SOME SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RECORDS OF THE LITTLE STINT

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INTRODUCTION

The Little Stint *Calidris minuta* breeds on arctic tundra from *ca* 30°E east to about the delta of the Yana; Kolguev and Vaigach Islands, southern Novaya Zemlya and the New Siberian Archipelago. It winters from the Sudan and the region south of the Sahara to Cape Province, islands of the Indian Ocean (and occasionally Madagascar), Arabia, southern Iran and India to Sri Lanka and the Maldives (Vaurie 1965). It also occurs in west, central and south Burma (King *et al.* 1975), and Finch (1980, 1983) detailed two records from New Guinea.

In Australia the Little Stint was first recorded at Werribee Sewage Farm, near Geelong, Victoria, on 22 January 1977 (Anon. 1977; McKean and Hertog 1981). Since then, there have been records from all States except New South Wales and Queensland (Strudwick 1980; McKean and Hertog 1981; Fletcher *et al.* 1981; Curry *et al.* 1983), although, until now, the South Australian records have not been documented in detail.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RECORDS

1. On 10 March 1979, when with R. Jaensch and L. Joseph on the eastern shores of Gulf St Vincent near Port Gawler (34° 40'S, 138° 26'E), I identified a brightly coloured Little Stint that was resting with nine greyish non-breeding (basic) plumaged Red-necked Stints *C. ruficollis* on mud by a freshwater channel leading into the sea. Although I had previously seen the species in Europe, the Little Stint was readily recognizable because it appeared to have its entire back and wings bright orange-brown marked with black. Its head was pale except for a dark line through the eye, a slightly streaked forehead and bright orange-brown crown and ear-coverts. The underparts were white from chin to undertail except for pale chestnut-buff streakings to the sides of the breast. Compared with the Red-necked Stints, it had a thinner bill and longer legs. On the following day the Little Stint was again located at the same place feeding with Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *C. acuminata*, Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* and Red-necked Stints. It was collected (under a Scientific Collecting Permit possessed by me) and is now in the South Australian Museum.

SAM B32136. Female, oocytes unenlarged; nuptial plumage.
Soft parts: bill black, thin and tapering to a slightly expanded and decurved tip; mouth dark grey; legs black with toes lacking palmations.
Measurements (mm): culmen 19.2; wing 91.5; tarsus 21.7; middle toe and claw 19.3; tail 35.7.

2. On 25 November 1979 another Little Stint was seen by J. Reid, D. Close, J. Hatch, R. Jaensch and me, near the spot where the first bird occurred. This second bird was distinctive because it had darker, browner and more boldly marked upperparts than Red-necked Stints. It also seemed shorter bodied but with longer legs and a finer bill. During the following days it was noticed that the Little Stint was aggressively defending its preferred feeding area from Red-necked Stints, although not from larger calidrid species. In these encounters the birds frequently called: the Little Stint's call being a quieter, higher-pitched *tsee-tee* or *tit-tit-tit*, and quite distinct from the call of the Red-necked Stint. On 7 December 1979 the Little Stint was collected at the request of the South Australian Museum.

SAM B32522. Immature male; skull not fully pneumatized.
Soft parts: bill black, thin then laterally expanding at tip, not decurved; legs black, the toes lacking webs.
Measurements (mm): culmen 18.7; wing 95; tarsus 21.5.

3. On 16 February 1980 I observed a Little Stint by a pool in a drying freshwater channel at Buckland Park Lake, near Port Gawler. It was again seen on 18 February by R. Jaensch, myself and other observers (see Curry *et al.* 1983). This bird was in non-breeding plumage except for

conspicuous bright orange-brown fringed tertials, and possibly other wing feathers. The rest of the upperparts were rather plain grey, the supercilia and underparts white, but with the sides and front of the breast finely streaked darker. The legs and bill were black, the latter being thinner than that of nearby Red-necked Stints, although of the same length.

4. On 17 October 1983 L. and J. Pedler found a richly coloured Little Stint at Price Saltfields (34° 17′S, 138°E), on the north-western shore of Gulf St Vincent. They observed it for about an hour with N. McCrie, who saw it again the following day. This Little Stint was also seen on 23 October by R. Allen, I. Beale, G. Carpenter, R. Kernot and N. McCrie when the bird was observed, with very few interruptions, from 0730 to 1430. R. Allen obtained several excellent colour photographs of the Little Stint, which show the distinctive features of the species: black legs and a short, fine black bill; pale chestnut crown and ear-coverts, streaked darker; dark-centred back feathers with broad chestnut-buff fringes, the outer feathers of the mantle being tipped pale buff and forming conspicuous creamy coloured lines above the scapulars; pale superciliary and whitish underparts with the sides of the breast pale orange-chestnut with darker streaks (see Plate 1).

5. I saw another Little Stint at the ICI Saltfields (*ca* 23 km NNW of Adelaide) on 6 December 1986. In plumage colouration this bird resembled the second bird listed above, but it had an even darker back and its crown, ear-coverts and sides of the breast were a pale orange-buff, streaked darker. The supercilia were pale and the rest of the underparts were white, as was a conspicuous wing-bar and sides of rump and undertail coverts. The bill was thinner than that of nearby Red-necked Stints, and it and the legs were black. Posturally, it also differed from the Red-necked Stint because its wings and tail seemed shorter and were held higher off the ground.

