



# Western Australian Bird Notes

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Quarterly Newsletter of the W.A. Group  
Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

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## COMING MEETINGS

Monday, September 28 at 8.00 p.m. — Cygnet Hall —  
Roger Jaensch will speak on crakes and rails.

Friday, January 8 at 7.00 p.m. Annual meeting and  
dinner. The venue will be advised in the December issue.

## FIELD OUTINGS

October 2-12 Biennial Campout, Boddington. **LAST CHANCE!!** Ring Joan Seabrook immediately if you wish to attend.

This year's campout will be centred around a farm near Boddington kindly lent by Owen Nicholls' Family. The unoccupied farmhouse and facilities will be available, including beds for eight people, kitchen and outdoor cooking, toilet, parking and room for tents.

The purpose of the expedition will be to obtain breeding records for the System Six Atlas. Excursions will be arranged by Doug Watkins and Owen Nicholls. There will be a booking fee of \$2.00. On receipt of booking further information such as maps will be posted. A community meal will be provided in the evenings at a cost of \$4.00 per head per day. Those wishing to participate in this should send either a deposit of \$2.00 a day or the full amount to cover whatever number of days are intended to be spent at the camp. The deadline for receiving deposits was originally 28th August so if you still intend to go, please act immediately.

Those people who can bring their own accommodation should do so as beds can then be allotted to those who don't have a tent or van.

Saturday, October 31 **Beginners excursion.** It is hoped to make these local outings a regular event in the Perth area. Primarily aimed at encouraging new members, they will be advertised in the local newspapers etc. Regular members are also welcome — bring along a beginner if you can, or just come along to help make the new folks feel at ease. This inaugural excursion will take place in the forest near Pickering

Brook. Meet at Mundaring Weir Lookout (south side of dam) at 8.00 a.m. This will be a morning outing only. Leader: Graeme Chapman, 298 8491.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE W.A. WADER STUDY GROUP

During the wader banding season, which usually begins in September of one year and ends in April of the next, the Group makes frequent Saturday afternoon or evening visits to places on the Swan estuary, to various lakes on the Swan coastal plain and on occasion to localities further afield to catch waders by mist netting or cannon netting. Since conditions at potential catching sites vary from day to day, it is seldom practicable to draw up a program of visits in advance and notify it to members of the Group and others wishing to take part in the Group's activities. People wishing to obtain information about dates, times and venues should therefore telephone Peter Curry on 390 6995 or Jeremy Talbot on 291 6563 after working hours.

In addition Ken Mills intends during the 1981/82 season to band waders at various points along the State's coastline south and east of Perth, i.e. anywhere between Mandurah and Esperance. Anybody who would like to assist Ken should phone him at home at Narrogin (098) 81 1809.

## RECOVERY OF REDNECKED STINT BANDED IN RUSSIA

On 25th October 1980 at Point Waylen on the Swan estuary, members of the W.A. Wader Study Group cannon netted 153 waders, of which 143 were Rednecked Stints, *Calidris ruficollis*. One of the Rednecked Stints proved to be wearing a Russian band and David Purchase, the Secretary of the Australian Bird-banding Scheme in Canberra, in due course received word from Russia that the bird had been banded on 17th June 1979 at Uelen on the Chukotski Peninsula in Siberia. According to the map, Uelen lies just across the Bering Strait from Alaska and is just about as far east as one can travel on the mainland of the Soviet Union. The other day Jim Lane of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife sent me a copy of a letter he had re-

ceived from a Dr. Paul Tomkovich of the Department of Ornithology, Zoological Museum, Herzen Street, Moscow. In this letter Dr. Tomkovich stated that our bird was one of the 267 Rednecked Stints banded near Uelen during his three year study of the breeding biology of this and other Calidridinae sandpiper species. The recaptured bird, a female, was banded on the nest and at the end of June 1979 the nest was destroyed and Dr. Tomkovich did not see her again. He is naturally very interested in the circumstances of her recapture and I shall be writing to him soon on the subject.

