

## A GREY PHALAROPE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

MARILYN. J. HEWISH, CATHERINE S. HAWES AND DEAN R. HEWISH

### INTRODUCTION

This is an account of our recent discovery of a Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius* near Magrath Flat in South Australia. This constituted the first record for the state and the second for Australia. The bird was seen by several observers between 7 July and 11 July 1989, the date of the last known sighting (J. B. Cox, pers. comm.).

At 14:30 on 7 July 1989, we parked next to a flooded claypan, 1.3 km SE of Magrath Flat, (35°52'S, 139°25'E) by the Meningie-Kingston road, which runs beside the Coorong in south-eastern South Australia. The only birds present on the claypan were some Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae*, and a small waterbird seen only as a black dot in the centre of the lake. Looking with binoculars at this dot revealed the distinctive silhouette of a phalarope. As any phalarope sighting in Australia is interesting, we examined the bird through 7x50 and 7x20 binoculars and a 20x60 tripod-mounted telescope to determine its species and made notes and sketches as a permanent record.

### Habitat

The claypan was flooded to form a shallow lake 300–400 m long and 150 m wide, with low, fringing vegetation of saltmarsh and grass. The main body of water was saline and open without emergent vegetation, but there was a low, narrow, saltmarsh-covered spit protruding into the lake at the south-eastern end. The lake was less than 1 km from the nearest part of the Coorong Lagoon, and about 4 km from the open sea.

The weather was overcast and cold with a moderate to strong NW wind and occasional light rain. The lake surface was broken by the wind into small waves, which were never high enough to obscure the bird. The light was dull but adequate, and uniform with no glare or deep shadows. When the sun came out briefly, viewing conditions deteriorated because of glare from the water surface.

### OBSERVATIONS

Initially the bird was observed from a distance of about 100 m, but, as it drifted towards the eastern end of the lake, we moved onto the spit and approached to within 50 m. We did not attempt a closer approach, hoping that the bird would not be disturbed and that other observers could have a chance to confirm the record.

The bird remained in the central part of the lake, not approaching closer to the shore than 50 m. Except for about 10 minutes when it rested on the water with its head under its wing it was feeding with a rather slow and deliberate feeding action. The bird pecked at the water in front or a little to the side, sometimes with a slow swinging of the head from side to side. It dipped the bill into the water to its full length or beyond to about eye level, without changing the attitude of its body. It was twice seen spinning while feeding in the 50 minutes of observation, each time making one turn of 360°. Once it flew up from the water for no obvious reason, rising less than a metre and settling immediately, only affording a poor view of its upperparts. John Cox, (pers. comm.) who saw the bird on 8 July, approached the bird to within 10 m, and it gave a quiet chut-chut call when flushed.

### Description

The description below has been compiled from notes and sketches made on site, and from photographs taken by later observers.

The small-wader silhouette with head held erect, the narrow, straight bill, and the bird's buoyant swimming in the centre of the open lake immediately suggested a species of phalarope. Robustly-built for a phalarope, neck rather short and thick giving a hunched appearance. Overall dark-looking. Crown black from bill base, narrowing to form a black line down centre of nape, and broadening and fading to dark-grey over mantle. White patch on face, bisected by a lens-shaped black band passing from the bill



Figure 1. Grey Phalarope near Magrath Flat, South Australia, 10 July 1989 (photograph courtesy of Dion Hobcroft).

through eye and beyond towards the edge of the white area. Upper part of patch easily visible from 100 metres as a broad, white eyebrow stripe, even when most of head under wing, probably because of strong contrast with sharply-defined black crown and eye-stripe. Lower part narrower and demarcation from underparts poorly-defined; intermittently visible from 100 m, but not obvious, even in telescope, until bird at closest approach of 50 m. Black band wholly enclosing eye, and as no contrast was visible, eye assumed to be black. Upperparts (mantle, scapulars, tertials) blackish, with rich buff feather edges showing as pale curving streaks and scallops on blackish background. Primaries and secondaries black, showing on folded wing as black rear edge and wingtip. White wing bar visible on folded wing (white tips of greater coverts). All underparts except undertail uniform, dark rufous-brown, including throat; photographs show some dark-grey mottling on underparts, especially on sides of breast, not visible to us because of viewing distance and poor conditions. Undertail white with pale rufous tinge. Upper tail not seen, hidden by wings. Bill rather short and thick for a phalarope, with rounded tip. At 100 m, black tip of bill seen but colour of base obscure, at 50 m, base of bill appeared pale straw-yellow. In brief look at upperparts in flight, rump and tail dark with black centre, no white rump

or lateral tail coverts. White wing bar not observed in flight, probably because of poor conditions (sun glare) and brevity of observation, but seen and described by later observers (e.g. J. B. Cox, pers. comm.).

