

# RECORDS OF INTEREST FROM THE ALICE SPRINGS REGION

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Since arriving in Alice Springs at the beginning of November 1978, I have been actively observing the birds of the region, and have found several species which, according to my knowledge of the available literature, have either not been previously recorded from Central Australia, or have been seen and collected on only rare occasions.

The most rewarding locality in the vicinity of Alice Springs has undoubtedly been the town's sewage ponds, situated on the southern periphery of Alice Springs. I have visited this series of permanent freshwater pools and their adjacent swamps and reed-beds on numerous occasions, and have been much impressed by the extraordinary variety and abundance of birds which frequent them. Early in December 1978, the water-level of the ponds dropped dramatically, because of the prevailing hot and dry conditions; and the composition and abundance of species varied accordingly. Heavy rains during January further altered the situation, and many species were either absent, or in much smaller numbers, than in December.

An annotated list of those species observed in the Alice Springs region that are considered to be of particular interest is presented below. The period in which these observations refer is from 5 November 1978 to 31 May 1979.

## GREAT CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*

According to Storr (1977:10), this species has not definitely been recorded in the Northern Territory. I saw a single bird at Ellery Gorge (85 km west of Alice Springs) on 10 March 1979 and its distinctive yellow face and large size were clearly noted. Small numbers of Little Black Cormorants *P. sulcirostris* are present throughout the region in small numbers.

## CATTLE EGRET *Ardeola ibis*

Three birds were seen on the sewage ponds on 7 and again on 10 November 1978. Two birds were in partial breeding plumage with orange-buff plumes around the neck and throat. I am very familiar with this species from observations in Queensland, and consider its occurrence in Central Australia to be most unusual. It seldom ventures very far inland anywhere in Australia, and in the Northern Territory has previously been recorded only from the wet north-west coastal plains of Arnhem Land (Storr 1977:13). The only other egrets that I have seen in the

region have been occasional individual Great Egrets *Egretta alba*.

## RUFOUS (NANKEEN) NIGHT-HERON *Nycticorax caledonicus*

Storr (1977:14) notes that there have been "no recent records from south of Tennant Creek" in the Northern Territory. I observed a single adult on the Alice Springs Golf Course on 13 November 1978, and have heard of several other evidently authentic sightings from the sewage ponds, the upper Finke River (Boggy Waterhole) and other localities in Central Australia.

## FRECKLED DUCK *Stictonetta naevosa*

I saw a compact flock of 6 birds, both on the water and in flight, on the sewage ponds on 7 November 1978. The species has been recorded in the Northern Territory on a few occasions previously, and has been seen on the sewage ponds before. Large numbers of Freckled Ducks were present at Brunette Downs in October 1966, and the species is evidently a regular winter visitor to that area (Parker 1969:2).

## CHESTNUT TEAL *Anas castanea*

A solitary female of this species was observed on the sewage ponds on several occasions between 10 November and 15 December 1978. It was far less shy than the large numbers of Grey Teal *A. gibberifrons* which habitually frequent the ponds, and permitted approach to within 10 m of the observer. The dark throat, overall dark brown plumage, and white patch on the flank were clearly noted.

This species has not, to my knowledge, been previously recorded in the Alice Springs region. According to Storr (1977:18), the only other record from the Northern Territory is that of two adult males collected near Darwin in 1958 (Frith, 1967:206). However, small numbers of Chestnut Teal were recorded on Tobermorey Station near the Queensland border in November, 1968 (Parker, 1971:99).

## GARGANEY *Anas querquedula*

A single Garganey, a male in eclipse plumage, was seen on the sewage ponds on 25 December 1978. Excellent views of the bird were obtained both on the water and in flight. Its features on the water included a conspicuously-spotted breast, dark crown, a dark line through the eye, and a pale-greenish wing speculum.

Characteristics noted in flight included its clean white belly and broad white bands across the wings. These features contrasted sharply with those of the Grey Teal and Black Duck *A. superciliosa*, numbers of which were observed in flight with the Garganey. The bird also appeared, both in flight and on the water, surprisingly smaller than the Grey Teal. Frith (1967:185, 226) gives the measurements for male Garganey and Grey Teal as 404-414 mm and 407-477 mm respectively:

The Garganey is a rare visitor to Australia, presumably from northern Asia, and is known from only a handful of sightings and specimens in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria. It has not been recorded previously from far inland Australia, and in the Territory is known as a "rare summer visitor (October to January) to Darwin area" (Storr 1977:19).

#### BAILLON'S (MARSH) CRAKE

##### *Porzana pusilla*

Good views were obtained of a single bird flushed from dense growth bordering one of the sewage ponds on 17 December 1978. After being flushed a second time, it landed on the open water and swam for several metres. Baillon's Crake has not been recorded before in Central Australia, and in the Northern Territory is known only from two records in the far north-west corner (Storr 1977:28).