Jeremy Talbot  
for W.A. Wader Study Group

## WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ATLAS NOTES

The next printout and maps for the field atlas have been held up by various delays on the computing side, but meanwhile a great deal of checking has been going ahead. Some of you took part in this process at the two Atlas workshops which I held in Perth this winter, and are probably now more familiar with the behind-the-scenes atlas work than you were before. We have three general aims in the checking process. First we want to get as much information as we possibly can about the little-known birds. Some of you have already had letters from me asking for more information about the Dusky Warbler. That was an example of the process in action, but a great many URRF requests also have behind them the need to know more about the birds that few people see. For this reason we are very anxious to get good descriptions of what you saw the bird doing. Most URRF's that are accepted depend upon a good description, usually made unknowingly, of some characteristic pieces of behaviour. The plumage descriptions can, after all, be looked up in the book (and you would be surprised how many verbatim quotations come in) but to record behaviour you have actually had to watch the bird. Another very helpful piece of information for birds that are little known is how many you saw over a given distance, and/or in a given time. We have very few measures of density against which to calibrate the reporting rate estimates that come out of the analysis of the atlas data and which we know to correlate well with measured density in certain sites where the two methods have been used simultaneously e.g. Garden Island, and Maria Island, Tasmania.

Another check that we are adopting is to ask for details of species that are reported only once from a 1° block for which at least 70 sheets have been received. The reason is that such single sightings have been found to represent a higher error rate — 60-80% — than any other category that can be easily identified. The causes of the errors rarely lie with the observation, but rather in the transcription process between your writing the sheet and the computer printing out the coded result. No matter how careful you are about hand-writing, some figures can be read in two ways and the quickest way to identify these errors is to check all single sightings. I feel a fool writing to ask you if the Pelican you saw was a Pelican, but I don't mind that if once in twenty times I find it was really a magpie. Perhaps if you understand why this stream of curious URRF requests is coming out at present you will be less amazed at them.

A third thing that we are trying to do is to achieve a uniform vetting standard across Australia. We have taken two approaches. One is to review all accepted URRF's in one place, by showing them to a small expert committee in Melbourne. The other is to call all the Regional Organisers to Melbourne in February 1981 to get them all to go through all the latest maps, marking records to query. The result is that many records were queried by organisers in

other districts that the local person would have accepted without question. I have been astonished how often these records have, in the event, been unsubstantiated and so I think the process well worth while, even though, again it causes me to ask for apparently trivial URRF's.

We seem to have got some coverage of all the W.A. blocks. There are just one or two that aren't so good as they should be. How about a special effort on 25/112, 27/113, and 32/128 — if you can find out where they are before December 31.

Finally, I expect to give a talk reviewing the whole Atlas project to the Royal Society of W. A. on the evening of October 12. If you give me a ring shortly before, I should be able to confirm the date and tell you where it will be, but I have to be careful here because I don't want to drag anyone back from Nanga Brook!

I hope you all enjoy this spring's atlassing and find lots of nests.

Stephen Davies

## EYRE BIRD OBSERVATORY

Peter and Di Congreve had their leave in Perth in June after nine months of really hard work that has pretty well finished the transformation of the old building. The new museum, set up by the Post Office Historical Society in May is a most attractive addition, and we are very grateful to Jack Rust and his fellow travellers for their hard work. Peter has finished redecorating the rooms and is at present installing an electric pump to take over from the little hand device that any of you who have been to Eyre will know well. Helen Laybourne Smith donated the money that enabled us to buy that and we are very grateful, especially Peter! Dame Rachael Cleland contributed some stationery and a print of the Observatory which are very decorative and can be bought by visitors to aid the finances and Julie Strudwick gave us money for a microscope-cum-binoculars and a vice, a practical but essential item that we sorely needed. Peter wont mind my telling the story that the vice he ordered was so big that when it arrived on the truck he sent it on to Eucla saying 'That's too big to be my vice'. It did come back and we are grateful to both Dame Rachael and Julie for their donations.

Mortlocks and an anonymous donor enabled us to buy a Suzuki LJ81 utility to assist with transport at Eyre. Their generosity is greatly appreciated and the ability to pick up stores without a trailer will be a great load off Peter's back, and off his trailer too, which he has been using on our behalf for the past nine months.

