites as well as the interlinkage shaped by these sites (Newton 2008). The concept of “flyway”, which refers to all of the areas covered by breeding, nonbreeding, and migrating of birds, provides a framework for international cooperation in the conservation of migratory birds and their key areas (Boere and Stroud 2006). Over the past decades, field surveys have identified many key areas used by migratory birds, which has facilitated the designation of conservation hotspots along a flyway (e.g., Bamford et al. 2008). However, the temporal and spatial patterns of migration can be quite different between seasons and between populations of the same species in the same flyway (e.g., Battley et al. 2012; Hewson et al. 2016). Understanding the seasonal and population difference in migration activities can be helpful for detecting the factors linked with population dynamics, for finding conservation gaps, and for developing targeted conservation measures.

Geographical distribution greatly affects the temporal and spatial patterns of migratory populations. In general, the higher the latitude of the breeding site, the later the suitable time to initiate breeding (especially for those species breeding in the Arctic which must wait for snow melt), and thus the later the birds depart from nonbreeding sites and arrive at breeding sites (Conklin et al. 2013; Briedis et al. 2016). With an increase in nonstop flight distance, birds require a longer time to deposit more fuel to support migratory flight before departure (Conklin et al. 2013; Zhao et al. 2017). Moreover, migratory routes are closely linked with the availability and quality of stopover sites. The quality of stopover sites can affect the population dynamics of migratory birds. For example, a decline in the numbers of the Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) that breed in the UK is related to the use of the western migration route, which provides low quality habitat (Hewson et al. 2016). In the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (EAAF), the rapid population decline of many migratory shorebirds is related to the dramatic habitat loss and degradation at their critical stopover sites in the Yellow Sea (Hua et al. 2015; Piersma et al. 2016; Studds et al. 2017).

Migration routes and stopover sites can also differ between the northward and southward migration of the same population. Weather conditions, especially wind conditions, influence the seasonal difference in migration activities (Alerstam et al. 2003). Because flying with a tailwind reduces fuel consumption and increases

migration speed, birds prefer to use migration routes that provide tailwind assistance, and seasonal differences in wind direction and strength may therefore greatly affect migration routes and stopover decisions (e.g., Shamoun-Baranes et al. 2017; Carneiro et al. 2019). Migration can also be affected by the activities after arrival at the migration destination. Because breeding activities are time-constrained, migratory birds face great time pressure during migration to their breeding grounds. As a consequence, for boreal breeding species, birds generally exhibit shorter stopover durations, and thus faster migration speeds, during northward than southward migration (Battley et al. 2012; Nilsson et al. 2013; Zhao et al. 2017).

In recent years, many migratory shorebirds in the EAAF have suffered rapid population decline (Hua et al. 2015; Piersma et al. 2016; Studds et al. 2017). Clarifying the full annual life cycle of movements is the basis for identifying potential causes of these declines and conservation gaps. The Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) is a long-distance migratory shorebird with a worldwide distribution. In the EAAF, there are about 65,000 individual Whimbrels (Hansen et al. 2016), and these belong to the subspecies *N. p. variegatus* (Engelmoer and Roselaar 1998). They are mainly distributed in Australia and Southeast Asia during the nonbreeding period and in Far Eastern Russia during the breeding period. Roebuck Bay (RB) in Northwest Australia and Moreton Bay (MB) in East Australia are two major nonbreeding sites for the Whimbrels (Bamford et al. 2008; Rogers et al. 2011; Wilson et al. 2011). Since the 1990s, Whimbrels numbers have declined at MB (Wilson et al. 2011) but increased at RB (Rogers et al. 2019). The causes for these different population trends are unclear (Conklin et al. 2014).

Field surveys have revealed seasonal differences in numbers of Whimbrels at stopover sites along the EAAF. Many birds stopover in the Yellow Sea region during northward migration (Barter 2002; Bamford et al. 2008) but mainly stopover on the coasts of the Kamchatka Peninsula (Gerasimov et al. 2018), south China (Carey et al. 2001; Bai et al. 2015), Indonesia (Eaton et al. 2016) and Papua New Guinea (Bishop 2006) during southward migration (Conklin et al. 2014). However, few surveys were conducted on southward migration (Choi et al. 2016). Shorebird banding and flag resightings (Minton et al. 2006) indicate that the migration route used by the Whimbrels may be more eastward during southward than northward migration, i.e., more birds migrating south use the Kamchatka Peninsula rather than the Yellow Sea region as a stopover site (Minton et al. 2006).