This Little Stint was rediscovered at the adjacent Buckland Park Lake on 14 December by myself and A. F. Lees, who obtained some photographs of it. On later searches it proved very difficult to find amongst the thousands of small calidrids present on the lake shores. Nevertheless, both of us saw it again on 31 December (when the bird was noted to be moulting some primary feathers), and I subsequently saw it on 29 January 1987 and then back on the ICI Saltfields on 8 February. On the last date it was noted to have some new back and wing feathers: the tertials were dark brown with broad chestnut fringes, and at least some of the scapulars were similarly coloured. It was judged, but by no means with absolute certainty, that these sightings were all of one individual Little Stint.

6. Another Little Stint that was obviously different from the above bird was seen by me at Buckland Park Lake on 13 December 1986. This bird had its head and back feathers chestnut with

Plate 1. Juvenile-plumaged Little Stint, Price Saltfields, 23 October 1983. *Photo: R. Allen.*

darker centres, and possessed very conspicuous creamy-coloured lines along the lower border of the mantle that formed a large, pale 'V' when viewed from the rear. It had a pale, forked supercilium in front of and over the eye. The underparts were white except for chestnut streaks to the sides of the breast. In close view the scapulars and wing-coverts were noted to be brown with buff and/or chestnut fringes. In flight it was seen to have a very conspicuous white wing-bar and white sides to the rump and uppertail coverts. Its bill and legs were black.

DISCUSSION

Similar species

Of the seven small calidrids or stints, three species, the Temminck's Stint *C. temminckii*, Long-toed Stint *C. subminuta* and Least Sandpiper *C. minutilla*, are distinctive in having paler yellow, greenish or brown rather than black legs; although black legs have been recorded in the Temminck's Stint (Prater *et al.* 1977), it is the most distinctive of the seven species and is unique in having pure white outer tail feathers (Marchant *et al.* 1986). Two of the four black-legged species, Semi-palmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla* and Western Sandpiper *C. mauri*, have small webs between the bases of all front toes, a feature lacking in the Little and Red-necked Stints.

Apart from their plumage features, the two Little Stint specimens described above can also be distinguished from Red-necked Stints by the ratio of their wing and tarsus measurements: that of the first bird is 4.2 and the second is 4.4, while that of the Red-necked Stint is 5.0 or greater (Marchant *et al.* 1986).

Field identification and plumage phases

Lane (1987) noted that Australian records of the Little Stint are of birds in breeding plumage, with many "in reverse moult cycles, showing breeding plumage during the non-breeding months". These aspects, however, are not true of most of the South Australian records, and indeed some of the other Australian records might prove to be of juveniles whose bright coloration could be mistaken for that of a nuptially-plumaged adult. Marchant *et al.* (1986) said, "In juvenile plumage, Little is the brightest of the four dark-legged stints," and "Juvenile is often distinct in the field until Dec.". Adult Little Stints normally gain nuptial plumage during a moult of body feathers in February-March, like other calidrids (see Prater *et al.* 1977).

The first Little Stint record listed above is of a nuptially plumaged female on 10-11 March.

The second record is almost certainly of a first winter bird recorded November-December.

The third bird of 16 and 18 February was mainly in non-breeding plumage, but was moulting into nuptial plumage because it had new tertials. This bird was identified from the Semi-palmated Sandpiper and Red-necked Stint by its conspicuous broad orange-brown fringes to the tertials and its finer bill; from the Western Sandpiper by its finer and shorter bill; and from the Temminck's Stint by many plumage features. When in nuptial plumage, the tertials of the Semi-palmated Sandpiper are "darkish brown with paler fringes" and those of the Red-necked Stint are "grey-brown", edged whitish or pale rufous" (Marchant *et al.* 1986).

The fourth record of a Little Stint in October was, judging from the photographs, of a juvenile-plumaged bird.

The fifth listed record of a Little Stint seen from December to February was apparently of another first winter bird. This individual was moulting primary feathers on 31 December, which corresponds with the data of Prater *et al.* (1977) for first winter Little Stints. They note that "most have a complete primary moult December/February to March/April". First winter Red-necked Stints have slightly worn primaries in winter (*i.e.* northern winter) which are "moderately worn by spring; some start to replace outer primaries during April-June."

The sixth bird, of 13 December, was also a juvenile; although the date is fairly late for a Little Stint to still be in juvenile plumage, the forked, whitish supercilium and conspicuous creamy-coloured lines to the mantle possessed by that bird are features of juveniles (Marchant *et. al.* 1986).

Conclusion

Although there are rather few records of the Little Stint in Australia, it is possible that a small number occur amongst the thousands of Red-necked Stints that arrive each year. When in non-breeding plumage, the two species are very

difficult to differentiate and some Little Stints could easily pass unnoticed. It is significant that most of the above records are of birds that were either in nuptial or juvenile plumage, or at least possessed some feathers of those plumage phases, which made them more easily identifiable in the field. Nevertheless, except for birds in full nuptial or juvenile plumage, all Little Stints are difficult to distinguish from Red-necked Stints under normal field conditions. I have seen birds that I could not identify and, in practice, attempt to obtain as close a view as possible, particularly to assess the bill shape of any strange stint compared with that of the Red-necked Stint. The photographs of Strudwick (1980) show the comparative features of the bills of Little and Red-necked Stints particularly well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Lynn and Janet Pedler for allowing inclusion of their record in this article, and to Leo Joseph and R. F. Brown for assistance in its preparation.

ADDENDUM

Another Little Stint was found at ICI Saltfields by J. B. C. on 26 December 1987. During the next two days this bird was also seen by Dr R. Brown from Warrigal, Victoria, R. Kernot and F. A. G. Day. It appeared to have new plumage and was probably a first winter bird. It was again seen on 24 January 1988 at distances as close as 3 m by J. B. C. and photographed by D. W. Eades, and again seen by J. B. C. on 28 January. Full details of this record will be published later.

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Accepted 23 September 1987.