

The Pectoral Sandpiper and other Northern Waders in South-western New South Wales

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On December 8, 1957, at Black Swamp, Wanganella, New South Wales, I had under observation a small wader, which undoubtedly was a Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*).

Black Swamp is a shallow sheet of water about 35 miles north of Deniliquin. It has a capacity diameter of about a mile and is much overgrown with lignum. Like all waters in this plains area it is of a transitory nature. In 1956 it had a depth of water up to 10 feet and supported a nesting colony of ibis many thousands strong. By December 1957, the water had receded to a disjointed chain of pools surrounded by areas of drying, grey mud.

The Pectoral Sandpiper was found on the edge of one of these small pools. It was solitary and did not mix with the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Calidris acuminata*) also present. I was able to drive some of the latter species to the same feeding patch as used by the Pectoral Sandpiper and was thus able to obtain comparisons of the two species alongside each other.

The Pectoral Sandpiper was a noticeably darker bird than the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Its plumage was of a somewhat darker shade of brown and the edgings to each feather were of a darker brown almost blackish. The whole effect was of a darker, more contrasted coloration. The chin was whitish but below this the whole breast was dusky with numerous, distinct striations of a dark brown to black colour. These striations terminated in a clear-cut line from the otherwise pure white of the abdomen. The line of demarcation was abrupt and most noticeable. It was obvious to the naked eye at ranges up to forty yards. The breast markings were totally different from those of the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers present or any I have seen previously. The remainder of the lower breast and abdomen was white with no traces of any markings, there being none of the buffish wash as in the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Even with a 25x telescope at 10 yards range, I was unable to see any signs of a rufous wash to the crown feathers.

The crown was dark and had a capped effect as in the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, but not to the same extent due to the white eye-stripe not extending so far back. The bill was black and perhaps a little shorter than the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper's. It was slightly decurved at the tip. In strong light it was possible to see a dull-reddish coloration at the base. I examined closely the bills of the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and in some it was possible to see a paleness in the base of the lower mandible, but there were no signs of redness. The legs

were yellow with at times a slight greenish tinge. I was able to compare the leg coloration with that of a Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatalis*) which was also present. The colours were practically identical, the Pectoral Sandpiper's being a little brighter. Its flight pattern was similar to that of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, but the call note on rising was totally different—a double, hoarse chirrup, repeated frequently, which I noted as 'drirt-drirt'. It was much harsher than the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper's call, lacking the softer, whistling effect, and was uttered more frequently and more readily. When flushed, the bird flew and settled on its own, ignoring other waders present.

Contrary to popular opinion, I found this bird readily distinguishable from the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Its darker plumage, the amazingly clear contrast of the striated breast from the white abdomen, the relatively-bright yellow legs, the lack of rufous on the head and the distinct call are all good points of distinction easily noticeable in the field. I gained the impression the bird was not so slender as the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, but a little plumper and more rotund. This effect could have been caused, however, by the darker colour and the line of demarcation across the lower breast.

Condon and McGill (*Field Guide to the Waders*, 1952, p. 22) list two previous Australian records: Albany, W.A., and Geelong, Vic. L. Amiet gives a further probable record at Ruby Bay, Queensland. (*Emu*, vol. 57, p. 251). Some doubt must exist in a sight record of such a rare wader and for that reason I have given in some detail the points on which I based my identification. It is perhaps significant that in recent years this species has become a regular visitant in small numbers to the British Isles and that all such visits are to freshwater swamps. Apparently it prefers this type of habitat and not the coastal mud-flats and seashore where most Australian observers go to study waders.

The time may be opportune to record my own observations on northern waders inland in this part of New South Wales.

Pluvialis dominica. Pacific Golden Plover.

On October 14, 1957, at a swamp on Wargam Station, Boooroorban, a party of R.A.O.U. members was noisily engaged in the capture of an injured Freckled Duck and apparently disturbed a single bird of this species. The identification was made by M. S. R. Sharland and C. Humphries, two 'non-combatants' idling on the bank.

Tringa nebularia. Greenshank.

Two records. One on the outskirts of Deniliquin at a small swamp caused by a heavy thunderstorm on December 16, 1964. One at Black Swamp, Wanganella, on December 8, 1957.

Tringa stagnatalis. Marsh Sandpiper.

One at Black Swamp, Wanganella, on December 8, 1957. This bird conveniently fed at times with the Greenshank, affording good opportunities for comparison and definite identification.

***Calidris ferruginea.* Curlew-Sandpiper.**

One in association with Sharp-tailed Sandpipers at Bundyulumbiah Station, Wanganella, on December 16, 1956. This bird was at a very large swamp in the middle of a saltbush plain. Formed in the floods of 1956, it gradually dried out during the ensuing summer, baring large areas of ooze which attracted a vast assemblage of waders, terns, gulls, herons and other water birds, many of which nested. It was here that the Double-banded Dotterels were seen (*Emu*, vol. 56, p. 434).

***Calidris acuminata.* Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.**

If conditions are suitable, a regular summer visitor, records ranging between October 10 and May 8. Frequents the larger swamps on the open plains and I have not seen it on the rivers or their associated billabongs and lagoons. Flocks may be large (400 at Bundyulumbiah on December 16, 1956), but are usually in the order of ten to fifty. A single bird was seen in February, 1955, at a small tank in mallee country north of Balranald. The larger numbers and majority of records are in October, November and December.

***Calidris ruficollis.* Red-necked Stint.**

Up to eleven were at Bundyulumbiah in December 1956.

***Gallinago hardwickii.* Japanese Snipe.**

Although seen occasionally on the open swamps, it usually frequents the billabongs and lagoons in the timbered areas by the rivers and creeks. It is not common and is more often solitary, although sometimes a dozen may be flushed along a length of billabong. Records range from September 26 to February 23.

Two 'Strange Faces'.—During a visit to Mornington on September 3, 1957, I came close upon two rare visitors. A dark Southern Skua (*Catharacta skua*) was being attacked by a small flock of Silver Gulls (*Larus nova-hollandiae*), whilst seven Little Pied Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucus*) looked on. The Skua took little notice of the Gulls and stayed perched on the jetty near the pier for several hours.

The second visitor was a Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Diomedea chlororhyncha*) which circled twice close to the shore, making vast sweeps out to sea, finally landing in shallow water within thirty yards offshore. The bird floated for twenty minutes, finally taking off in the direction of the Rip, presumably heading for the open sea.

Walking about a mile each way from the pier I counted thirty-seven Silver Gulls and one Pacific Gull (*Larus pacificus*). Later in the day, at Portsea, a pair of Pied Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*) was seen. Both birds allowed me to approach quite close and during 40 minutes worked a little over one hundred yards along the beach, searching for food. Suddenly, startled by a group of people, they flew parallel to the shore and landed some half-mile away to continue feeding.

The two birds had moved many pieces of sea-weed, using both beak and feet, and seemed to gather much food from each piece. On closer examination, untried pieces were found to harbour tiny black insects and very small crabs.—GEORGE W. BEDGGOOD, Mooroopna, Vic., 11/9/57.