However, not many Whimbrels were flagged and these flagged birds mainly came from nonbreeding sites in

Data analysis

Of the 21 tagged Whimbrels, eight completed both the northward and southward migration (three from MB and five from RB), and another two from RB completed the northward but not the southward migration. Individuals failed to track were due to equipment failure or death of birds. For example, four birds with tags were resighted in the field but no data received, and one bird was killed in Yakut, Russia by local hunter, and two birds were lost when encountering typhoon in the East China Sea. We analyzed migration data from birds that completed at least a single trip, including 10 birds (7 with PTTs and 3 with GPS–GSMs) that completed northward migration and 8 birds (7 with PTTs and 1 with GPS–GSMs) that completed southward migration. Mantel tests were used to analyze the strength of migration connectivity between the nonbreeding and breeding sites of the two populations (Ambrosini et al. 2009). The pairwise distance matrix for each of the two populations was established based on the geographical location of the nonbreeding and breeding sites for each individual (Ambrosini et al. 2009). The distance matrix included all individuals that arrived at the breeding site during northward migration (seven individuals from RB and three individuals from MB). Distance between individuals was calculated as the great circle distance. The “ADE4” package in R was used to calculate the Mantel correlation coefficient (r_M) for each population (Dray and Dufour 2007). The larger the coefficient, the stronger the migration connectivity.

A two-tailed Welch t -test was used to compare the migration activities of the RB and MB population in the same season. We calculated the logarithm of the seasonal ratio of migration speed, overall stopover duration, and travel speed for each individual in order to compare the seasonal difference in migration activities (Nilsson et al. 2013; Schmaljohann 2018). Linear mixed models (LMMs) were used to analyze the effect of travel speed and overall stopover duration on the seasonal difference in migration speed, with individual as a random variable. All statistical analyses were conducted with R software (R Core Team 2018), and results are reported as mean \pm SD.

Results

Migration routes and stopover sites

During their northward migration, Whimbrels from the same nonbreeding site followed a similar migration route for their first leg of flights after departure (Fig. 1a, b). The seven tagged birds from RB (Northwest Australia) flew over Southeast Asia to stopover sites on the south China coast, and then moved northward along the coast to the Yellow Sea region (Fig. 1a). The three tagged birds from MB (East Australia) flew over the Western

Pacific to stopover sites on the Japan or Yellow Sea coast (Fig. 1b). The first leg flight from RB was 4791 ± 222 km, which represented 44% of the total northward migration distance (11,018 km). The first leg flight from MB was 7121 ± 412 km, which represented 55% of the total northward migration distance (12,991 km). Both the flight distance and duration were significantly longer ($t=9.23$, $df=2.52$ and

