

OBSERVATIONS OF WATER-BIRDS AT THE ALICE SPRINGS SEWAGE PONDS

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Received 14 January 1981; accepted 18 February 1981

I lived in Alice Springs, Central Australia, from 1 November 1978 to 5 June 1979, during which time I regularly visited the sewage ponds situated on the southern periphery of the town. Several sightings of particular interest have been previously detailed (Roberts 1980). This paper presents a complete list of waterbirds that I recorded from the ponds.

The ponds constitute a permanent wetland habitat such as is rare in Central Australia. The area under discussion consists primarily of a series of open ponds separated from each other by earthen levy-banks. Overflow from ponds at regular intervals has provided a semi-permanent swamp adjacent to the southernmost levy-bank. This swampy area is well-vegetated with *Lignum Muehlenbeckia cunninghamii*, *Cumbungi Typha angustifolia* and other aquatic plants.

The water-level of the ponds fluctuates widely in accordance with prevailing weather conditions and small areas of mud are frequently exposed. I visited the ponds at least once, and sometimes two or three times, weekly during my stay in Alice Springs. An annotated list of waterbirds recorded is now presented.

ANNOTATED LIST

HOARY-HEADED GREBE

Poliiocephalus poliocephalus

Generally the most abundant waterbird, with up to 550 on all visits and numbers fairly stable. The species regularly outnumbered the following in a ratio of about 4:1.

AUSTRALASIAN GREBE

Tachybaptus novaehollandiae

Common. Between 100 and 150 on all visits.

AUSTRALIAN PELICAN

Pelecanus conspicillatus

Two on 15 March 1979.

DARTER *Anhinga melanogaster*

One immature on 19 February and an adult on 23 March 1979.

LITTLE BLACK CORMORANT

Phalacrocorax sulcirostris

Up to three regularly noted. No other cormorants recorded.

PACIFIC HERON *Ardea pacifica*

Up to four regularly during November and December 1978.

WHITE-FACED HERON

Ardea novaehollandiae

Up to five during all visits and flocks of up to 40 during December 1978 and January 1979.

CATTLE EGRET *Ardeola ibis*

Three, two in partial breeding plumage, on 7 and 10 November 1978 (Roberts 1980). Two in non-breeding plumage present from 9 to 20 April 1979 and one on 8 May 1979.

GREAT EGRET *Egretta alba*

One on 25 and 31 December 1978.

INTERMEDIATE EGRET

Egretta intermedia

One on 12 May 1979. Distinguished from *E. alba* by its much smaller size and shorter neck and legs, and from *Ardeola ibis* by its larger size, longer neck and bill and much more slender shape. I am familiar with all Australian egrets through observations in Queensland. This species was reported from the ponds during December 1976 (Klapste 1978) although, unfortunately, the author gave no reason why these birds were not *Ardeola ibis*. To my mind, solitary non-breeding *Ardeola ibis* are closer in appearance to this species than are *E. alba*.

GLOSSY IBIS *Plegadis falcinellus*

Flocks of up to 60 during December 1978 and January 1979. Flocks of up to 15 regular at other times.

STRAW-NECKED IBIS

Threskiornis spinicollis

About 150 on 18 November 1978, and small flocks of up to ten regularly from November 1978 to mid-January 1979.

SACRED IBIS *Threskiornis aethiopia*

One on 31 December 1978 and again on 10 January 1979.

ROYAL SPOONBILL *Platalea regia*

Five with breeding plumage in a flock with 20 Yellow-billed Spoonbills on 14 January 1979.

YELLOW-BILLED SPOONBILL

Platalea flavipes

Up to 50 on nearly all visits. Usual number between two and six.

PLUMED WHISTLING-DUCK

Dendrocygna eytoni

Up to 24 regularly noted up to and including 14 January 1979. Two on 30 March 1979.

BLACK SWAN *Cygnus atratus*

At least one present during most visits, and up to 150 regularly recorded during December 1978 and January 1979.

FRECKLED DUCK *Stictonetta naevosa*

Six on 7 November 1978 (Roberts 1980).

PACIFIC BLACK DUCK *Anas superciliosa*

Common. Up to 150 on all visits with numbers fluctuating considerably. One pair successfully bred in March 1979.

GREY TEAL *Anas gibberifrons*

The most abundant duck: up to 400 on all visits and numbers fluctuating considerably. One pair successfully bred in December 1978.

CHESTNUT TEAL *Anas castanea*

One female from 10 November to 15 December 1978 (Roberts 1980).

GARGANEY *Anas querquedula*

A male in eclipse plumage recorded on 25 December 1978 (Roberts 1980).

PINK-EARED DUCK

Malacorhynchus membranaceus

Common at times with up to 120 present but very irregular and sporadic in appearance.

HARDHEAD *Aythya australis*

Generally common with up to 200 on most visits but numbers fluctuated considerably and the species was sometimes scarce or absent.

MANED DUCK *Chenonetta jubata*

Common during December 1978 and January 1979 with up to 50 seen regularly. Scarce or absent at other times.

BAILLON'S CRAKE *Porzana pusilla*

One on 17 December 1978 (Roberts 1980).

AUSTRALIAN CRAKE *Porzana fluminea*

Evidently moderately common, as it was regularly observed singly and in small parties of up to 10, both on the ponds and adjacent swamp.

BLACK-TAILED NATIVE-HEN

Gallinula ventralis

Common during December 1978 and January 1979, with up to 200 regularly seen. Scarce or absent at other times.

PURPLE SWAMPHEN *Porphyrio porphyrio*

One present from 17 December 1978 to 14 January 1979.

EURASIAN COOT *Fulica atra*

Common, with up to 150 on all visits.

PAINTED SNIPE *Rostratula benghalensis*

A pair present from 17 December 1978 to 14 January 1979 (Roberts 1980).

