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SAVING SANDPIPERS, EGG BY EGG BY EGG

You must have been living on Mars if you haven't heard of the spoon-billed sandpiper. Thanks to a phenomenal international effort to save it from extinction, this tiny wader with a one-of-a-kind black spatulate bill has suddenly become the giant panda of the bird world.

The list of organisations putting their weight behind it reads like a *Who's Who* of conservation: the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Birds Russia and the RSPB, along with the BTO, BirdLife International and plenty of others. There's even a Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force.

Perhaps it's not surprising – there are believed to be fewer than 100 breeding pairs left in the wild, and without serious help they could disappear within a decade.

Conservationists are buying time to tackle everything from illegal hunting to the destruction of their 'stopover' habitat by taking some into captivity. There is now a small breeding flock at WWT's headquarters in Slimbridge, providing a precious insurance policy.

Eggs have also been taken from nests on the Russian tundra and then

artificially hatched to help the chicks through their crucial first few days. It's a delicate process and, even then, the young birds have to make an 8,000km migration to their wintering grounds in South Asia.

But, against all the odds, the first hand-reared bird (a female carrying eggs) has just returned to her Russian breeding grounds – two nail-biting years

THE FIRST HAND-REARED SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER HAS RETURNED TO HER BREEDING GROUNDS.

after she was released.

So the spoon-billed sandpiper is in safe hands. It's a long, slow, winding road to recovery but at least it's on its way.

Now we just need to do the same for the Javan rhino, forest owlet, lemur leaf frog and all the other 2,444 Critically Endangered species (and that's not including plants) hurtling towards extinction.

But bearing in mind the phenomenal effort needed to save this one bird – no bigger than a sparrow – goodness knows how we're going to do that.