

## THE PECTORAL SANDPIPER IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By JOHN ECKERT

Most observers with a special interest in waders have no doubt been aware of the possibility that the Pectoral Sandpiper (*Ereunetes melanotos*) would eventually be found to visit South Australia. The species is so similar to the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*E. acuminata*) that visits our swamps annually in thousands that an odd Pectoral might quite easily be overlooked.

Excellent references to the species by J. N. Hobbs (*Emu*, 58, 1958, pp. 56-58, 412-413) and later by F. T. H. Smith (*Australian Bird Watcher*, 2, 1963, pp. 9-17; 1964, pp. 104-108; *Bird Observer* No. 396, November, 1964, p. 8) developed the personal feeling that this bird may visit us, for both writers stressed the favoured habitat as freshwater swamps with short green grass, a situation not uncommon around Lake Alexandrina. However, despite much scanning of Sharptail flocks in the years from 1962 onwards, no trace of a Pectoral was seen, although admittedly, an occasional Sharptail caused some excitement for a few moments.

By 1966 the level of Lake Alexandrina was low and most of the swamps were dry. Waders were scarce and none of the typical Pectoral Sandpiper habitat existed. On February 12 at the Boggy Lake near Mulgundawa a flock of about fifty Sharp-tailed Sandpipers resting on an island of mud and waterweed were casually scanned through binoculars. The dark breast of one caught the eye and it was soon evident that here was a Pectoral Sandpiper at last.

This bird was probably a male for it was quite as large as the largest Sharptail. It squatted front on with the head hunched into the shoulders and this stance caused the breast to swell out rather reminiscent of a pigeon. This showed clearly the darker grey of the breast (compared with nearby Sharptails), with its heavy black striations and sharp demarcation from the white abdomen. Quickly the other recognition points were checked—basal portion of bill dull yellow; bill slightly longer than a Sharptail's and decurved at the tip; legs a shade brighter

yellow than those of the Sharptail and the crown of the head brown instead of rufous. Finally the bird flushed and as it flew it uttered a harsh 'Trerrp trerrp' call so distinct from that of the Sharptail.

R. Cleggett was contacted and we returned to the area. The bird could not be located at that spot but Cleggett found two birds further along the shore, one of which flew off at my approach. The remaining bird, a smaller and duller female, was collected and duly taken to the South Australian Museum where identification was confirmed by the Curator of Birds, Mr. H. T. Condon. After collecting the specimen two more Pectoral Sandpipers were seen during a walk along the shore.

On each of five subsequent visits to this area up to April 10, either one or two Pectoral Sandpipers were seen, but no definite sightings were made after this. By April many Sharptails were donning breeding plumage and it was thought that this might make detection of Pectorals harder. Surprisingly the reverse was the case for the Pectoral's abdomen remained pure white while markings on the sides of the Sharptail's abdomen seemed to have increased. However, the striations of the male Pectoral's gorget did seem to intensify and viewed from the side his lower breast appeared almost black.

No observation of habits differed markedly from those of previous writers. The species was always found in loose association with Sharptails and other small waders. As a rule they were no harder to approach than were the Sharptails. Except for the first day the birds were always seen feeding on wide, bare, muddy swamp edges, but this means little as virtually no other type of feeding ground was available. At the S.A. Museum, Mr. Condon discovered that the underwing pattern differed from that of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and has included this in his description of the specimen.

This seems to be the first definite record of the Pectoral Sandpiper from this State although there is a previous sighting from

Reid (Slater and McCrum, *W.A. Naturalist*, 4, 1955, p. 193), which has been rejected by Boehm and Condon (*South Aust. Ornith.*, 22, 1958, p. 61). As it has taken four years of searching before making the first personal contact with the Pectoral Sandpiper it is difficult at present to regard it as anything but an accidental visitor to South Australia. However, it has proved to be an annual visitor to the vicinity of Melbourne in recent years and the possibility of a more frequent occurrence here should not be entirely disregarded.

### DESCRIPTION OF SPECIMEN

The following details have been supplied by Mr. H. T. Condon, Curator of Birds, S.A. Museum: "Sex: ? ." Bill, dark greyish olive, base light greyish olive; interramal space broad ( $3/16$  inches wide) and unfeathered legs and feet, yellowish citrine, joints serpentine green. Colours according to Ridgway's Colour Standards. Wing span,  $15\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Bill,  $1\frac{1}{8}$  ins., wing  $4\frac{3}{4}$  ins., tarsus  $1\frac{1}{16}$  ins. tail  $2\frac{1}{4}$  ins., middle toe and claw  $1\frac{1}{8}$  ins.

"Underwing coverts—(outer marginal three rows) indistinct grey scallops to outer row, other two medium dark grey, becoming white towards the axillaries; next row (secondaries) wider and paler with medium grey edges; next row (secondaries) pale grey, followed by an almost white row and a long, white row. Primary coverts pale grey, with narrow ( $\frac{1}{8}$ "') white tips. Axillaries relatively elongate; white. The area of the underwing coverts appears much whiter in the centre of the wing than in *E. acuminata*."

### EDITOR'S NOTE

1. Mr. Eckert has since reported that he observed a Pectoral Sandpiper again at the Boggy Lake on October 30, 1966. As the original specimen had been lost another Pectoral Sandpiper, a male, was collected on November 26, 1966.

2. It is unfortunate that the Reid record was not corrected much earlier. Although some old maps show Reid in South Australia, Reid is now a station on the East-West Railway line in Western Australia. Mr. N. F. Brealey, Chief Traffic Manager, Common-

wealth Railways, Port Augusta has informed me (in litt. December 15, 1966):

'Records reveal that O'Malley, which is located 522 miles from Port Pirie Junction, was previously known as Reid although there is no record of this name having been officially approved by the State Nomenclature Committee.

'During September, 1937, approval was obtained for the siding located 688 miles from Port Pirie Junction to be named Reid. This siding is so named at the present time.'

Thus the sight record of a Pectoral Sandpiper at Reid refers to Western Australia, not South Australia as stated by Boehm and Condon.