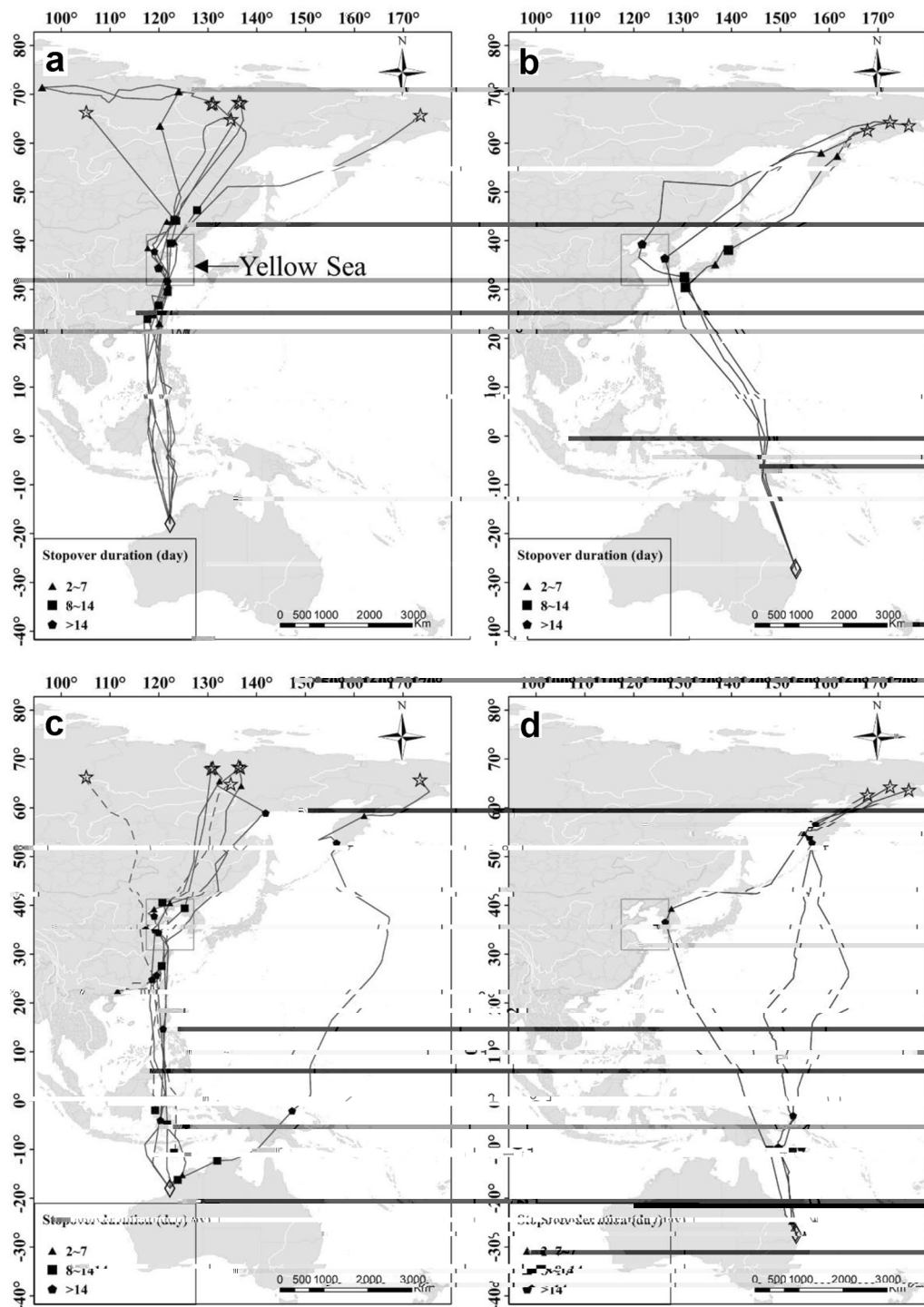


Fig. 1 Nonbreeding sites (diamonds in Australia), northward (a, b), northward (c, d) migration routes, stopover sites (filled in symbols), and breeding sites (pentagrams) of Whimbrels captured at Roebuck Bay (a, c) and Port Phillip Bay (b, d). Solid lines show the complete one-way migration routes, and dotted lines show incomplete one-way migration routes of individual birds

birds used stopover sites in the Yellow Sea and adjacent region (Japan) during their northward migration, but

RB birds stopped over for 28.8 ± 18.0 days, accounting for $48.2 \pm 34.4\%$ of the overall stopover duration.

Seasonal difference in migration activity

The overall migration speed of birds was faster ($t=9.51$, $df=14.78$, $p<0.001$) during northward migration than during southward migration (Table 1). This was mainly due to the shorter migration duration and stopover duration during northward migration than during southward migration (Additional file 1: Table S2). There was no significant difference in migration distance ($t=0.37$, $df=14.26$, $p=0.72$) or detour index ($t=0.55$, $df=12.51$, $p=0.59$) between the northward migration and the southward migration (Table 1).

