

A FURTHER OCCURRENCE OF THE RED-NECKED PHALAROPE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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PREVIOUS RECORDS

In southern Australasia, there have been few records of the Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*. F. T. H. Smith (1969) wrote that six had been recorded in Victoria. J. Eckert (1969) wrote of another record from near Langhorne Creek, South Australia. Three records are known from New Zealand (Falla *et al*, 1966.)

THIS RECORD

A Red-necked Phalarope in winter plumage was seen by me in the B.H.P.

saltfields, about 6.5 km north of Whyalla (Eyre Peninsula, South Australia) at 07.00 on February 17, 1973. It proved easy to identify, because I was familiar with this species and with the Grey Phalarope *P. fulicarius* in Britain prior to 1967. It was again seen on February 23 and on March 1. Mr. R. W. Bradshaw of Whyalla, and my wife also observed it. On the last date, the numbers of waders were much reduced, there being no Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *Calidris acuminata*, whereas previously they were

present in moderate numbers. Waders continued to diminish in numbers, and searches by myself and others on March 3 and 4 failed to locate the phalarope.

HABITS

During all sightings the phalarope seemed to be loosely associated with Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* and I believe this is the reason why it could not be approached as closely as phalaropes normally allow. When first seen on February 17 it was swimming near the outer edge of a small group of Curlew Sandpipers wading in water up to their bellies. Later that day Mr. Bradshaw and I tried to approach near enough to photograph it, but it repeatedly flew away with the Curlew Sandpipers until at 11.30, when the tide had long been ebbing, it finally flew away with them towards the sea. The bird was only once, briefly, seen to stand on land. Otherwise (when not flying) it was always seen swimming, frequently spinning on its own axis.

DESCRIPTION

The phalarope was usually seen in very good light and at close range through 10X binoculars, when it was unmistakable. It appeared very "black and white" the white extending over the whole of the underparts and face, which had a conspicuous black mark from just before the eye, extending through it, and curving down to the ear-coverts. The forehead was white, and the crown and back of neck blackish, joining the dark slate mantle. Two noticeable broken white stripes extended along the back; with small white markings on the closed wing. The bill was blackish, straight, fine and needle-like. The legs appeared blackish, but were never seen well enough (because of the bird's swimming habits) to be reliably recorded. In flight it seemed more compact in build than a Curlew Sandpiper, and the broken white stripes on the back were still conspicuous at close range. Extending along the dark upperwings were noticeable white bars. The tail and the centre strip of the rump were very dark, and the latter had white sides. It was not heard to call.

Even in silhouette it could be easily picked out from the Curlew Sandpipers, which also frequently swam, by its more buoyant posture and lower-held wings, and particularly by its

proportionately longer neck and seemingly smaller head. When the bird was standing, its body appeared quite duck-shaped when compared with the bodies of the Curlew Sandpipers, and the legs were proportionately shorter.

FIELD-DIFFERENTIATION OF PHALAROPES

Phalaropes in winter plumage, apart from Wilson's Phalarope *P. tricolor* can easily be identified by the blackish mark extending from before the eye, through it and down to the ear coverts; their very white underparts; and usually also by their swimming habits. I have, however, watched a Red-necked Phalarope which, although under prolonged observation, was not seen to swim. It is really possible to confuse the Red-necked only with the Grey Phalarope; and the latter is readily identified by its pale, uniformly grey back, and thicker bill, which sometimes has a yellowish base. Wilson's Phalarope, while also white on the underparts, lacks the dark mark extending behind the eye; has an all-white rump; uniformly grey wings which lack the white bar of the other two species, and a longer needle-like bill. It is also less given to swimming than the others.

HABITAT AND RANGE OF RED-NECKED PHALAROPE

Apparently the winter range of the Red-necked Phalarope is not yet fully understood. They are believed to occur on the open seas, like the Grey Phalarope. Slater (1971) states that they are common north of New Guinea. This Whyalla bird occurred on a flooded salt-pan with extensive muddy edges, the water being for the most part very shallow. All Red-necked Phalaropes I have seen have been in similar, though not necessarily saline, situations. In fact in all records that I know of, when the species is away from its pelagic habitat it has a preference for shallow pools. On the other hand, even storm-driven Grey Phalaropes seem to prefer deep water, such as steep-banked reservoirs.

REFERENCES

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