

The Broad-billed Sandpiper in Australia

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In recent years the study of shore-birds (waders) has become quite a cult with ornithologists in Sydney, and for that matter, elsewhere in Australia, particularly in Melbourne and Perth. The results have been interesting and much information of value to the field-worker has appeared in the pages of *The Emu*.

Restrained enthusiasm on the part of observers has given us a better and more precise understanding of the status of a number of species, the inclusion of which in a local fauna may have been previously based on odd specimens (sometimes wrongly labelled) in museums.

It is not the purpose of these remarks to give a complete list of the wading birds (Charadriiformes, restricted) recorded from the Sydney district (County of Cumberland), though it is of interest to note, in passing, that there are acceptable records for forty-one of the fifty-three species of that group listed from Australia. Twenty-four of these are either regular migrants, or stragglers, from the eastern Palaearctic Region (Siberia, Mongolia, etc.), where they breed. Fifteen are species that breed in Australia and therefore may be considered Australian though some extend beyond Australia. One, the Upland Plover or Bartram's Sandpiper, is a straggler (one record) from the Nearctic Region (North America); and one, the Double-banded Dotterel, is a regular migrant, in limited numbers, from New Zealand.

The days of straightforward collecting, essential in time and place, have given way to close and accurate observation of the living bird. Any unusual record has to stand the test of searching enquiries and friendly criticism before it is accepted. Generally it has been possible to confirm such sight records to the satisfaction of all concerned. The few birds that have had to be placed on the 'unidentified' list only sharpen one's enthusiasm for further field work.

Some ornithologists may be inclined to reject sight records of rare species, that is rare for a particular area. A few waders are indeed 'problem children' when it comes to identification in the field. However, I see no reason why observations by careful and experienced field-workers should not be accepted as definite records.

The foregoing remarks need not be taken as an apologia for the following notes. I refer to the Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*), one of the rarest of the northern hemisphere migrant shore-birds occurring in Australia. On March 27, 1948, a bird of this species was seen and closely examined, with the aid of x 10 binoculars, at Boat Harbour, north Cronulla Beach, some fifteen miles south of Sydney. It was under close observation for more than half an hour

and was studied with much interest by four observers—T. A. Everitt, W. R. Moore, G. Marshall, and K. A. Hindwood. The bird was fairly tame and in the company of various kinds of waders resting on the sand-spit lying between the extreme northern end of Cronulla Beach and Boat Harbour. Later, on a falling tide, it was watched as it fed over the rock flats nearby.

Notes taken at the time read—"Bill long, slightly decurved towards tip, appeared to be entirely dull black; legs dull slaty-green. Size between that of Little Stint and Mongolian Dotterel, both of which species were within a foot of the Broad-billed Sandpiper at one time or another. Dark markings of feathers on back pronounced, a few edged with rufous: flecking on sides of neck and upper-breast: whitish stripe from base of upper mandible extending over and behind eye: dark stripe on forehead, broadening on crown: lores, dark. General effect of head markings distinctly snipe-like. Tail pattern, in flight, like that of the Little Stint and the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper." The plumage pattern generally resembled the illustration in Gregory M. Mathews' *The Birds of Australia*,¹ which is of a bird collected on Buchanan Islets, near Melville Island, in April 1912.