## DISCUSSION

The bird was identified on site as a Grey Phalarope in breeding plumage by reference to Slater *et al.* (1986). It was an adult male, distinguished by the small, poorly-defined facial patch and the dull rufous-brown underparts; females have large, pure-white facial patches and chestnut-red or brick-red underparts (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Hayman *et al.* 1986).

The Red-necked Phalarope *P. lobatus*, the most commonly recorded phalarope species in Australia (Saunders & de Rebeira 1987), differs from the Grey Phalarope in its smaller and lighter build, its fine, all-black bill, and its distinctive breeding plumage, particularly the white throat and lack of large areas of white on the face.

The Wilson's Phalarope *P. tricolor* differs in its taller, more slender build and its long, fine, all-black bill. In breeding plumage, its white rump, lack of a white bar on the upperwing, and mainly white underparts are diagnostic. It prefers to wade rather than swim.

One of us (MJH) is familiar with these two phalarope species in breeding plumage, from observations in Australia and Canada, and we have all seen Red-necked Phalaropes in non-breeding plumage.

#### *World distribution and Australasian records*

Grey Phalaropes breed in arctic Eurasia and North America, migrating to spend the non-breeding period at sea off tropical and subtropical Africa and South America (Cramp & Simmons 1983). There have been several records from New Zealand (Brown & Latham 1978; Falla *et al.* 1978; Maloney & Watola 1989), but only one published record from Australia (Smith 1976). This is thus the second record from Australia, although the first of a bird in breeding plumage, and the first from South Australia. In its non-breeding quarters, the species is the most marine of the phalaropes, although it occasionally enters inshore waters or coastal wetlands during rough weather (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The lake used by this bird was open and saline, close to the coast, and offered shelter from the wind, which was strong at the time of the bird's discovery. The bird remained only a few days after the original sighting, leaving after the wind abated, probably to return to sea. As with this sighting, most New Zealand records have occurred during the usual breeding period, June–July, and have been of birds in breeding plumage (Brown & Latham 1978; Maloney & Watola 1989). This suggests that some birds which fail to return to the breeding grounds wander widely. The first Australian record was unusual in that it occurred in February, the bird was in non-breeding plumage, and it was far inland (Smith 1976). The species is noted for its exceptional tameness. However, John Cox noted

that this bird was not as tame as others of the species he has encountered, and allowed approach only to 10 metres; the other bird found in Australia was observed from as close as two metres (Smith 1976).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Neville Forde for his rapid confirmation of the sighting, and John Cox and David Eades for helpful discussion and information. Dion Hobcroft kindly provided excellent colour photographs of the bird. We are grateful to the bird-watchers who shared their pleasure and excitement with us after seeing this bird.

#### REFERENCES

- Brown, B. and Latham, P. C. M. 1978. Grey Phalarope in the Bay of Plenty. *Notornis* 25: 198–202.
- Cramp, S. and Simmons, K. E. L. (eds). 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: the Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Falla, R. A., Sibson, R. B. and Turbott, E. G. 1978. *The New Guide to the Birds of New Zealand*. Collins: Auckland.
- Hayman, P., Marchant, J. and Prater, T. 1986. *Shorebirds: an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Croom Helm: Sydney.
- Maloney, R. and Watola, G. 1989. A second Grey Phalarope at Lake Wainono. *Notornis* 36: 88.
- Saunders, D. A. and de Rebeira, C. P. 1987. A review of sightings of Red-necked Phalaropes in Australia. *Aust. Bird Watcher* 12: 118–121.
- Slater, P., Slater, P. and Slater, R. 1986. *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Rigby: Sydney.
- Smith, F. T. H. 1976. An Australian record of the Grey Phalarope. *Aust. Bird Watcher* 6: 292–299.

*Marilyn J. Hewish, Dean R. Hewish; 74 Wellington Street, Bacchus Marsh, Vic. 3340.*  
*Catherine S. Hawes; 32 Woodfield Avenue, Fullarton, S.A. 5063.*

Received 8 January 1990; Accepted 1 May 1990.