Discussion

This study provided new information on the migration of Whimbrels from two nonbreeding sites (RB and MB) in the EAAF. The dates for the start and end of the migration were similar for the two populations in both seasons, perhaps because the latitudes of breeding sites are similar for the two populations. Migration routes, stopover sites, and stopover duration, however, differed between the populations and between seasons. Moreover, the migration connectivity between nonbreeding and breeding sites was strong for the MB population (all birds nested in a narrow longitudinal band in Far East Siberia) but weak for the RB population (birds nested across a broad band spanning ~60 degrees of longitude). Seasonal and population differences in migration highlight the importance of identifying the full annual movements of multiple populations of the same species in the same flyway.

Migration of Whimbrels in the EAAF

Using band recovery and flag resighting data, Minton *et al.* (2006) suggested that, unlike most shorebirds in the EAAF that pass through the coasts of the Asian mainland during their northward migration, Whimbrels take an eastward migration route and their main stopover sites are located in the Kamchatka region of Far Eastern Russia and Japan. Field surveys also have indicated the importance of Kamchatka for Whimbrels on both northward (Lappo *et al.* 2012) and southward (Gerasi-

and nonbreeding sites should help clarify the migration connectivity and gene flow in the flyway.

N. p. variegatus was considered to be the only subspecies in the EAAF with breeding at the east of Far Eastern Russia (Bamford et al. 2008; Conklin et al. 2014). In this study, the breeding grounds of most tracked birds match the breeding range of *variegatus* but new breeding regions (central-northern Sakha and eastern Krasnoyarskiy Krai) were identified for RB birds. These regions have been suggested to be the overlap zone of subspecies *phaeopus* and *variegatus* (Engelmoer and Roselaar 1998) and the nature of intergradation is unclear. Although our tracking results cannot identify whether there is intergradation between the two subspecies and whether *phaeopus* and *variegatus* might even be different species (Livezey 2010), we found RB Whimbrels have a widespread breeding region in Far Eastern Russia. Combining with migratory tracking, comparison on the morphological and genetic traits of birds at both breeding and nonbreeding sites will help to clarify the issue in taxonomy.

We detected obvious seasonal difference in the use of stopover sites. During northward migration, birds took a long-distance, nonstop flight after departing from nonbreeding sites, and their stopover sites were therefore concentrated in the second half of their migratory journey, i.e., along the coasts of China, Japan, and the Yellow Sea region. During southward migration, stopover sites were widely distributed on the Kamchatka Peninsula, the Yellow Sea region, and the coasts of China, southeast Asia, and Papua New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago (Fig. 1c, d). This is consistent with the results from field surveys (Barter 2002; Hadden 2004; Bishop 2006; Bamford et al. 2008; Bai et al. 2015) and reported in McClure (1974). Our tracking results confirm field observations by Gerasimov et al. (2018), for Whimbrels that breed in East Siberia, the Kamchatka Peninsula is an important gathering site during southward migration before their cross-sea southward flight. Our tracking results also indicated that the Kamchatka Peninsula was less used during the northern migration. Field surveys have reported that about 51% (Gerasimov et al. 2018) to 91% (Schuckard et al. 2006) of the Whimbrels in the EAAF stopped over on the Kamchatka Peninsula during southward migration, which is much more than birds recorded during northward migration, although a large number of birds also can be recorded on northward migration (Lappo et al. 2012).

Most of stopover sites the Whimbrels used in this study have been identified as the sites of international importance (Bamford et al. 2008; Conklin et al. 2014) but some new recognized sites have not yet (Additional file 1: Table S1). During northward migration, the newly recognized sites were concentrated in the south coast and

the northeast of China, where RB birds did stopover at. During southward migration, the newly recognized sites were concentrated in the southwest coast of Kamchatka, Papua New Guinea and Bismarck Archipelago, south coast of China, and Sulawesi in Indonesia (Additional file 1: Table S1). Although large flocks of Whimbrels have been reported in the southeast Asia on southward migration and nonbreeding period (Conklin et al. 2016), the detailed sites recorded by our tracking are different from former records. Field surveys in these regions are required to clarify the importance of these sites for the Whimbrels and other shorebirds.

