

A REDSHANK IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Considerable interest was generated by the presence in 1983 of a Redshank *Tringa totanus* on the ICI saltfields at St Kilda, some 20 km NW of Adelaide. This appears to be the sixth record of Redshank in Australia, and the first Australian sighting outside a relatively small northern coastal area. Observed at St Kilda by the author on various dates from 26 May 1983 to 7 September 1983, it was seen by many other observers during this period, and a number of photographs were obtained. This paper summarizes some observations on the bird's appearance and behaviour, relates its occurrence to previous Australian records of the Redshank, and discusses data on the distribution of the species in the regions immediately to the north of Australia.

DESCRIPTION

The first sighting, at 16.50 on 26 May 1983, was in calm and mild conditions, approximately 25 minutes before sunset. Of three apparent Greenshanks *Tringa nebularia* feeding together in a wide brackish drain, one was seen, when flushed, to have a conspicuous white trailing edge to the wing. The following description is based on 15 minutes observation on 26 May and on data obtained on 28 May during a more extended period of observation. On both occasions the bird was seen at distances down to 30 m through 8x40 binoculars and a 20x60 telescope.

Description: a predominantly grey and white wader, fractionally smaller than a Greenshank, with a long straight bill and long conspicuously red, legs. Upperparts medium grey, slightly tinged brown on the

back and on the wing coverts, the latter showing narrow buff edges at the tips. The unstriped grey forehead, crown and nape, were separated from the paler grey face by an indistinct whitish superciliary streak extending from the base of the bill. Underparts dull white, with irregular pale grey striping on the throat and breast fading into the unmarked belly and ventral areas. Black and white barring along the edge of the folded tail was visible in some attitudes. The bill, of about the same length as a Greenshank's, was relatively slender, the basal half dull red and the remainder black. A narrow white eyering contrasted with the dark eye. Viewed in flight, from below the bird was white, except for darker outer ends to the primaries and the red legs, while from above it was generally grey, very dark on the primaries, with a wide white trailing edge at the secondaries and a white lower back, rump and tail, the last finely and indistinctly barred darker. Seen immediately adjacent to a greenshank, the Redshank appeared slightly smaller in body and slightly shorter in the leg, differences hardly perceptible apart from direct comparison.

The general appearance became darker in the weeks following 28 May, giving greater contrast between the upperparts and the underparts. The latest close view, obtained on 17 August, showed that the darker grey upperparts were no longer tinged brown and that a number of small black marks had appeared on the back and wings. The throat and breast were heavily and regularly streaked dark grey, extending along the sides, and there were a few irregular dark spots under the tail on the otherwise white underparts. From Prater, Marchant and Vuourinen (1977) the description corresponds to an adult Redshank coming into breeding plumage.

BEHAVIOUR

Of the 16 sightings by the author, 14 were in a stretch of *ca* two kilometres of mixed samphire swamp, tidal pools and open mud flat, lying between the mangrove-fringed tidal flats and the evaporation lagoons approximately one kilometre farther inland. Apparently the Redshank did not frequent the tidal flats only a few hundred metres west of its preferred haunts. It was often to be seen on the saltfields, alone, or with a few scattered individuals of other species, when the main body of waders had departed for the tidal flats.

Reference books describe Redshank as noisy and restless, but the ICI bird was generally less vocal than the Greenshanks with which it frequently associated. A loud, clear, musical *tlooe*, usually repeated two or three times, was heard on occasions during regular flight. Other calls noted were a loud *plip, plip, plip* given in alarm when the bird was flushed, a high *tilp, tilp* given on two occasions during

flight between tidal pools, and a loud, liquid, *plee, pler, pler, pler*, again given on being flushed. Overall, it seemed rather quiet for a Redshank, judged by past experience with the species in England. The 'restless' description was more appropriate. The bird generally fed in shallow water, striding along probing from side to side, and was several times seen to fly off, for no apparent reason, only to return to the same spot, or nearby, a few minutes later. Though restless, it did not seem particularly nervous, and when in company with other waders, the Redshank was often the last bird to leave when they were flushed, standing alert and immobile for a second or two after the general exodus. When alone, the Redshank usually permitted a cautious approach to within about 30 to 40 metres before becoming disturbed.

