

THE OCCURRENCE OF LEWIN'S RAIL ON EYRE PENINSULA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

SHANE A. PARKER

In South Australia, Lewin's Rail *Rallus pectoralis* has been recorded from the South-East, Coorong, Lake Alexandrina, River Murray, Adelaide Plains, South Mount Lofty Ranges and adjacent districts and Kangaroo Island. It is chiefly a summer visitor, with no authenticated records between 1 June and 8 August (Parker *et al.* in prep.)¹

From Yorke Peninsula there seem to be no published reports. From Eyre Peninsula there is one: sightings in a samphire swamp south of Arno Bay township in June 1951 (Storr 1952). Dr Storr (*in litt.* 12 July 1977) does not now accept this record, which was unaccompanied by a description, and thinks that the species involved was much more likely to have been a crake of some sort. If so, then in view of the samphire habitat, the species in question may well have been the Australian Crake *Porzana fluminea*.

Thus, Lewin's Rail might be removed from the Eyre Peninsula list were it not for the existence of a hitherto unreported specimen in the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. This specimen, an adult female, reg. no 278769, was collected by C. Hoy on 30 March 1920, and bears on its label the locality '9 miles south of Port Lincoln'. However, no road or track runs due south of Port Lincoln for this distance, and, moreover, nine miles (14 km) directly south of Port Lincoln places one in the midst of an area of dense mallee-heath to reach which one would have had to cross over four kilometres of the coastal waters of a bay (Port Lincoln Proper). It seems likely therefore that the direction was not meant literally, and that what Hoy meant was the main southerly route out of Port Lincoln, which is a main road heading south-west. Nine miles along this road places one, conveniently, at the large subcoastal lake, Sleaford Mere, which is incidentally the only large inland water southwards from Port Lincoln. I therefore assume that Hoy's

specimen of *R. pectoralis* was collected at Sleaford Mere.

¹ Parker *et al.* (in prep.) experienced particular difficulty in compiling the account of this species for the **Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia**, in that of all the sight-records, and reports based on specimens not retained, only one set was accompanied by a description permitting confident acceptance of the identification of the birds as *R. pectoralis*: that of Baxter (1981). For the rest, the authors had no way of knowing why the birds concerned were determined as *R. pectoralis* rather than *P. fluminea* or the Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis*. This objection is a general one against all sight-records, but assumes special importance in the case of *R. pectoralis* for the following reason. Leach's 'An Australian Bird Book' widely used from 1911 till at least the 1950's, while depicting *G. philippensis* and *P. fluminea*, contains no picture of *R. pectoralis*; moreover, in the ninth edition (1958, pl.3), the picture of *P. fluminea* combines features of that species and *R. pectoralis* (e.g. the brownish hindneck of the latter), thus rendering it valueless as an aid to identification. From 1931 onwards, with the appearance of Cayley's superior 'What Bird is That?', the situation for the amateur ornithologist would, at least theoretically, have improved in this matter. The problem remains, however, that until it is known just which of the earlier sight-reports of *R. pectoralis* were identified by the use of Leach's book (and are therefore unacceptable), one is faced with the choice of rejecting them all or accepting them all at face value. Provisionally but with reluctance, Parker *et al.* (in prep.) have followed the latter course, while advocating a deeper study of the problem.

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South Australian Museum, North Terrace, Adelaide, S.A. 5000
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