

SOME REMARKS ON THE BIRDS OF KANGAROO ISLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Following an examination of the literature of Kangaroo Island's birds, it became apparent that much basic distributional information is still unrecorded. In this paper I endeavour to clarify the range and status of several species on Kangaroo Island using observations made while I was resident on the Island in 1979-1981. All cited records are my own unless otherwise indicated.

LITTLE EGRET *Egretta garzetta*

Previously unrecorded from Kangaroo Island.

G. Jackson photographed one in June 1976 approximately one kilometre upstream from the mouth of the Cygnet River in extensive samphire flats (G. Jackson, pers. comm.). In the course of several visits to this locality, I observed one Little Egret on 5 August 1979 and 31 October 1980 (identification by black bill and legs and small size). On the former occasion, several plumes seen on the bird's back were indicative of partial breeding plumage. A pair was seen on 24 January 1981 feeding in tidal shallows eight kilometres S of Kingscote, but again near the Cygnet River mouth.

ROYAL SPOONBILL *Platalea regia*

Parker *et al.* (1979) did not record this species for Kangaroo Island. However, a pamphlet published by the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (undated) and entitled "The Birds of Kangaroo Island" had cited one individual as having been seen 'in an airport paddock', presumably referring to cleared land surrounding the Kingscote aerodrome.

On 28 April 1980, one was seen feeding with many Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus* on Pelican Lagoon, approximately three kilometres S of American River. Another was seen twice in shallow water in pasture at Vivonne Bay on 27 June 1980, while what was presumably the same individual was seen again on 6 July 1980 on the edge of the Harriet River only a short distance from the locality of the June sighting.

More sightings of this species may be reported in the future since there is much suitable habitat for it on the Island, particularly during winter. It is possible that Royal Spoonbills could be overlooked should they be feeding with Sacred Ibis for both species have predominantly white plumage with a black bill and are similar in size.

YELLOW-BILLED SPOONBILL

Platalea flavipes

Condon (1968) and Hatch (1977) each recorded single birds.

The species has been recorded on three occasions on a small swamp in a paddock immediately NE of "Roper's Gums" on the Cygnet River, 15 km W of Kingscote: one adult on 21 December 1979; nine adults on 24 December 1979 and four adults and six immatures on 1 January 1980. On the latter occasion, one immature appeared to be begging for food from an adult. At a dam approximately four kilometres S of Penneshaw, records are of one on 5 and 28 April 1980 and two on 16 May 1980. Lastly, one was at a dam 200 metres NE of Kingscote aerodrome on 16 May 1980.

The Yellow-billed Spoonbill thus appears to be more common on the Island than earlier records suggested. It is probably a resident species and not a vagrant as suggested in Ford (1979). Given that the birds favour River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* swamps in which to breed, the sector of the Cygnet River in which some of the above sightings were made would constitute ideal breeding habitat. Future searches will concentrate on seeking nesting birds in this area.

FRECKLED DUCK *Stictonetta naevosa*

Ford (1979) considered this species to be a vagrant to Kangaroo Island. Exceptional numbers were recorded on the Island in 1980, presumably due to drought conditions in inland south-eastern Australia.

On 9 April 1980, a total of 334 was seen at Murray's Lagoon (54 seen in scattered flocks) and Birchmore Lagoon (280 in a single flock) while six were at the latter locality on 23 December 1980. At two dams 10 kilometres S of Penneshaw, 87 were seen on 28 April 1980 and 81 on 16 May 1980. T. Fraser (pers. comm.) recorded two on Grassdale Lagoon, Kelly Hill Caves Conservation Park on 18 January 1981 while I recorded 11 there on 14 March 1981. Between 18 July and the first week of December 1980, more than 1000 were seen on a freshwater lagoon approximately 10 acres in area and situated some 35 kilometres SSW of Kingscote. This lagoon is the only freshwater lagoon in an area of many brackish lagoons and swamps. The birds roosted by day

on four small islands in the lagoon and their density made accurate counting difficult. Independent estimates of the flock's size by several observers including the author, ranged from 'greater than 1500' to 2800. Hitherto, the largest recorded flock of this species appears to be that of 600 at Lake Merrimajeel in New South Wales (see Frith 1977).

HARDHEAD *Aythya australis*

Ford (1979) remarked that there appeared to be no records of this species on Kangaroo Island.

I have recorded less than 20 Hardheads on a total of 13 occasions at the following localities: Kelly Hill Caves CP, Murray's Lagoon, four kilometres SE of Penneshaw and 35 km SSW of Kingscote; a flock of 150 was seen at Murray's Lagoon on 20 January 1979.

Having been recorded in all seasons of the year, the Hardhead is almost certainly a resident species on Kangaroo Island. Further searches in suitable habitat may reveal the birds to be much more common on the Island than previously realised.

PEREGRINE FALCON *Falco peregrinus*

Hatch (1977) summarised the six records of this species from Kangaroo Island and suggested that the bird "is regular on the Island".