#### AUSTRALIAN (SPOTTED) CRAKE

##### *Porzana fluminea*

I have seen this species singly and in small parties on several occasions on the sewage ponds and adjacent swamps. It is evidently not uncommon in the Alice Springs region as since 1967 it has been recorded regularly from a number of localities by other observers (D. Chinners, *pers. comm.*, Parker 1969).

#### PAINTED SNIPE *Rostratula benghalensis*

A pair of Painted Snipe was present on the sewage ponds from 17 December 1978 to 5 January 1979. The birds confined themselves to a portion of one pond which has a number of dead *Acacia* spp. trees, both standing and fallen, on its periphery. Painted Snipe have been recorded from the Northern Territory on rare occasions previously but have not been seen in Central Australia before. This was one of several species which suddenly appeared on the ponds after the above-mentioned drop in water-level.

#### BANDED STILT

##### *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*

No less than 12 Banded Stilts were observed on the sewage ponds on 10 February 1979. All were juveniles and lacked the distinctive under-

part colouration of their parents. The birds were nevertheless distinguished immediately from adult and juvenile Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, with which they associated. The conspicuous white trailing edge to the wing, dull orange-pink legs, clean white head, neck and back, brownish wings and chunky appearance were amongst the features noted. The birds appeared to be feeding much more actively than the 150+ Black-winged Stilts and 15 Red-necked Avocets (*Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*), which formed a loose flock with them. The same number of Banded Stilts was seen on the ponds in similar conditions on 19 February 1979. On 8 March 1979, four juvenile birds were swimming on one of the sewage ponds in a separate flock. Storr (1977) does not list the Banded Stilt, and this seems to be the first published record of the species for the Northern Territory.

#### RED-CAPPED PLOVER

##### *Charadrius ruficapillus*

Storr (1977:32) notes that this species has been very rarely recorded away from coastal areas in the Northern Territory. Between four and ten birds, in both adult and juvenile plumage, were seen on all my visits to the sewage ponds during the latter half of December 1978, and during January 1979.

#### RED-NECKED STINT *Calidris ruficollis*

One or two birds have been observed on the sewage ponds on most of my visits there. Storr (1977:38) gives its distribution in the Northern Territory as being essentially coastal, with no records for Central Australia. It was, however, recorded on the sewage ponds "on isolated occasions" between 19 February 1967 and 25 August 1968 (Braithwaite & Stewart, 1975:88).

#### PECTORAL SANDPIPER *Calidris melanotos*

Very good views were obtained of a single bird on the sewage ponds on 17 December 1978. Another single Pectoral Sandpiper, possibly the same individual, was seen on 10 January 1979. Characteristics noted, when compared to nearby Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, included its distinctive breast markings (abruptly meeting its white belly), pale base to the relatively longer bill, more upright stance, distinctive reedy call and more subdued markings on the upperparts.

The Pectoral Sandpiper has not been reported from Central Australia before. In the Northern Territory it is regarded as a rare summer visitor to the Darwin area (Storr 1977:39).

(Between 20 and 80 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers have been seen on all my visits to the sewage

ponds, and from one to four Curlew Sandpipers (*C. ferruginea*) have been seen on most visits).

#### WHITE-WINGED (BLACK) TERN

##### *Chlidonias leucopterus*

On 25 December 1978, two birds of this species in non-breeding plumage were seen on the sewage ponds feeding with a small group of Whiskered Terns (*C. hybridus*). When compared with the latter species, features noted included the relatively short, stubby bill, shorter tail, slower and more leisurely wing-beats, paler rump, white collar and more 'chunky' appearance.

This tern is largely confined to coastal areas throughout its Australian range, and has not previously been recorded from Central Australia, although four birds were seen by C. Corben, G. Czechura and myself in far south-western Queensland in December, 1971 (Roberts 1976:74).

(Between 10 and 150 Whiskered Terns, many in full breeding plumage, have been seen on all my visits to the sewage ponds).

#### PEACEFUL DOVE *Geopelia placida*

According to Storr (1977:47), the range of this species is confined to the "northern half of the Territory, south to Phillip Creek and Alexandria". On 22 November 1978, I observed a pair of Peaceful Doves feeding amongst a flock of Diamond Doves (*G. cuneata*) in *Hakea* spp. woodland near Simpson's Gap, west of Alice Springs.

