

THE BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER: A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RECORD

by JOHN ECKERT

For some years, the Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) has been considered a species likely to eventually be found in South Australia. Post-war observations have shown that it probably visits the Pt. Phillip Bay area of Victoria regularly in small numbers. There it has revealed a preference for feeding on tidal mud-flats, indicating that the Coorong might be a likely area to attract the species in this State; but hours of searching in that locality have, so far, proved fruitless.

On March 26, 1970, Alan Lendon guided a party comprising a visiting Victorian photographer M. Streeter and Strathalbyn Naturalist Club members Ross and Ron Robinson, R. Eckert and myself, on a tour of the I.C.I. saltfields. When the northern boundary of the saltfields was reached, the spot in Buckland Park where the Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) had first been recorded in South Australia was pointed out.

Here, on some shallow water, a number of small waders were feeding, some within a chain of the car. The bill of one attracted attention for it was long, rather heavy, with a distinct downcurve near the tip. Fortun-

ately, it fed close to a Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*), then past a Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*), showing that in size it was slightly larger than *ruficollis* but noticeably smaller than *ferruginea*. The bird was observed for some time and compared with the description of *L. falcinellus* in *Field Guide to the Waders*, a description it fitted well except that it showed no sign of the light markings on the wing coverts of the bird illustrated therein. On being put to flight, it revealed the rump pattern of a dark centre with white sides, thus convincing all observers that it was a Broad-billed Sandpiper.

The plumage pattern of the bird was almost identical to the winter plumage of *ruficollis*, except for the greyish, lightly-streaked breast and the distinctive head, which had a dark crown with two whitish streaks on either side. The light mottling of the upper surface differed from the plainer grey of *ferruginea* in winter plumage. Also the bill of *ferruginea* seems to curve evenly throughout its length, whereas in *falcinellus* the curve is more pronounced near the tip (see illustration inside of back cover).

The bird fed mainly in shallow water, but also in soft mud and amongst a patch of green weed growing in the mud. It favoured certain small feeding areas, and rapidly returned to these if forced to leave them. The feeding action commented on by other writers was a noticeable feature of this bird, the bill being driven vertically into the mud, often to its full depth, with a vigorous "jack-hammer" action. M. Streeter noted that, on occasions, the mandibles were held slightly apart as the bill was withdrawn, indicating that some small, hard object was obtained. The bird was aggressive to Stints which came too near as it fed.

The property owner, Mr. Malcolm Brooks, obligingly gave permission and assistance for the record to be confirmed by the taking of a specimen. On return to the spot the bird was quickly located a little further along the margin by Ron Robinson, who claimed that its feeding action drew his attention. It was collected and proved to be an immature female, the body length of $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches suggesting that it belonged to the eastern breeding race *sibirica*, which is larger and also brighter in its breeding plumage than the nominate race. However the wing length was barely 104 mm. Vaurie (1962) gives wing lengths as *falcinellus*, male: 101-109 (103.9); female: 104-111 (107); *sibirica*, male: 103-112.5 (109.6); female: 108-114 (111) from which it is evident that the wing length of the specimen only just reaches the lower limit of *falcinellus* and does not accord with that of *sibirica*. Therefore until it can be checked against comparative material, its subspecific status must remain in doubt.

Earlier in the day another sighting of interest had been two Ruffs (*Philomachus pugnax*) seen feeding with a small group of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Calidris acuminata*) at the edge of an I.C.I. pond. The orange-red legs of one bird first drew attention to the group. Ross Robinson and myself were able to crawl to within 15 yards and considered both were males because of their size, which was almost twice that of the associated Sharp-tails. The second Ruff had dark legs which gave a brownish glint on the odd occasions they were seen in the sunlight. Plumage was very similar to that of *acuminata*, but chestnut crown and eye-brow stripe were lacking, and the brownish back feathers possessed black centres and paler edges, giving an attractive mottled

