

FURTHER RECORDS OF THE ORIENTAL PLOVER AND A REASSESSMENT OF SOME PROBLEMS IN FIELD IDENTIFICATION

NIVEN McCRIE

INTRODUCTION

The Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* appears to be a rare straggler to South Australia (Parker *et al.*, forthcoming). It is readily distinguished from the other sandplovers recorded in South Australia by the following: size about that of Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica* but with proportionately longer legs and wings; legs long, flesh-coloured, yellowish, green or brownish; rump and tail concolorous with back and lacking broad pale edges; indistinct wingbar; folded wings extending slightly but noticeably beyond tail.

The Caspian Plover *C. asiaticus* is very similar in appearance to *veredus*. Although known in Australia only from one specimen (Condon 1961) and two tentative sight records (McKean *et al.* 1976) the possibility that it could occur in South Australia cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, few observers are aware of the difficulty in distinguishing *veredus* from *asiaticus*, while some others too readily base identifications on single, sometimes unreliable, features. From a survey of recent and earlier literature and specimens housed in the South Australian Museum, it appears that there is some overlap in the criteria traditionally considered diagnostic for the species. In view of this, all previous South Australian sight records referred to *veredus* (Close 1982) need to be reassessed.

Features that distinguish *veredus* from *asiaticus*, with notes on overlap between them, are as follows:

- i) *veredus*: weights and measurements 13-17% larger (Cramp *et al.* 1983). Prater *et al.* (1977) give the following measurements of *veredus*: wing \geq 160 mm, tarsus \geq 43 mm; bill more robust and in male summer plumage, a broader black posterior border to the breast.
- ii) *veredus*: underwing coverts and axillaries grey to brown (axillaries smoky, Dement'ev *et al.* 1969); underwing browner (than in *asiaticus*) and axillaries brown narrowly fringed white (Prater *et al.* 1977).
asiaticus: underwing and axillaries white to greyish or brownish (underwing coverts

white and brown, axillaries white, Dement'ev *et al.* 1969); underwing coverts dirty white or grey broadly tipped white, axillaries suffused pale brown (Prater *et al.* 1977). Previously, axillaries of *asiaticus* were considered always white and therefore affording clear distinction from *veredus*.

iii) *veredus*: wingbar usually indiscernible, but Thomas (1969) noted a faint wingbar in his Tasmanian record of *veredus*. *asiaticus*: wingbar is small but distinct in fresh plumage; it may be reduced or missing in birds with heavily abraded coverts.

iv) *veredus*: legs pinkish, yellow, green-yellow or brownish. *asiaticus*: legs greenish-grey or yellowish-grey (Dement'ev *et al.* 1969) yellow-brown to olive-grey or dull green (Cramp 1983). Distinctly yellow legs would usually suggest *veredus* although some individuals of *asiaticus* have legs much more yellowish than greenish-grey (Bannerman 1961).

In the field, separation of *veredus* from *asiaticus* by size is hardly feasible unless individuals of the two are standing side by side. Definite separation of *veredus* must then be made on the basis of *all three* remaining features being unequivocally representative of it.

RECENT RECORDS

I consider that the following recent South Australian records refer almost certainly to *veredus*, but that for the reasons given above it is perhaps wisest to regard them as equivocal for the time being. Features that help distinguish the birds from *asiaticus* are included.

1. Four seen feeding "like pratincoles" on bare ground at Napier's Bore, eight kilometres NNW of Billa Kalina HS (29°55'S, 136°11'E) on 20 November 1981 by P. Langdon (pers. comm.). Two calls were noted: an alarm call *burrt burrt* and another call *tick-tick*. Distinguished from *asiaticus* by pale yellow legs and grey axillaries.