#### SACRED KINGFISHER *Halycon sancta*

Storr (1977:62) regards this species as "casual" in the Alice Springs area. Parker (1971:100) has listed the few existent records of Sacred Kingfishers in Central Australia, and suggests that it is "probably a regular summer visitor, but has been overlooked because of its similarity to the Red-backed Kingfisher *H. pyrrhopygia*". My observations confirm Parker's view, for the species has been quite common about Alice Springs since my arrival here. In the town area, it is much more numerous than *H. pyrrhopygia*, and its distinctive calls can be frequently heard.

#### TREE MARTIN *Cecropis nigricans*

Storr (1977:65) confines the range of the Tree Martin in the Northern Territory to the northern third, describing it as a "non-breeding visitor, mainly arriving in late March-April and leaving in September-November". I found it to be the most numerous member of the swallow family (Hirundinidae) in the Alice Springs region. It occurs commonly along the Todd

River and most watercourses lined with tall eucalypts. Shane Parker (*in litt.*) has five records of Tree Martins in the area from late April to the end of July. On 7 March 1979, I saw a pair feeding young in the hollow spout of a eucalypt along the Todd River, Alice Springs, and it seems probable that the species breeds regularly in the region.

#### CLAMOROUS REED-WARBLER

##### *Acrocephalus stentoreus*

This species, according to Storr (1977:83), has not been recorded in the southern sector of the Northern Territory since 1923 and was "presumably extinct". - I have observed and heard it on many occasions amongst the swamps and reed-beds in the vicinity of the sewage ponds, where it occurs with the equally numerous Little Grassbird, *Megalurus gramineus*. There exists in this area some dense stands of *Typha* spp. and other suitable reed plants.

It is of interest to note that the Clamorous Reed-Warbler was evidently not present around the sewage ponds from 1967 to 1970 (S. Parker, *in litt.*). It was, however, recorded there in December, 1976 (Klapste 1978:151).

#### GREY FANTAIL

##### *Rhipidura fuliginosa albicauda*

This distinctive inland subspecies of the Grey Fantail was something of a mystery in Central Australia, being "only certainly known in the Territory from North's types (two specimens from Stokes Pass)" (Storr, 1977:72).

I have found it to be common on several visits to an extensive area of mulga extending east from near Hamilton Downs (23° 35', 133° 16') to within 15 km of the Stuart Highway immediately north of Alice Springs. Pairs and individuals could be attracted by imitating alarm calls in almost any suitable-looking locality in this area during several visits in December 1978. When I visited the area again on 11 February 1979, however, only a single bird could be located. This is peculiar in view of the heavy rains which had fallen in the interim. During December, conditions were dry and scarcely any trees and shrubs were flowering. The mulga was conspicuously more lush on the latter visit, with a profusion of new plant growth and flowering shrubs. This form of the Grey Fantail is immediately recognised by its distinctive tail feathers, which are wholly white except for the upper surface of the central feathers. I consider that, in appearance, it is much duller than the widespread eastern subspecies *R. f. alisteri*, and that its call-notes are much more diminutive.

Although the area referred to consists of mulga woodland, the Grey Fantails were always located in stands of tall, dense mulga with a thick substratum of *Acacia* spp., *Cassia* spp., *Eremophila* spp. and other plants. The mulga is growing on red sandy soil at the base of the northern foothills of the MacDonnell Range.

#### GREY HONEYEATER *Conopophila whitei*

In the above-mentioned area, I have also observed pairs of Grey Honeyeaters on three occasions; one of which was in dense mulga and the other two in tall mulga woodland. This is the same general area in which Grey Honeyeaters were recorded in August 1967 (Parker, 1969:10).

Features noted in these birds included the short and slightly decurved black bill, with an impression of paler colouration along the cutting edges; brownish-grey upperparts with olive tinges to the wing feathers; greyish breast; clean white belly and grey tail faintly tipped white. The Grey Honeyeaters were not shy but were quiet and unobtrusive. They were not particularly active, and would sometimes pause for short periods with bills open and wings outstretched. They flew from tree to tree, thoroughly gleaning the mulga leaves for insects.

The chief call I heard from the birds was a relatively plaintive "troo-who", 'troo-who', in quick succession and with the first

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syllable louder than the second. I was surprised to note that the birds were in fact quite honey-eater-like in appearance, and I consider that neither their appearance nor their call is 'silvery-like', as the popular literature suggests. Although there are few records of this species from Central Australia, I believe that future observations will render it more common and widespread than is generally believed.

Another species of interest in this mulga is the Slate-backed Thornbill *Acanthiza robustirostris*, which is common in both dense mulga and mulga woodland. It is not infrequently seen feeding in the company of Yellow-rumped Thornbills *A. chrysorrhoa*, Chestnut-rumped Thornbills *A. uropygialis* and Inland (Broad-tailed) Thornbills *A. apicalis*.

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