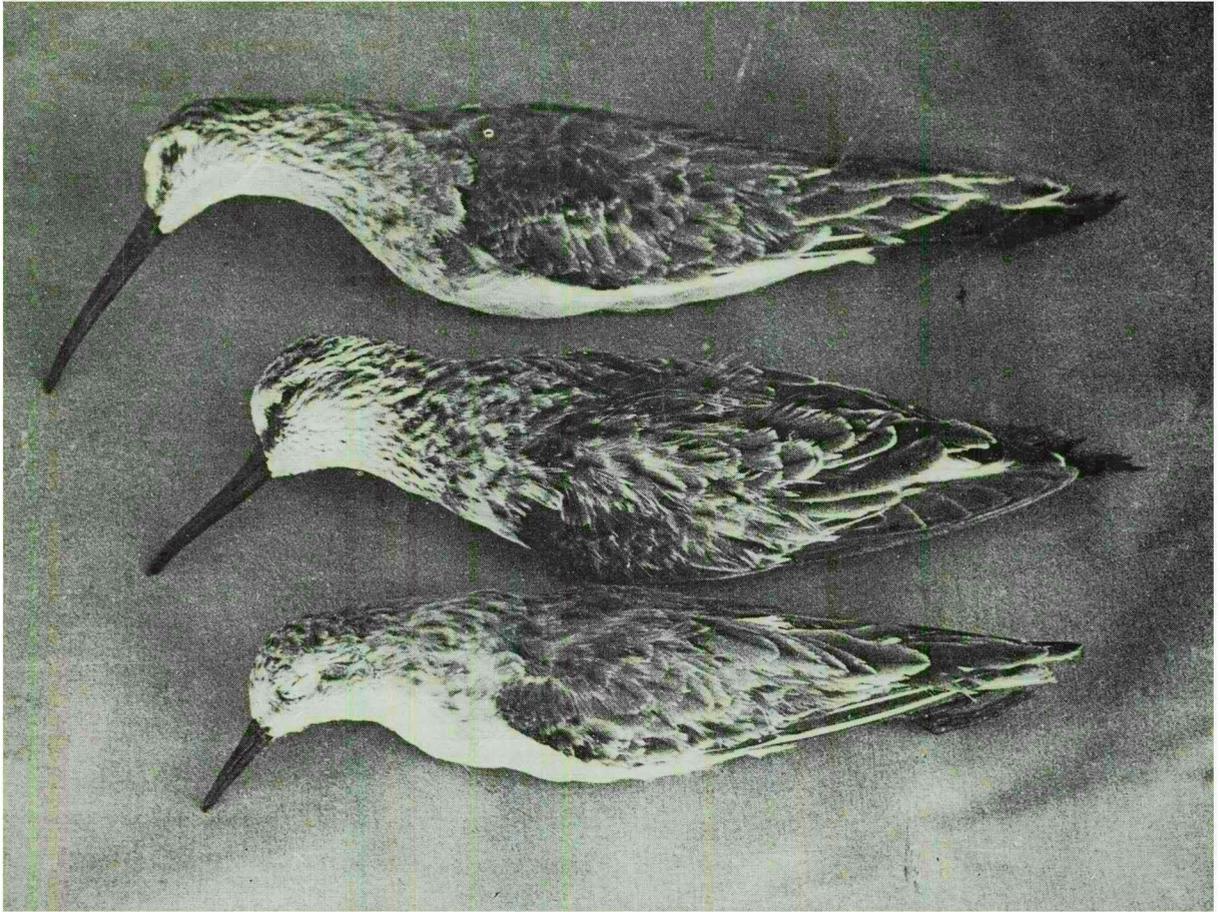
effect. The red-legged bird was lighter about the face and had a small dark spot behind the eye while the other was darker on the breast with some scaly pattern evident there. Bills were dark. Both fed sedately among the Sharp-tails and when alarmed adopted an upright stance which made them appear quite tall. Except for leg colour, the red-legged bird was almost identical to the eclipse male depicted in "Birds of Japan in Natural Colours."

DESCRIPTION OF SPECIMEN

Sex female immature, by skull and oviduct; Iris, dark brown; Legs and feet, dull greyish olive, joints blackish; Bill, dull black, base lower mandible brownish; Inside mouth, black, whitish near gullet; Wingspan $13\frac{3}{4}$ " (349mm); Length $7\frac{1}{4}$ " (183mm); Very fat; hardly any moult; Stomach contents, several molluscs *Salinator* sp. (either *S. solida* or *S. fragilis*, but shells too immature for specific distinction), broken remains of small worm-like creatures.

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Photograph: M. Streeter.

Above (from top): Curlew Sandpiper, Broad-Billed Sandpiper, Red-Necked Stint.