Associations between the Redshank and other saltfield waders were of some interest. In the first four weeks or so of its presence the Redshank was several times found feeding with groups of up to about five Black-winged Stilts. This association became less noticeable with the departure or disbanding of the small groups of Stilts as the season advanced. The Redshank associated freely, though apparently not particularly closely, with Greenshanks, sometimes separating from them while feeding, or during flight. One instance of distinct hostility was noted, when in a compact and active feeding group of five Greenshanks and the Redshank, a Greenshank ran briefly at the Redshank, with lowered head and outstretched neck, forcing it apart from the group. Towards September, the Redshank appeared to associate more closely and more frequently with Greenshanks, often roosting with them, and flying with them when disturbed. The author's last sighting of the bird, on 7 September 1983, was of it roosting with five Greenshanks on a small mud island in an evaporation lagoon from which all rose to fly off low over the water to the south-west.

GENERAL DISTRIBUTION AND PREVIOUS AUSTRALIAN RECORDS

The Redshank is a Palaearctic species, distributed from Iceland in the west to Manchuria in the east (Vaurie 1965), and wintering in Africa, India and South-East Asia. In the region immediately to the north of Australia, its status does not appear to be known in detail, though some published data exist. McKean, Mason and O'Connor (1975) reported at least 20 in Portuguese Timor in October 1973, White

(1975) located records on four specimens from the Celebes and Salayer for an October-November period, Bell (1966) refers to a reported sighting in Papua, and Crawford (1972) makes passing reference to the existence of records for Borneo and Malaya. Rand and Gilliard (1967) do not mention the Redshank for New Guinea, Peckover and Filewood (1976), in their work covering the birds of Papua, New Guinea, Irian Jaya and the Solomons, list it as a 'rare visitor, known from one or two records', while King, Woodcock and Dickinson (1975) describe it as a common migrant to South-East Asia. The current total of at least six recorded Redshank sightings in Australia suggests that the Redshank may be a more frequent visitor to the regions immediately north of Australia than these references imply.

Previous Australian records of the Redshank are all sight records and relate almost exclusively to the Darwin area. Crawford (1972) reported the first known Australian sightings, those of a single bird on 19 July 1970 and a flock of 17 on 26 July 1970, on both occasions near Darwin. McKean *et al.* (1975) recorded the sighting of a single bird on 4 November 1973, ca 140km SSW of Darwin, and McKean, Thompson and Estbergs (1976) noted the occurrence of a single bird on 5 January 1975, just north of Darwin. A fifth record is that of a single bird on 14 and 15 November 1976, again just north of Darwin, reported in Thompson (1977).

DISCUSSION

If one accepts the two July records as resulting from unusually early seasonal movements, previous Australian records of Redshank fall within the normal season for migrant waders 'wintering' in Australia. Additionally, four of the five records relate to the same small coastal region a few kilometres north of Darwin, the fifth coming from an area only slightly farther south. Against this pattern, the appearance of a single Redshank some 3000 km farther south, at a time when the annual northward efflux of migrant waders from the area of its sighting had just finished, is distinctly unusual. It is unlikely that such a noticeable bird was present long before its discovery on 26 May since the area in which it was present is well patrolled by wader enthusiasts, and the author did not detect it in visits on 16 May and 22 May. No unusual weather pattern prevailed locally in the weeks preceding 26 May, nor did there appear to be

any significant variations in the local wader populations apart from the usual departures among the migrant species. There is thus no obvious correlation between the Redshank's arrival and climatic factors or wader movements in general.

The Redshank is a common bird throughout much of its range and the occurrence of a single bird so far south of its normal distribution is presumably a freak event. The evidence indicates, however, that Redshanks are occasional visitors to northern Australia, and the attention currently being given to waders on the northern and north-western coasts of Australia seems likely to result in further sightings. The limited number of reported Australian sightings so far, and their bias to the Darwin area, presumably reflect the distribution and habits of bird watchers, rather than of the Redshank, but it is worth noting Crawford's comment (Crawford 1972), on the first Australian records of the Redshank, that 'it can hardly be a regular visitor because these were my only records during almost five years in the Darwin area'.

The author was unable to locate the Redshank in several visits to the St Kilda saltfields and adjacent areas after 7 September 1983 and there do not appear to have been any later sightings by other observers.

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