

**NOTES ON THE AUSTRALIAN PRATINCOLE.** Southerly movements of the Australian Pratincole *Stiltia isabella* generally are regarded as being unpredictable and erratic (Higgins and Davies 1996). The following observations, from an area that is virtually the southern limit of normal range for the species in South Australia, are therefore of interest. The area concerned is the plains country adjacent to the northern shores of Lake Alexandrina, mainly from Mulgundawa and south of Langhorne Creek through to Milang. The species has proven to be a fairly regular summer migrant to this area. It has been recorded only occasionally from the near south at locations such as Middleton (Parsons 1933), and Port Elliot and Ashville, c. 20 km S of Wellington (pers. obs.). The record from Bool Lagoon (Jaensch 1983) indicates that sporadic forays much further south are possible.

Some older residents had knowledge of occasional visits by this species extending back to the early 1900s. Personal local observations began in 1956 when Australian Pratincoles were plentiful on ground left bare as the waters of the River Murray flood of that year subsided in late-spring and summer (Eckert 2000). J.N. Hobbs (1961) commented on a similar situation in south-western New South Wales at that same time. They were noted locally again in the spring-summer periods of 1958, 1960 and 1962, giving rise to a belief that they must be biennial migrants. In 1962 the local Strathalbyn Naturalists Club was formed and better coverage of the area resulted in the species being recorded in 1963 (Eckert 2000). Its visits have been monitored since then.

In the 33 years from 1963 to 1996 there were only four calendar years in which the species was not recorded. The tendency for late-nesting birds to stay into the New Year, sometimes as late as March, partially masks the fact that during that time there were actually eight years in which Australian Pratincoles were not noted in the normal arrival months of October–November. Australian Pratincoles are quite selective regarding the paddocks they choose to reside in, so it is possible that their presence was sometimes missed. It is possible also that occasionally they could have been on the plains adjacent to the eastern end of Lake Alexandrina and not actually present in the monitored area. Thus for that 33-year period visits by the pratincoles were fairly consistent despite the southerly location.

October is the usual month of arrival. In about a third of years the species has not been noted until November, but, for reasons already indicated, there are suspicions that, in some cases at least, the birds had been present earlier without their haunts being quickly located by observers. Early arrivals have been recorded twice; on 25 September 1972 and 28 September 1980. These times do not seem to differ greatly from those given for the southern half of inland New South Wales (Hobbs 1961; MacLean 1976) suggesting that southerly movement, once undertaken, may be fairly purposeful and rapid.

The species has been found nesting in slightly more than half of the years when present. Usually, but not always, it is in those years when reasonable numbers (20 or more) are found. Egg-laying has not been noted until November and not uncommonly some birds will still have eggs in January. They appear to depart soon after the young are fledged and are not normally seen after March. Ploughed paddocks are the sites most often chosen for nesting. In dry years fairly bare pasture land, often on stony rises, is used. Several pairs will sometimes nest fairly close to each other. In November 1991 six pairs were nesting in approximately 6 ha of land sown to potatoes *Solanum tuberosum* near the mouth of the Bremer River. Eggs were laid prior to the potato plants emerging from the ground. The incubating birds then endured disturbance and regular watering by sprinklers similar to that at Aldinga (Ashton 1985). When the chicks hatched, some chose to shelter in temporarily unused irrigation pipes. Fortunately the workmen noticed this and would up-end pipes to eject chicks before reconnection. Clods, stones and tufts of grass are the usual shelters chosen by chicks, but one was known to frequent a disused Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* burrow.

On three occasions, 1975, 1983 and 1984, Australian Pratincoles have been known to winter here. In each of these winters they were seen on two or more occasions with sightings being four to nine weeks apart, suggesting that much of the winter was spent in the area. Single birds were involved on two occasions, but in 1983 two were present throughout most of June. Despite intermittent sightings from 21 June to 27 August 1984, none were recorded in the summer of 1984/85, nor in the following summer of 1985/86. Multiple winter records and especially those of such duration, do not appear to have been

recorded for any other locality in the southern part of the Australian Pratincole's range.

On 14 December 1993 a pair of Australian Pratincoles was watched as they searched to select a nest site. They investigated several potential spots using displays illustrated in HANZAB (Higgins and Davies 1996) of tail raised and wings held high. Both birds took turns in pivoting on a likely nest site but the bird I took to be female, because of slightly duller plumage, took the major role. The presumed male sometimes moved away a little and then ran back with head held low to sit almost touching the mate. Twice she scratched soil and kicked it out while still sitting, on both occasions giving the mate dust in the face. Scratching was not mentioned by MacLean (1976), stony soil perhaps being the reason for its use here. The bird not involved in shaping the nest would often pick up small objects and toss them in rather random fashion both towards and away from the nest. They eventually seemed to select a preferred site, spending about 15 minutes shaping it. However, a few days later, the female was found to be sitting on eggs some 20 metres away.

Since 1996 there have been no Australian Pratincole records from this area until 4 November 2001 when T. McAnaney saw two near a swamp margin on Mosquito Point. The long run of fairly consistent pratincole visits prior to 1996 may have changed due to several good seasons inland obviating the need to move so far south. Also, it may be significant that the change coincides with considerable change in land use in the monitored area. Some paddocks that

hosted nest-sites are now planted to grape vines *Vitis* spp. and are therefore now unsuitable habitat. Potatoes are now grown under centre-pivot irrigation instead of hand-shift irrigation and the birds may be unwilling to tolerate the lofty apparatus passing slowly above them. A great deal of land farmed under a cropping-sheep program in 1996 has now been taken into more intensive forms of production. There are still areas which would seem suitable for Australian Pratincoles but this may be the start of a decline of a species which, while not resident, was still a significant component of the local avifauna, having migrated and bred in the area on a fairly regular basis.

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Received: 28 December 2001