

OBSERVATIONS OF BIRDS AT TUMBY BAY SEWAGE PONDS

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ABSTRACT

Tumby Bay Sewage Ponds on Eyre Peninsula were visited at least 36 times from December 1998 to November 1999 and 40 native bird species were recorded. In late-August to September 1999 there was an influx of more than 15 Baillon's Crakes *Porzana pusilla* and more than 20 Australian Spotted Crakes *P. fluminea*, the former being rarely recorded on the Eyre Peninsula.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial sewage ponds generally provide habitat for a variety of waterbirds and those near Tumby Bay on Eyre Peninsula are a permanent freshwater resource in an area that has very little natural surface water. They are 2.3 km N of Tumby Bay (at 34°21'29"S, 136°06'28"E). The main pond is about 400 m x 100 m of open water contained within clay banks, with the inner banks being lined with limestone. A smaller overflow pond measures about 100 m x 80 m, varies in extent from 80% to 100% coverage and never exceeds 120 mm in water depth. The smaller pond is vegetated with samphire *Halosarcia* spp., nitre-bush *Nitraria billardierei* and manna wattle *Acacia microcarpa*. The ponds are bounded on the west by the Tumby Bay golf course, which is planted with trees along the fairways. To the east is an area of samphire *Halosarcia* sp. and South Australian swamp paperbark *Melaleuca halmaturorum* which backs the coastal dunes. The nearest freshwater is in farm dams in the Koppio Hills about 10 km away and the nearest large body of freshwater is the Tod Reservoir, 27.9 km away.

METHODS

From December 1998 to November 1999 I visited the Tumby Bay Sewage Ponds at least three times per month between 0930 and 1130 h, representing over 36 visits. The birds recorded are listed in the Appendix.

DISCUSSION

A total of 40 native and one introduced bird

species was recorded at the Tumby Bay Sewage Ponds over the one year of observation. Of the native species, 17 were terrestrial and 23 were waterbirds or birds of coastal situations. Numbers of waterbirds of many species varied considerably over the year, which is typical of waterbird counts at such wetlands. For example Roberts (1981) recorded the same phenomenon from waterbird counts at the Sewage Ponds in Alice Springs and attributed this to the high level of nomadism of waterbirds in inland Australia. One could go further and state that many waterbird species in Australia generally exhibit a high level of nomadism due to unpredictable rainfall patterns (e.g. Frith 1982 states that most Australian waterfowl are nomadic).

Of particular interest is the observation of large numbers of two species of crane in late-August through September 1999. More than 15 Baillon's Crakes *Porzana pusilla* and more than 20 Australian Spotted Crakes *P. fluminea* were recorded in the overflow pond. While large numbers of Spotted Crakes are sometimes recorded from the one area, such an aggregation of Baillon's Crakes is rare. Moreover the Baillon's Crane appears to have been only rarely recorded from Eyre Peninsula. Eckert (1972 and 1973) does not mention this species from either of his visits in 1972 or in his summary of earlier ornithologists' visits. There are two records of the species from Whyalla, one of a dead bird by R. Fox in 1994 (SAOA 1994) and the other of three birds by E. Smith in September 1999 (SAOA 1999). Records from southern Eyre Peninsula are of two birds at Big Swamp on 1/9/99 (G. Carpenter pers. comm.) and a breeding record shown in the Bird Atlas (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1994). It is perhaps significant that of these four other records of Baillon's Crane from Eyre Peninsula, two are from the same period that the large number were recorded at the Tumby Bay Sewage Ponds. This suggests that birds were moving around at this time, perhaps after a more successful than usual breeding season in

1998. Baillon's Crake is listed as rare in the Schedules of the South Australian *National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972*.

Since the cessation of bird recording the overflow pond has been cleared and deepened and as a consequence the bird diversity has declined dramatically.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX

The following birds were recorded at Tumbly Bay Sewage Ponds from December 1998 to November 1999. * = an introduced species.

