

SHORT NOTES

Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*) at Lake Ellesmere

On 6 August 1986, we observed an unusual wader at Wolfe's Road, Lake Ellesmere. This bird caught our attention when it flew in and landed in a large patch of dried rushes in marshy ground near the end of the road. Members of a Workers' Educational Association course joined us and we watched the bird for several minutes from about 10 metres away. At first, we thought the bird might be a Marsh Crake (*Porzana pusilla*) for it was behaving in a secretive crake-like manner, crouching and freezing in the vegetation, then moving forward very slowly, seeming aware of our presence. It was very hard to locate, even with 12x50 field glasses, and not until it stood with head raised did we realise it was much larger than a Marsh Crake. We noticed brilliant white underparts, green legs and outstanding markings on the head and back.

Size and appearance: Larger than a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*) but smaller than a Knot (*C. canutus*); more streamlined than the plump, rounded shape of a Knot. Movements jerky as it crept through the reeds with its rear parts bobbing and its head kept low.

Plumage: Its head markings were outstanding. Round each eye, a pale ring, extending back towards the nape. The crown was intersected by a buff stripe, which extended from the base of the bill to the nape. The upperparts were marbled mid-grey with a bronze tinge and an almost metallic sheen. A broad, creamy stripe extended down each side of the back and framed the upper wings to form a V over the rump. The wings were speckled black and white. Breast streaked grey, lighter in front and forming a pectoral band. Rest of underparts brilliant white.

Bare parts: Bill yellowish horn, substantial and longer than the head. The decurved tip was darker and appeared slightly bulbous. Legs green and of medium length. Feet not seen.

More people arrived on the scene and the excitement of the discovery intensified. Much talk ensued and this disturbed the bird, which flew suddenly, keeping fairly low. It disappeared into distant reed beds on the property of Mr C. Hills. We could not see the bird's rump as it flew but we noticed that it trailed its legs, somewhat in the manner of a rail, which made the flight rather ungainly.

When at home we consulted Pizzey's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* (1980) and were in no doubt that the bird was a Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*). Because the bird had no rufous on the head and breast, which distinguishes male from female, we believe that the bird was male.

The Painted Snipe family (*Rostratulidae*) has only two members worldwide. *Rostratula benghalensis* ranges through Africa, India, China, south-eastern Asia and the Pacific. Two subspecies are recognised, with *R. b. australis* breeding in Australia. In the Tasmanian region the only record is of a specimen from Sandford in July 1910. In western Australia the species has not been recorded since a sighting near Derby in the 1950s. Breeding reports are confined to the Murray-Darling, South-East and the South

Australia Range regions except for one in the 1950s of the bird arriving to breed at Ayr in March-April each year. Occasional records from remote places show that the Painted Snipe can move far. This and its apparently erratic appearances, common in some years, scarce or absent in others, led earlier writers to consider it nomadic, e.g. birds at Laverton, May-September 1951, were the first recorded there since 1897. In southern Australia the Painted Snipe was reported to be present only during floods at long intervals, but the *Atlas of Australian Birds* (Blakers *et al.* 1984) and other observations suggest that movements are mainly north in winter and south in summer. Reports imply that the species may even migrate out of Australia, though there is little evidence of overseas populations migrating or of a possible wintering ground for Australian birds. The largest flock reported is of 25 birds near a nesting colony on the Murray River.

Although we have searched for the Painted Snipe on many occasions since 6 August, we have been unsuccessful. Conditions at Lake Ellesmere changed during the rest of August, owing to prolonged and heavy rain, and the area of dry rushes in which we saw the bird was inundated for many weeks. Lake Ellesmere has a vast expanse of suitable marshy terrain and so the chances of finding the bird again were remote.

An interesting report was received on 12 August. A shooter operating in the Wolfe's Road area flushed what he described as a strange bird with a white mark around its body and reddish colour on the plumage from reed beds near where we had seen the Painted Snipe. It disappeared without his being able to gain more information.

On being shown Pizzey's Field Guide, he seemed fairly certain that the Painted Snipe resembled the bird he had flushed. The reference to a reddish colour on the plumage may indicate that a female as well as a male Painted Snipe have been observed. Various sources state that male-female pairs often fly around together.

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Light-mantled Sooty Albatross at Lake Manapouri

At 1100 hours on 2 June 1986, R. T. Johnston, a Fiordland Travel bus driver, saw a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (*Phoebastria palpebrata*) on the ground near the vehicle garages at West Arm Power Station, Lake Manapouri. The bird was examined at Te Anau Wildlife Centre and found to be in good health.

On 3 June, after 30 hours' captivity in a tourist bus and car, the albatross was released on Oreti Beach, Invercargill. We yelled encouragement as the bird did a minute's vigorous wing flapping before rising to 8 m in the fresh on-shore breeze. After a brief mobbing by some Black-billed Gulls (*Larus bulleri*) the albatross glided along the dunes towards Bluff Hill.