MASKED LAPWING *Vanellus miles*

Up to 15 (mostly 4-8) on all visits. Individuals represented both races (*V. m. miles* and *V. m. novaehollandiae*) and, on several occasions, apparent hybrids.

RED-KNEED DOTTEREL

Erythrogonys cinctus

Generally common with up to 100 regularly present (mostly 15-35). Numbers fluctuated considerably and the species was occasionally scarce or absent.

BLACK-FRONTED PLOVER

Charadrius melanops

Up to 70 on all visits (usual number 10-30).

RED-CAPPED PLOVER

Charadrius ruficapillus

Up to 10 during December 1978 and January 1979 (Roberts 1980), and two on 16 April 1979.

BLACK-WINGED STILT

Himantopus himantopus

Common, with up to 350 on all visits. Although pairs gave the impression of nesting on several occasions, no nests or recently-hatched young were recorded.

BANDED STILT

Cladorhynchus leucocephalus

Twelve on 10 February and 19 February 1979, and four on 8 March 1979 (Roberts 1980). Three present from 15 March to 25 April 1979. All birds were young.

RED-NECKED AVOCET

Recurvirostra novaehollandiae

Numbers fluctuated considerably, but up to 50 were present on all visits.

WOOD SANDPIPER *Tringa glareola*

Up to 20 (mostly 6-10) on all visits from 17 December 1978 (first recorded) to 25 April 1979 (last recorded).

COMMON SANDPIPER *Tringa hypoleucos*

Up to 15 (mostly 8-10) on all visits to 12 May 1979 (last recorded).

MARSH SANDPIPER *Tringa stagnatilis*

One or two present from 30 November 1978 to 10 January 1979.

GREENSHANK *Tringa nebularia*

Two to four on all visits to 16 January 1979.
One on 9 April 1979.

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER*Calidris acuminata*

Up to 120 on all visits up to 25 April 1980
(last recorded — 11 birds). Numbers fluctuated
considerably, the usual number being 10-25.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER*Calidris melanotos*

One on 17 December 1978 and again on 10
January 1979 (Roberts 1980).

RED-NECKED STINT *Calidris ruficollis*

One or two regularly noted up to 7 March
1979 (last recorded).

CURLEW SANDPIPER *Calidris ferruginea*

Up to four present on all visits to 10 January
1979, and one on 23 March 1979.

AUSTRALIAN PRATINCOLE*Stiltia isabellae*

Two on 10 January 1979, and three from 13
April to 25 April 1979.

SILVER GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*

One immature present from 7 November
1978 to 14 January 1979. Up to 23 seen
regularly from 15 March 1979.

GULL-BILLED TERN *Gelochelidon nilotica*

One on 17 December 1978 and 14 January
1979; six on 31 January 1979 and three on 30
March 1979.

WHISKERED TERN *Chlidonias hybrida*

Up to 150, many in breeding plumage, seen
regularly to 19 February 1979. Two on 13 April
1979.

WHITE-WINGED TERN*Chlidonias leucoptera*

Two in non-breeding plumage on 25 Decem-
ber 1978 (Roberts 1980).

DISCUSSION

According to Storr (1977), many of the
above species have either not been previously
recorded in Central Australia, or have been
noted on only rare occasions. These are the
Little Black Cormorant, Darter, Great Egret,
Intermediate Egret, Cattle Egret, Sacred Ibis,
Freckled Duck, Chestnut Teal, Garganey,
Baillon's Crake, Australian Crake, Swamp-
hen, Painted Snipe, Red-capped Plover, Marsh
Sandpiper, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper,
Red-necked Stint, Pectoral Sandpiper, Banded
Stilt, Gull-billed Tern, White-winged Tern and
Whiskered Tern. Furthermore, I observed six
Blue-winged Shovelers *Anas rhynchos* during

21 Kensington Avenue, Seven Hills, Qld. 4170.

a previous trip to Alice Springs on one of the
sewage ponds on 28 December 1975.

Numbers of many species varied considerably
between visits and relatively few remained
constant in abundance, reflecting the high level
of nomadism of waterbirds in inland areas of
Australia. The water-level of the ponds was
particularly low during the latter half of
December 1978 and during January 1979 as a
consequence of extended hot and dry weather
conditions. Numbers of waterbirds were
particularly high during this time and several
species were recorded only then.

Breeding observations were restricted to two
occasions. Only a pair each of Pacific Black
Duck and Grey Teal were successful in raising
young, although general observations suggested
that Black-winged Stilts and Australian Crakes
had bred there. The dearth of breeding records
is no doubt due to the paucity of suitable
breeding sites, there being no hollow logs,
extensive and permanent mudbanks, or dense
aquatic plant growth immediately adjacent to
open water.

Although relatively few migratory waders
were recorded, the observations suggest that the
ponds are used, albeit briefly, by some birds in
transit. Common and Wood Sandpipers
remained fairly constant in abundance and
Sharp-tailed Sandpipers could be seen on nearly
every visit, although their numbers varied.
Other species were recorded infrequently and,
mostly, during the months of November,
December and January. Sharp-tailed Sandpipers
were still present on 25 April and this is con-
sidered unusually late for the species in
Australia.

The Alice Springs sewage ponds thus provide
an important refuge for waterbirds in Central
Australia and this should be recognised by
appropriate authorities. The ponds could be
declared a reserve and properly managed to
protect them from the disturbances of feral and
domestic animals, human intruders and the
various drainage and other developmental
proposals which have been occasionally mooted.
The people of Alice Springs have a unique
opportunity to develop what at first appears to
be a mosquito-infested dump for human wastes,
into a fine reserve which has potential as a
tourist attraction in addition to providing
sanctuary for the waterbirds of the region.

REFERENCES

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