2. Five seen roosting in soft, deep mud at low tide at Clinton Conservation Park (34°09'S, 138°06'E) on 14 February 1982 by myself, I. Beale, R. Allen and D. Harper. All birds had buff-orange breasts bordered black below. Distinguished from *asiaticus* by yellow legs, grey-brown underwing and lack of wingbar.
3. One seen on a bare sandy area adjacent to Andrewilla Waterhole (26°31'S, 139°13'E), Diamantina River system, on 29 September 1982 by L. Pedler, G.L. Duggan, A. Black and others (pers. comm.). Distinguished from *asiaticus* by pale grey underwing and pale orange legs.
4. Ten seen on a reef north of Port Rickaby (34°30'S, 137°22'E) by K. Treloar and L. Underwood (pers. comm.) on 30 January, 4 and 26 February 1983. Five birds had red-brown breasts bordered black below. Legs were brownish. Distinguished from *asiaticus* by brown underwing and lack of wingbar.
5. 27 seen "flying and feeding as a flock" at Clinton CP (34°09'S, 138°06'E) on 21 January 1983 by J.B. Cox and A. Lees (pers. comm.). None of the birds showed a wingbar.
6. Two seen standing in one centimetre of water near Lake Goyder (27°03'S, 140°11'E) on 1 February 1983 by I.A. May (pers. comm.). Call noted *kleep* like "deep long *C. ruficapillus*". Distinguished from *asiaticus* by brown underwing and yellow-pink legs.
7. Six seen at the Murray Mouth (35°34'S, 138°53'E) on 6 February 1982 by J. Bransbury (pers. comm.). Separable from *asiaticus* by yellowish legs and lack of wingbar. One bird had pink-brown breast bordered black. A chirruping call was noted.

DISCUSSION

Adult males of *veredus* in summer plumage are readily identified by a blackish border to the reddish-brown breast and by a pale nape contrasting strongly with the darker head and back. (Birds with a distinct breast band but lacking the black border would be adult or first summer males if the nape were distinctly paler than the rest of the upperparts, and adult female if the nape did not contrast strongly (Prater *et al.* 1977). Of the above records three included adult males. One of the Billa Kalina birds seemed to be an adult because of the faint breastband and the faint russet edges to the coverts.

It is notable that the coastal sightings occurred on days of very high temperatures: over

35°C for the Pt Rickaby and Clinton CP records. At Pt Rickaby and Clinton CP, there were also many Banded Lapwings *Vanellus tricolor*, a species that usually congregates on the coast only when seeking relief from hot and dry conditions inland. When the Pt Rickaby birds were flushed, it was assumed that they flew to roost in the paddocks usually favoured by the lapwings, although this was not confirmed.

It is probable that *C. veredus* is not as rare in South Australia as the literature suggests. Rather, the infrequent sightings are a reflection of its high mobility and preference for inland areas. In view of the difficulties in making definite field identification of *veredus* and its uncertain taxonomic relationship to *asiaticus*, there is a need for an analysis of specimens and, probably, more collecting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful to Shane Parker, Leo Joseph, David Close and Richard Allen for their helpful criticism and advice in the preparation of this paper, and John Bransbury, Peter Langdon, Ian May, Lynn Pedler, Kent Treloar and Len Underwood for supplying details of their records.

REFERENCES

- Bannerman, D. & Lodge, G. 1961. *The Birds of the British Isles*, X. Oliver & Boyd: London.
- Close, D.H. 1982. Recent records of the Oriental Plover. *S. Aust. Orn.* 28: 205-6.
- Condon, H.T. 1961. The Caspian Plover — a new record for Australia. *Emu* 61: 191-5.
- Cramp, S. (Ed.) 1983. *The Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*. Oxford.
- Dement'ev, G.P. & N.A. Gladkov (Ed.) 1969. *Birds of the Soviet Union*, 3. Israel Program for Scientific Translations: Jerusalem.
- Johnsgard, P. 1981. *The Plovers, Sandpipers and Snipes of the World*. University of Nebraska Press.
- McKean, J.L., H.A.F. Thompson and J.A. Estbergs. 1976. Records of Uncommon Migrant Waders near Darwin, N.T. *Aust. Bird Watcher* 6: 143-8.
- Parker, S.A., H.J. Eckert and G.B. Ragless. (forthcoming). *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia. Part 2. Waterfowl to Gulls and Terns*. S. Aust. Orn. Assoc.: Adelaide.
- Pizzey, G. 1980. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*. Collins: Sydney.
- Prater, A.J., J.H. Marchant & J. Vuorinen. 1977. *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders*. B.T.O. Guide 17. Brit. Trust for Orn.: Tring.
- Thomas, D.G. 1969. First Records of Waders for Tasmania. *Emu* 69: 131-6.
- Vaughan, R. 1980. *Plovers*. Terence Dalton Limited: Lavenham.

40 Gilbert Street, Gilberton, S.A. 5081.

Received 6 September 1983; accepted 25 November 1983.