The first leg of the migratory flight during northward migration is far for both MB and RB populations, i.e., the leg covers about half of the total migration distance. This is also the case for some other shorebirds that spend the nonbreeding period in Oceania and that breed in the Arctic and subarctic (Additional file 1: Table S3). Fuel deposition rate of shorebirds is relatively low at low latitudes where there is less food (macrobenthos on tideland) than at high latitudes (Piersma et al. 2004). To improve their fuel deposition rate, shorebirds can take a long-distance, nonstop flight to “jump over” the low latitudes (Piersma et al. 2004; Aharon-Rotman et al. 2016).

This requires high-quality habitats with abundant food to support rapid fuel deposition pre-migration at nonbreeding sites. During their northward migration, birds from MB exhibited longer first leg flights than birds from RB, suggesting that birds from MB deposit more fuel than birds from RB before the onset of migration. This inference is supported by the body mass data at the two sites: there was no significant difference in body mass between the two populations from October to December; while at pre-migration period in March, body mass of the Whimbrels at MB was significantly higher than that at RB (Additional file 2: Figure S1). We therefore suggest that high quality habitats at nonbreeding sites are important for long-distance migration.

We found RB population intensively used China's coast including the Yellow Sea during both northward and southward migration, while MB population less used during southward migration. This is similar to the migration of Bar-tailed Godwits in the EAAF: *menzbieri* Godwits (mainly stay in Northwest Australia in nonbreeding season) use the Yellow Sea on both migrations while *baueri* Godwits (mainly stay in New Zealand and East Australia in nonbreeding season) use the Yellow Sea only on northward migration (Battley et al. 2012). *Menzbieri* population suffered more rapid decline than *baueri* population; this is likely due to their different dependence on the stopover sites in the Yellow Sea, where the critical tidal habitats suffered dramatic loss over the past several decades (Conklin et al. 2016). However, Whimbrel

populations have declined at MB (Wilson et al. 2011) but increased at RB in the recent few decades (Rogers et al. 2019). This is the opposite of the situation of Godwits.

This may be because the Whimbrels can use a variety of habitat types (including widely distributed farmland and shrub) during migration (Kuang et al. 2019). Thus, tidal habitat loss along China's coast had limited impact on the Whimbrels. Recent study indicated that huge numbers of Whimbrels were killed by local hunters in Kamchatka (37,000 birds per year, Khlokov et al. 2020), suggesting MB birds that breed in the east of Far Eastern Russia suffered serious hunting pressure. Further studies on the survival rates at different periods and sites in the full annual life cycle (e.g., Piersma et al. 2016) are important to clarify the different trends between the two populations.

Migration of Whimbrels in different flyways

Recent studies have indicated that Whimbrels that breed in North America and Iceland use only a limited number of stopover sites during migration. They generally make one stopover during their northward migration, and Icelandic Whimbrels can fly directly from the breeding to nonbreeding site during their southward migration (Alves et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2016; Carneiro et al. 2019, Additional file 1: Table S4). Whimbrels in the EAAF, in contrast, stopover for an average of three and four times during their northward and southward migration, respectively. This might be related to the longer migration distances of the Whimbrels in the EAAF (11,000 and 13,000 km for birds from MB and RB, respectively) than in the other two flyways (9800 and 6700 km for birds in North America and Iceland, respectively, Additional file 1: Table S4). Wind conditions (tailwinds or headwinds) in different regions can also affect stopover decisions during migration (Alerstam et al. 2003; Ma et al. 2011; Carneiro et al. 2019). Whimbrels that breed in Iceland and North America are likely to obtain wind assistance (Alves et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2016; Carneiro et al. 2019) while birds in the EAAF might encounter unfavorable tailwinds near the equator (Wang et al. 2020) and in the south hemisphere during southward migration (Gill et al. 2014). The adverse wind condition can increase the possibility of stopover of birds during migratory flight (Ma et al. 2011).

Because the fuel deposition rate at stopover sites is much slower than the fuel consumption rate during flight, stopover duration is much longer than the duration of migratory flight, and thus migration speed is mainly determined by stopover duration (Kölzsch et al. 2016; Schmaljohann 2018). In the EAAF, Whimbrels have shorter stopover durations and thus faster

migration speeds during their northward than their southward migration. This is consistent with results obtained for most migratory birds and is related to the time pressure for early arrival at breeding sites during northward migration (Newton 2008; Nilsson et al. 2010).

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