Birds have been exciting down there recently with a lot of new records and the total species list is now well over 200, almost as many as Perth. The total banded is over 1,000 and at the rate Peter is going the next 1,000 won't take 3 years. There should be some interesting recoveries coming in soon.

The committee decided that the fees would have to rise from August 1, with an overnight stay at \$12 each, bringing Eyre in line with Rotamah which has been \$12 for some time. We can only keep fees low if many people use the observatory, so please consider taking a holiday there sometime soon.

Someone to whom we are very grateful for taking a holiday there recently was Pauline Duncan, who ran the observatory while Peter and Di were on leave. Thank you Pauline. If any of you would like to book the Acting Warden's job while Peter is on leave next year, he or I would start a waiting list anytime.

The regeneration of the sandunes made some progress this year, and we hope to run a working party (at reduced

rates) in January 1982 to try to press on with this work. It is now as urgent as anything for the new paint inside is hard to keep clean while the sand is blowing in from outside.

## W.A. BIRD REPORT

The W.A. Group of the R.A.O.U. has decided to publish an Annual Bird Report. I have "agreed" to undertake the editing of it. The report will be about the size of the Eyre Bird Observatory Report. I am looking at publishing the first edition for the year 1st January 1982 to 31st December 1982. This will, everything proceeding smoothly, mean publication in the middle of 1983.

I see the purpose of this as providing a central collecting point for observations of birds in W.A. which will allow us, over a period of time, to see changes in population and distribution. I envisage that each species seen in the State in that year will be included in the report with a summary of the observations, with special mention being given to anything that appears to be unusual. Deciding what is unusual will be difficult as at present we do not have a standard of the usual and this is what I hope we will be able to establish.

I would like to receive any records of birds seen from anywhere in the state that you think will enable us to build up this picture. This will enable us to flesh out the details of the Atlas. It would be helpful if I could receive these records throughout the year rather than have them all on the 3rd January 1983, otherwise the publication date of the report will have to be put back. It would be nice to have several reports from the same area over the year to enable a picture of seasonal change to be produced.

Over the next twelve months I hope to have a few British Country Bird Reports available to allow people to see the sort of thing we are trying to produce. I will give you more details and reminders over the next eighteen months.

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Telephone 448 3512

## SOUTH-WEST WATERBIRD PROJECT Report by Roger Jaensch

The June and September issues of the national R.A.O.U. Newsletter outline the nature and scope of the Waterbird Project and account for progress to date. Therefore, I will only reiterate a few major points here and outline plans for the coming months. There will be a report on the Project in each issue of W.A. Bird Notes as one of its main purposes is to present feedback to Project contributors.

The R.A.O.U. Waterbird Project entails a four year study of waterbird usage of Wetland Nature Reserves (WNR), controlled by the Western Australian Wildlife Authority (WAWA) in the south-west of the State (approx. Geraldton to Esperance). Information will be gathered by volunteer observers many of whom were contributors to the Australian Bird Atlas (ends Dec. 1981), and will be stored and analysed by computer.

The aims of the project are:

1. To provide information on waterbird usage to help in the management of WNR's and in resolving conflicts between different uses,
2. To assess the role and importance of the WNR system in the conservation of waterbird populations,
3. To provide appropriate experience for future monitoring of waterbird abundance and

4. To assess the efficiency and practicability of various methods of conducting a census of waterbirds under Australian conditions.

Waterbirds are defined as those species dependent on wetlands for their survival and for the South-West include species from the grebe, pelican, darter, cormorant, heron and allies, ibis and spoonbill, swan and duck, rail, Painted Snipe, plover, stilt and avocet, sandpiper and gull and tern families. The Marsh Harrier, Clamorous Reed Warbler and Little Grassbird are also considered waterbirds in this project.

I am employed by the R.A.O.U. as full-time Field Officer to design, test and report on census techniques (first twelve months to April 1982), and co-ordinate the activities of observers (field survey to start May 1982). My work has so far largely been concerned with establishing an office and the design and testing of field survey booklets and computer forms. I have also visited a representative third of the 180-odd WNR, to familiarise myself with South-West conditions. A major task for the remainder of 1981 will be the compilation of observer kits for each reserve; these will include access and depth gauge location maps, air photos and instructions.