I have recorded the species twice: a pair, the female of which was observed to strike a Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, was seen at Murray's Lagoon on 25 May 1980 and an adult was seen at Cape du Couedic on 7 February 1981. Other sightings reported to me are as follows: one, ca 3 kilometres SE of King George Beach on 10 June 1979 (J. Reid) and a pair attending one nestling at a coastal cliff-face eyrie four kilometres E of Stokes Bay on 27 October 1980 (G. Jackson, L. Joseph).

It is surprising that this species is not seen more regularly as the Island's coastline offers ideal nesting sites and roosting platforms. A thorough search along the Island's high coastal cliffs may reveal more breeding pairs.

LEWIN'S RAIL *Rallus pectoralis*

Terrill and Rix (1950) recorded an individual that had been caught at Antechamber Bay on 24 December 1948.

I have observed this species along the lower Rocky River on 25 January and 15 December 1979 and on 1 March 1980. All three sightings were of single birds on the river edge adjoining dense stands of coastal Tea-tree *Leptospermum pubescens* and cutting grass *Gahnia* sp.

Owing to the scarcity of published details of the species, the following description and field notes made on 15 December 1979 are presented:

Slightly larger than a Spotless Crake; mottled black and brown back; crown and nape reddish, faintly streaked black; reddish frons and lores; light grey breast; cream throat; black flanks and wings boldly barred with white; undertail dark grey with rich chestnut on small area of undertail coverts; bill light grey but when seen in sunlight almost translucent reddish colour; eye dark; legs light grey. Bird pecked at ground in manner of a domestic fowl eating grain; extremely wary, constantly retreating into cover of cutting grass; no tail-flicking; up-and-down head bobbing action.

The bird seen on 1 March 1980 was also extremely wary and its bright reddish head and nape colouring and bold flank barring were most conspicuous. In comparison with a Spotless Crake, it was similar in body size but had proportionately longer legs and neck.

My observations were made when the water level of Rocky River was extremely low, making observation easy. The higher water levels of winter presumably result in the birds, if present, foraging out of view in dense vegetation.

SPOTLESS CRAKE *Porzana tabuensis*

Parker and Lashmar (1976) recorded this species for Kangaroo Island on the basis of a clutch of five eggs collected at Lashmar's Lagoon on 23 October 1946. Seymour (1978) subsequently noted one in Flinders Chase National Park, along the lower Rocky River.

I recorded the species along the lower Rocky River on 14 and 21 April 1979, two and one being seen respectively. That seen on 21 April differed in having bright red, not brown, legs and a conspicuous white throat patch. One was seen on 17 April 1981 in the unallotted Crown Land at Gosse, 25 km NE of Rocky River.

RED-KNEED DOTTEREL

Erythrogonys cinctus

My only record of this species on Kangaroo Island is that of three on 9 April 1980 on a muddy spit in the NW corner of Murray's Lagoon. Subsequent visits to this area have not revealed any Red-kneed Dotterels.

WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*

Previously unrecorded from Kangaroo Island.

Seven were noted at Busby Islet on 23 June 1980. Standing next to three Eastern Curlews *Numenius madagascariensis*, their smaller size and shorter bills were apparent. Also noted were their heavy brown throat and breast streaking and light superciliar stripes. In flight, the rump of only one individual was seen and was noted as whitish.

A Whimbrel was seen on 24 January 1981 in tidal shallows, *ca* eight kilometres S of Kingscote, and also in the company of an Eastern Curlew.

WILLIE WAGTAIL *Rhipidura leucophrys*

Hatch (1977) pointed out that this bird has been regularly sighted in small numbers on Kangaroo Island. He further commented that its Island status has "always been something of a mystery", presumably because of its comparative abundance on the adjacent mainland.

I have found the species to be widespread and moderately common on the Island, having sighted it on 62 occasions. Coastal Paperbark *Melaleuca halmaturorum* and pastures bordered with Kangaroo Island Narrow-leaved Mallee *Eucalyptus cneorifolia* constitute the species' favoured Island habitats but they are more or less restricted to the eastern half of the Island. Nevertheless, moderate numbers have been recorded from the western end. A pair that was first noted in the open eucalypt woodland at Rocky River on 27 September 1979, later nested there and reared two fledglings, this being the first record of the species breeding on Kangaroo Island.

AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE LARK

Grallina cyanoleuca

Hatch (1977) suggested that either this species may be colonising Kangaroo Island following the recently increased availability of pasture and watering points or that it is still "largely a vagrant, supplemented by migratory

flocks from the mainland or even by local nomadism".

I have recorded the species over the whole Island at all times of the year wherever suitable open areas occur near water. Nests have been recorded at Flinders Chase National Park, around Murray's Lagoon and along the Cygnet River. Family parties have been prominent in these and other areas after the breeding season which has commenced in late September and finished by December.

Thus, the species now appears to be a moderately common breeding resident. In view of the above, it would seem that agricultural development of the Island in the past thirty years has indeed created ideal habitat for the species (as suggested by Hatch (*op. cit.*)) and so permitted colonisation.

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Flinders Chase National Park, via Kingscote, S.A. 5223.