

## A SIGHTING OF THE WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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The White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* breeds in the high Arctic of Canada and Alaska and migrates to winter in southern South America. Vagrants frequently occur in Iceland and western Europe and others have been reported from Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia, South Africa, Galapagos, New Zealand and Australia (Marchant *et al.* 1986). There are five records from Australia (Lane 1987). The initial sighting was in Victoria in 1973 (Smith 1976) and later reports are from that State, Western Australia and New South Wales (Smith *et al.* 1978, Curry *et al.* 1983, Pringle 1987).

At 1400 hours on 15 January 1988 we were looking at Red-capped Plovers *Charadrius ruficapillus*, Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis*, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *C. acuminata* and Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* that were feeding along the edges of a mud-spit in a salt lagoon at I.C.I. Saltfields, 25 km N of Adelaide, South Australia. When approximately 150 m from these birds we detected, using 10 x 50 binoculars, one amongst them that was either a Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii* or a White-rumped Sandpiper. It was feeding along the windward side of the spit where small waves were breaking. It was intermediate in size between the Red-necked Stints and Curlew Sandpipers and had a darker breast and back. It clearly possessed the long-winged and short-legged shape characteristic of both the Baird's and White-rumped Sandpiper, but at this range we could not be sure to which of the two species it belonged. Consequently, we moved out onto the mud-spit to within 20 m of the bird. We subsequently watched it for about an hour. During that time it came to within 15 m of us as it foraged along the waterline. The following description is taken from our field notes:

Intermediate in size between Red-necked Stint and Curlew Sandpiper, but nearer the former and ca 10% larger. Appeared to be short-necked. The wings were long and pointed and extended past the tip of the tail. These gave the bird a very elongated appearance. Bill dark, marginally

decurved, tapering from the wider base to a blunt tip and longer than that of Red-necked Stint. Legs blackish, also longer than Red-necked Stint's but very much shorter than a Curlew Sandpiper's. Crown dark with dense but fine striations. Lores dark. Ear coverts finely streaked darker on a pale grey ground colour. Supercilia whitish and fairly distinct from bill to eye, but behind the eye obscure and only slightly paler than adjacent feathering. Throat whitish, shading to darker feathering of the neck. Neck and upper breast, greyish with darker streaks. On the breast the darker streaks were broader, but less pronounced, and blended more with the greyish ground colour. Sides of lower breast were indistinctly mottled greyish. The remainder of the underparts were dirty white. Upperparts nearly uniform grey-brown of a darker shade than either Red-necked Stint or Curlew Sandpiper. At close range the mantle feathers and scapulars were noted to have very thin pale fringes that gave the plumage a faint scaly pattern. Dark shaft lines noted only on some scapulars. Wing coverts similar in colour to back feathers. Tertiaries dark grey-brown with pale fringes, very long and pointed. The primaries appeared very dark where they protruded beyond the tertiaries.

During the period of observation the bird was continuously feeding by pecking at the mud being washed by the small waves. At no time did it preen or stretch its wings so that its uppertail coverts were exposed. Nevertheless, judging by its dark grey-brown upperparts, the blunt bill-tip and its legs that we thought were slightly longer than those of the Baird's Sandpiper seen at Buckland Park the previous year (Snell 1988), we were confident it was a White-rumped Sandpiper. To confirm this identification the bird was flushed. It did not fly with the other waders, but kept low and flew around behind us no more than 10 metres away and landed nearby at the edge of the lagoon. When flushed, a small but very distinct white patch was noted above the tail. This white patch seemed smaller and positioned further to the rear than that of the Curlew Sandpiper, but it contrasted more with the dark back and tail. As it flew we noted it had dark upperwings with a small but distinct white wing-bar, formed by white tips to the greater coverts. When in flight the bird always called; a single note, sometimes repeated, and written as "cree" in our notebook. It was a very distinctive call that JBC likened

to a distant and abbreviated call of the Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*, but which we both thought had a peculiar quality reminiscent of a creaky squeak.

After confirming that the bird was indeed a White-rumped Sandpiper, we watched it for about another hour. We flushed it several more times to obtain views of the white uppertail coverts and wing patterning, and to hear its unusual call. Eventually it flew to the spot where it was first detected, and there we left it.

The Curlew Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper are the only species in the genus *Calidris* that have white central uppertail coverts. The bird seen by us was closer in size to a stint rather than a Curlew Sandpiper. Its smaller white patch above the tail, and thin white wing-bar were also distinctly different from the Curlew Sandpiper's and contrasted more with the darker upperparts. The white patch above the tail was squarer in shape and positioned more posteriorly (apparently, because only the uppertail coverts were white) than the white patch of the Curlew Sandpiper (in which species the lower rump feathers are also white, Marchant *et al.* 1986). Other distinctions were its much shorter and straighter bill, its short legs and proportionately

much longer wings, but perhaps most characteristic of all was its peculiar call-note.

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