Why only WNR? Although the R.A.O.U. is interested in Wetlands in general, it has been granted funds to study WAWA-vested WNR and so in view of the relatively low density of observers in the South-West, the most efficient approach will be to concentrate effort solely on the allocated reserves. If the reserves are adequately covered then we may be able to process data from additional wetlands. In any case, this project is seen as a pilot study for ongoing monitoring of waterbird populations using all South-West wetlands: the larger study will only be possible if the present project succeeds.

The surveys: who, where and when? I have made some contact with potential participants through various R.A.O.U. meetings and C.S.I.R.O., Fisheries and Wildlife and Naturalist circles. The main recruiting thrust will commence before the end of the year, the first move being for me to personally approach or write to all current South-West Atlasers and other R.A.O.U. members.

All observers are welcome in this scheme as I will be able to arrange training for those less experienced with waterbirds. I hope to see each participant at least once before the end of 1982, to discuss any problems encountered with the material we prepare for the Project.

We will be trying to ensure that each WNR is surveyed on a minimal two-monthly basis starting with selected reserves in the first survey year. Additional surveys will be requested at critical stages of the season such as at breeding peaks and as wetlands dry up. Some people may be able to commit themselves to cover several reserves but the Project will allow for all levels of participation. We shall certainly welcome more frequent coverage so there will be no real limit to the number of observers covering each reserve, provided observations can be co-ordinated. However, I will be attempting to rationalise effort and so might suggest that some people tackle a less or un-worked reserve in preference to a well worked reserve.

For the present, any person who is keen to test and comment on my survey form designs should contact me at the address below.

The first organised gathering and training of potential participants will be during the R.A.O.U. Campout at Boddington in October. Any future activities will be published in this newsletter. . . . so read carefully and gear yourself up for a most exciting and rewarding project!

### Interesting sightings in WAWA WNR's:

Cattle Egret :	1, Lake Joondalup, 29 April;
Glossy Ibis :	1 immature, Benger Swamp, 8 July;
Freckled Duck :	2, Lake Bambun, 12 May;
	12, Lake Chittering, 12 May;
	1, Lake Wannamal, 10 June;
	5, Lake Mears, 14 July;
	6, Lake Chittering, 20 August;
Chestnut Teal :	4, Lake Kwoornicup, 11 July;
(all males)	1, Lake Toolibin, 18 July;
Pink-eared Duck :	2 clutches, paperbarks at
	Lake Wannamal, 20 August;
Spotless Crane :	at least 2, in dense canopy of teatree
	flooded by two-metre-deep water,
	Lake Chittering, 20 August;
Red-necked Stint :	59, Lake Kwoornicup, 11 July;
Roseate Tern :	1 immature, Austin Bay WNR
	(Peel Inlet), 5 June, 1981.

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### NORTH-WEST WADER EXPEDITION

**Preliminary Report** — more comprehensive reports to follow in national R.A.O.U. Newsletter and in Australasian Wader Study Group periodical *The Stilt*.

Twenty ornithologists took part in a survey of waders frequenting the coastline from Mornington Island (Qld.) to the Eighty-Mile Beach (W.A.) in the period 22 August to 4 September, 1981. Ten participants were from Western Australia, nine from Victoria and one from the United Kingdom (Durham University).

Following aerial surveys of the far northern coast, eighteen of the team met at Broome and began intensive ground and aerial surveys of wader habitat between Broome and Mandora. Ideal cannon-netting sites were found adjacent to an excellent campsite on the north side of Roebuck Bay with at least 45,000 waders in the vicinity.

Four attempts were made to catch birds with Fisheries and Wildlife cannon-nets at high tide roosts and three were successful, realising a total of 1189 birds banded from twelve species. Major problems were excessive numbers of waders landing in the net catching areas (e.g. 5000+) and uncertainty about high tide levels. 764 birds were processed fully including a sample swabbed for viral analysis. However, none were dyed as originally intended due partly to difficulties in processing the large catches and also to the relatively low numbers of Red-necked Stints and Curlew Sandpipers caught.

