

OBSERVATIONS OF A PAINTED SNIPE *ROSTRATULA BENGHALENSIS* AND GREAT EGRET *ARDEA ALBA* IN THE NORTH FLINDERS RANGES. During 1997 two wetland species were observed for the first time at Brindana Gorge, in the North Flinders Ranges of South Australia. Full details of the location appeared in Hornsby (1997).

On 27 September 1997, a solitary Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* was observed on the edges of a swampy section of the Hamilton Creek, just upstream from where it passes through Brindana Gorge. A further observation was made on 29 September 1997, about 600 m downstream, presumably of the same bird.

It had a broad golden streak running lengthwise over the head, and two similar wavy streaks were visible along the upper edges of the wings as the bird dipped forward. While semi-crouching, the broad wings were held low to give a prominent white 'wish-bone' across the chest. Only when the bird stood up were the white underparts readily seen from the side, together with its green legs. The white eye-line was not over-conspicuous, and the bill was long and dark, while the wings were a dark olive-bronze, flecked with gold. According to Marchant and Higgins (1993), the darkness of the bill suggests the bird was an immature.

The species has not previously been reported in the area, although Reid *et al.* (1996) noted it as a vagrant in the Flinders Ranges, and both Badman (1991) and Reid (1990) classed it similarly for the adjacent Lake Eyre Basin and north-eastern parts of South Australia.

Gray (1933) recorded two females at Orroroo, in the mid-north of South Australia, and Brandon (1936) 'saw about fifteen or twenty of them and obtained three sets of eggs' in the Wilmington District, 90 km west of Orroroo, in 1931. However these two records are from the Southern Flinders Ranges, some 350 km south of the present observation.

Pizzey and Doyle (1980) reported the species to be 'rare, nomadic, and very irregular'; while Garnett (1992) referred to the Painted Snipe found in Australia as a subspecies *R. benghalensis australis*, and gave its national survival status as 'insufficiently known'. Garnett (1993) reported that the Australian subspecies has been recorded from wetlands 'over most of Australia except Cape York Peninsula' but that over most of its range its occurrence was irregular. Marchant

and Higgins (1993) reported that the preferred habitat was terrestrial shallow water (occasionally brackish) wetlands...often with scattered clumps of...tea-tree *Melaleuca* sp. In the present instance, the habitat was brackish water with sporadic clumps of sedge and reeds in the relatively open bed of the Hamilton Creek, but with both sides of the creek lined with thickets of inland paper-bark *Melaleuca glomerata*.

Pizzey and Knight (1997) regarded it as 'dispersive and irruptive in response to rainfall'. In February 1997, 145 mm of rainfall was recorded at the nearby Moolawatana Homestead (compared with an annual average of 163.3 mm), but there was virtually nothing subsequently.

It was not phased by the observer on either occasion, allowing an approach to within 20 m. Lowe (1963) also noted that 'it is not a shy bird in the sense that it flies quickly out of the range of man'. On each occasion, the bird was observed out in the open in broad daylight, at about 1000 hours; although Garnett (1992) referred to the species as being rarely seen 'because it is cryptic and crepuscular'. The first time it was seen it was watched for over 20 minutes then photographed as it flew off. During this period, it frequently dipped its head. Lowe (1963) reported he considered 'head-bobbing' was a wrong term if it was meant as a head movement. The action he observed was 'a frequent dipping of the rear and tail'. He only once saw head-bobbing: 'Five males were located crouched in a close bunch. At my approach, four rose and ran for cover... The fifth was 30 yards away, approaching step by step. With upright stance and frequent dippings, the bird suggested a defiant guard or leader'. In the present instance, the bird was standing about 20 m away, about three-quarters on but with the head further away. It definitely dipped its head, not the rear and tail. The action had the appearance of being a stereotyped movement, and the bird certainly was not feeding at the time.

The second species observed was the Great Egret *Ardea alba*. A single individual initially was seen on 26 May 1997, and identified by Wally Klau, mainly on the basis of size, and the yellow facial skin extending back under the eye. It was in non-breeding plumage. It was observed daily until I left the area on 2 June 1997. I revisited the Gorge from 25 September 1997 to 1 October 1997, and again a Great Egret was seen every day. While it cannot be certain it was

the same bird, the behaviour was very similar on both occasions, and it seems highly likely that it was.

Paton (1980) regarded the species as an 'occasional' visitor to the Flinders Ranges region. Badman (1979) recorded it on a number of occasions in the South and West Lake Eyre Drainage region. Most of his observations were of single individuals, but occasionally there were larger numbers.

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