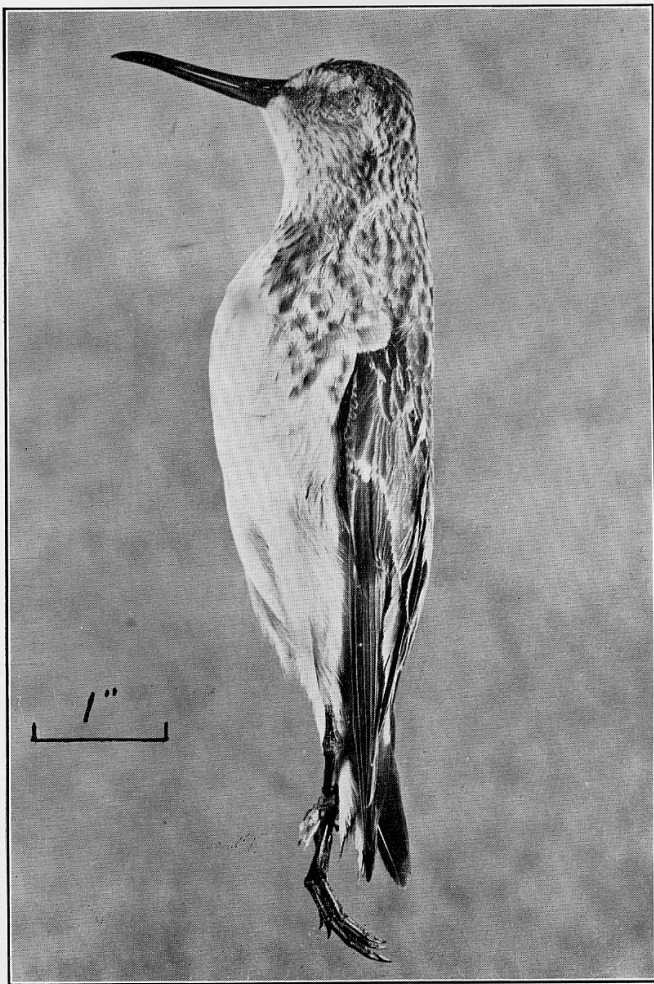
Some years ago (October 24, 1943) I watched a bird, which I took to be a Broad-billed Sandpiper, on a moist sand flat at Quibray Bay, about two miles west of Boat Harbour. At the time it was placed on the doubtful list, mainly because the species is such a rarity in Australia. However, following the incident I made a careful study of the specimen (the only one in Australia, as far as I am aware) in the Australian Museum, and of published illustrations and the literature dealing with the species.

In the minds of the four observers who saw the bird at Boat Harbour there is no doubt that it was a Broad-billed Sandpiper. Apart from the snipe-like head markings and the comparatively long, slightly decurved bill, the general impression was of an over-sized Little Stint in a certain plumage state, that of late summer and early autumn (Australian seasons), at which time the back markings are more prominent than earlier, though before the birds acquire any rufous wash on the neck.

James Lee Peters lists² two forms of the Broad-billed Sandpiper. He states of the eastern race, *sibirica*, which migrates as far south as Australia, that it—"Undoubtedly breeds in north-eastern Siberia.* Migrates through eastern Asia at least as far west as Lake Baikal; winters in eastern India, Indo-Chinese countries, Malay Archipelago to Australia."

Particulars of the three known specimens collected in Australia are—

*As far as I know the eggs of the Eastern Broad-billed Sandpiper remain undescribed.



Broad-billed Sandpiper, Cook's River, Botany Bay, 18/12/16.
Australian Museum

- No. 742575, female. Collected October 16, 1903, Broome, north-west Australia. American Museum of Natural History (Mathews' collection).



Recorded distribution of the Broad-billed Sandpiper in Australia: Broome, Buchanan Islets, Cook's River (Botany Bay), Boat Harbour (north Cronulla Beach).

- No. 742574, female. Collected April 5, 1912, 'Buchanan's Islet, Melville Island,' north-western Australia. [Buchanan Islets, at southern entrance to Apsley Strait, between Melville and Bathurst Islands]. American Museum of Natural History (Mathews' collection). Figured by Mathews¹ as a male.

- No. O.30186, male. Collected December 18, 1916, Cook's River, Botany Bay, near Sydney, N.S.W. Australian Museum, Sydney (Grant Collection). D. L. Serventy³ gives the date of collection as February 18, 1916.

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2. Peters, James Lee. *Check-list of Birds of the World*, vol. 2, 1934, p. 287.
3. Serventy, D. L. 'Notes on Some Rarer Waders,' *The Emu*, vol. 43, pt. 4, April 1944, pp. 274-280, see pp. 279-280.

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