- Black Swan *Cygnus atratus*. 3 birds on 4/3/99 & on 2/11/99.
- Australian Shelduck *Tadorna tadornoides*. 5-15 birds on all visits. This is not a common species in the area.
- Australian Wood Duck *Chenonetta jubata*. 5 on 20/5/99. This is common on farm dams in the area.
- Grey Teal *Anas gracilis*. 50-100 on all visits.
- Chestnut Teal *Anas castanea*. 10-20 on all visits.
- Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa*. 5-10 on most visits.
- Pink-eared Duck *Malacorhynchus membranaceus*. 5-20 on all visits. An uncommon species in the area.
- Hardhead *Aythya australis*. 2-6 birds in July & Aug. 1999 and 50+ on 19/10/99.
- Hoary-headed Grebe *Polyocephalus polyocephalus*. 30+ all year but 300+ in Nov. 1999.
- White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae*. 1 on 20/5/99.
- Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*. 1 bird on all visits.
- Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus axillaris*. 1 patrolling ponds on 31/8/99.
- Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*. 15+ feeding in shallows amongst grass and samphire in overflow pond on 31/8/99. 15+ seen on 2 visits in September, but none were present on 19/10/99. By late-October shallow water amongst the samphire and grass had dried leaving shallow pools only in open areas.
- Australian Spotted Crake *Porzana fluminea*. 20+ in over-flow pond with Baillon's Crakes on 31/8/99, 15 seen in September, but none were present on 19/10/99. See comment for the previous crake.
- Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*. 30+ on all visits.
- Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*. 5 on 20/5/99, 15+ on 19/10/99 & 5 on 16/11/99.
- Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*. 3 in Aug. 1999; present in Nov.; 20-30 on 19/10/99, mainly imm.
- Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. 1 with preceding species in Nov. 1999.
- Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*. 4 adults & 1 juvenile recorded from 5/4/99 to Sep. 1999. One adult and 4 juveniles on 19/10/99 & 2 adults on 16/11/99.
- Banded Stilt *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*. 2 in April 1999.
- Black-fronted Dotterel *Elsayornis melanops*. 8-10 in overflow pond from June to Sep. 1999.
- Pacific Gull *Larus pacificus*. 2-3 occasionally.
- Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*. Many birds (up to 100) on all visits.
- Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*. 5 or 6 during Sep.-Nov. 1999; often feeding over tall grass at golf course.
- *Rock Dove *Columba livia*. A few birds on all visits.
- Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes*. A common visitor to the ponds from the golf course and the swamp paper-barks. Up to 20 seen on a single visit.
- Galah *Cacatua roseicapilla*. Common on golf course. Up to 100 seen on a single visit.

- Musk Lorikeet *Glossopsitta concinna*. Numerous in golf course trees when flowering.
- Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx basalis*. 1 in Aug. 1999 near a Superb Fairy-wren's nest in a nitre-bush.
- Superb Fairy-wren *Malurus cyaneus*. Very numerous and seen on every visit. Breeding in areas of nitre-bush in overflow pond.
- Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthagenys rufogularis*. In swamp paper-barks and 5-6 seen on every visit.
- Singing Honeyeater *Lichenostomus virescens*. Common in area of overflow pond and seen on every visit.
- New Holland Honeyeater *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*. In golf course trees & occasionally flew over overflow pond.
- White-fronted Chat *Epthianura albifrons*. At the overflow pond. 3-4 seen on every visit.
- Maggie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca*. One or two pairs seen on most visits.
- Grey Fantail *Rhipidura fuliginosa*. A few in the swamp paper-barks.
- Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*. Common in open areas around ponds.
- White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*. 1 on fence around ponds on 20/5/99. Recorded by the author at Port Neill (34°07'S, 136°21'E), 35 km N of Tumby Bay on 31/1/91.
- Australian Raven *Corvus coronoides*. 4-5 in general area at most times.
- Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena*. Very common over water.
- Little Grassbird *Megalurus gramineus*. 1 or 2 in grass in the overflow pond.
- Silveryeye *Zosterops lateralis*. Common in swamp paper-barks and visited nitre-bush in overflow pond. Loose flocks of 6-10 in paper-barks on most visits.
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