Surprisingly, the most numerous wader seen and caught was the Great Knot while godwits, tattlers, Large Sand Plovers and Terek Sandpipers were also relatively abundant. Final tallies for the North-west are still being prepared but the total number of waders seen was probably in excess of 100,000. Most of the birds weighed were at or less than "normal" body weight, suggesting they had just arrived from the Northern Hemisphere.

One of the highlights of the expedition was a visit to Bush Point where 23,000 waders were found roosting. These included 600 Eastern Curlews, 260 Oriental Plovers and numbers of Sanderlings. Two W.A. four-wheel-drives negotiated about 50 kilometres of the Eighty-Mile Beach and found dense roosts of one or two thousand birds each along most of the route but particularly near Anna Plains homestead. Curlew Sandpipers and Red Knots were more abundant here and many more Oriental Plovers and Terek Sandpipers were observed.

On the return trip to Perth, W.A. observers found Long-toed Stints and Wood Sandpipers at four inland localities including Anna Plains and Karratha Sewage Ponds.

These brought the total number of wader species seen on the trip to 32.

Overall, the expedition was highly successful from the data gathering aspect and was complemented with perfect weather and great birding. Plans are already being made for a return expedition in March-April, 1982.

Roger Jaensch

### WHITE-BACKED SWALLOWS NEAR PERTH

Last season there were several nest tunnels with attendant White-backed Swallows in the sandy banks to the west of the standard gauge railway in Newburn Road, Maida Vale. Continual removal of sand from this area by members of the public has since resulted in the destruction of the burrows, from one of which an infertile egg was recovered. Thus, breeding was at least attempted last year and this appears to constitute a southerly record for the coastal plain. No doubt wherever sand pits are dug they will prove an attraction to this species. Does anybody have any records of White-backed Swallows breeding or otherwise south of Perth on the coastal plain?

### BROWN BITTERN! OR ARE THEY NIGHT HERONS?

It is surprising how many atlas records are rejected for the Brown Bittern, often because of insufficient description but also on behavioural grounds. Brown Bitterns seen roosting or flushed from trees are highly suspect. This is a common habit of the Rufous Night Heron and in case you don't already know, or have forgotten, juvenile night herons look remarkably similar to Brown (Aust.) Bitterns. The best way to distinguish these two is to look for the white spotting in the wings of the young night herons. This character is slightly emphasised in Slater's field guide, but probably not made clear enough in the new guide by Pizzey and Doyle.

Brown Bitterns are really very rarely recorded mainly because of the difficulty of access of the dense reed beds they inhabit. Even those intrepid folks who go squelching through the swamps more often than not pass right past the Brown Bitterns which remain rigid and erect in cryptic pose, trying to pretend they are not really there.

Whilst on the subject of night herons, in response to the notes published in the February newsletter, Tom Spence writes:-

There is an interesting relationship between Night Herons and the Great Egrets (and small cormorants). The changes at the Leschenault estuary are typical of other colonies I have observed. For example, at the former colony of Great Egrets in the shag swamp off the Collie River at Brunswick, a similar dynamic situation occurred. The Great Egrets started breeding there some time before 1967. On my first visit in 1967, there were 20-odd pairs breeding. Within three years this reached approximately 120 pairs, then they declined sharply and deserted it completely. The Night Herons began nesting there in 1967 with four pairs and rapidly built up to over 100 pairs. Night herons are dreadful predators as our experience in the zoo has shown, and have killed every Great Egret hatched in the zoo. Their presence in the zoo has inhibited our Great Egrets from even attempting to nest during the last five or six years. I feel that the decline of the Great Egrets in both these colonies is attributable to increased nest predation by the Night Herons. We have a very large colony in the zoo now and because of the abundance of food, they breed the whole year round.

### FOR SALE

Leitz 560 mm f5.6 Super Telephoto lens with Televit follow focus grip and shoulder stock. Ideal for wader photography etc. Contact Graeme Chapman. Telephone 298 8491.