

THE PAINTED SNIPE BREEDING AT STRATHALBYN

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INTRODUCTION

Tucker's Lagoon is a shallow freshwater lake on the outskirts of Strathalbyn, 45 km SE of Adelaide. When filled by winter rains it occupies about 10 ha but dries in summer. Its southern edge is bordered by a belt of reeds *Typha* sp. up to five metres wide and which merges into a three metre wide strip of lignum. The western end is shallowest and there are a few old River Gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* on the periphery. The northern and eastern sides are bare of reeds but bordered with samphire. Up to 60 bird species, including several migratory waders, have been found on the Lagoon and in its surrounds.

The Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* has been recorded in South Australia in the lower South-East, the Coorong area, the Adelaide Plains, the southern Flinders Ranges and the upper Murray region (Condon 1969).¹ The only localities in the Mount Lofty Ranges at which the bird has previously been recorded are Happy Valley (Rix 1942), the Mount Compass area (Rix 1962, Ragless 1968, Ashby 1920) and Carey's Gully (specimen, SAM, B 32741). Our observations from Tucker's Lagoon in the Ranges are thus of some interest.

OBSERVATIONS

During a search of the Lagoon's shores for waders in late December 1979, JF saw four individuals of an unusual species and which were subsequently identified as immature Painted Snipe. Their plumage was a mottled grey-brown. They were seen at close range by six observers and a photograph confirming the identification was subsequently obtained.

When first found, an adult male joined and shepherded them whilst they fed but did not itself feed. When a sheep approached to within 20 metres the immatures scuttled into adjacent reeds while the adult performed a broken wing display over some 30 metres and then flew to the far end of the reedbed. In spite of regular early morning visits the birds were not seen again until 10 January 1980 when the immatures were observed to 'freeze' in a compact group adjacent to a scanty sprig of dead samphire and remain motionless for 15 minutes. They appeared about three-quarters the size of an adult. They were then observed daily until 22 January by which time they

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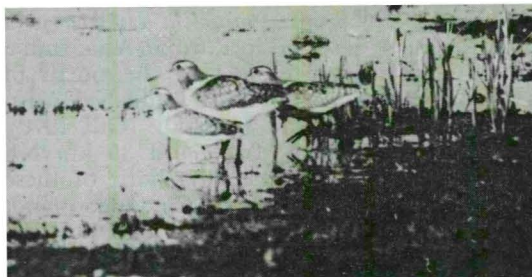


PLATE 1. Adult (centre) and two immature Painted Snipe at Tucker's Lagoon.

Photo: author

appeared fully grown and indistinguishable from the adult male by either size or plumage. All showed a conspicuous white 'horse-collar' band and ran from the cover of reeds to shallow water when approached. Also noted was a 'bobbing' behaviour in which only the rear of the bird moved, the head remaining still. Their stance was upright. On 24 January one Snipe was seen. It was crouched in shallow water with the back horizontal and the head drawn in, about one-third of the body being under water. On close approach it flew across the Lagoon, low over the water. The flight was slow, the body appeared heavy and the wings somewhat rounded.

DISCUSSION

JF has scanned the shores of Tucker's Lagoon for waders over the previous thirty years. This was the second record of the Painted Snipe. A female was seen once in February 1976.

Sporadic breeding in this species such as seems to have occurred at Tucker's Lagoon in 1979-1980 is well documented. Lowe (1963) recorded that the species commonly nests in small colonies, the nests being widely separated. In the colonies a few females can be seen, but they never incubate the eggs or attend the young, these duties being left to males. An adult female was not seen during our observations.

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