

Bird Notes

Coastal birds of the far west of South Australia.

The far west South Australian coast has a 10 km strip of drifting dunes known as the Merdayerrah Sandpatch at the western end of the Nullarbor cliffs, 5 km from the Western Australian border. The associated sandy beach at Merdayerrah provides potential habitat for waterbirds, particularly shorebirds. However there has been no assessment of its use and importance for waterbirds, including as part of national and state-wide shorebird surveys. It has been assumed that the South Australian coast west of Ceduna supports few waders (Lane 1987, Watkins 1993, Wilson 2000).

Counts at Eyre Bird Observatory, about 250 km to the west of Merdayerrah, show that beaches adjacent to the Nullarbor can support a variety of shorebirds, with significant numbers at times (Congreve 1982, Congreve and Congreve 1985, Dymond 1988). Regular surveys of a 14 km section of beach at Eyre found at least 30 migratory and 10 non-migratory shorebird species, with up to 500 and 200 individuals respectively. Maximum numbers of migratory shorebirds occur at Eyre in the middle of October (Congreve and Congreve 1985). This may correspond with the arrival of shorebirds that pass over continental Australia as part of their southward migration before dispersing along the coast (Blakers et al. 1984, Higgins and Davies 1996).

The beach at Merdayerrah has a relatively shallow gradient and is backed by drifting

dunes for about 6 km, by low cliffs along the eastern portion and steep cliffs at the western end. A limestone reef is exposed at the eastern end at low tide. The beach was twice surveyed for waterbirds. About 5 km of the beach was assessed on 8 May 1996 (Visit A) during a survey of mallee birds in the district (Carpenter and Matthew 1997). I conducted a more systematic survey in October 2004 (Visit B) during a biological and ethnological survey of the Merdayerrah Sandpatch area by the South Australian Museum Waterhouse Club. Merdayerrah beach was surveyed over two days: the western half on 26 October and the eastern half on 28 October.

Results

Counts of waterbirds along Merdayerrah beach are tabled. More species and individuals were observed on Visit B, when 14 species (189 individuals) were recorded along the beach, plus a further five offshore or beach-washed. Eleven shorebirds including 7 migratory species have been recorded, with a maximum of 23 individuals on Visit B.

Discussion

The two surveys show that Merdayerrah beach provides habitat for a variety of waterbirds (18 species, plus six seabirds offshore or beach-washed), including eleven species of shorebirds (7 migratory). The surveys coincided with the two peaks in shorebird abundance found at Eyre Bird Observatory (Congreve 1982, Congreve and Congreve 1985, Dymond 1988), suggesting the numbers recorded at Merdayerrah would be near the annual maxima.

Fewer shorebirds (species and individuals) were recorded at Merdayerrah compared with a similar length of beach surveyed at Eyre

Table. Numbers of waterbirds recorded along Merdayerrah beach (including seabirds seen offshore or found beach-washed) in May 1996 (Visit A, 5 km of beach) and October 2004 (Visit B, 10 km of beach).

| Species | Visit A. May 1996 | Visit B. Oct 2004 |
|---|-------------------|------------------------|
| Hoary-headed Grebe <i>Poliiocephalus poliocephalus</i> | 1 in sea | |
| Little Penguin <i>Eudyptula minor</i> | | 1 beach-washed |
| Short-tailed Shearwater <i>Ardenna tenuirostris</i> | 1 beach-washed | 20? offshore |
| Yellow-nosed Albatross <i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i> | | 2 offshore |
| Australasian Gannet <i>Morus serrator</i> | Several offshore | 2 beach-washed |
| Pied Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax varius</i> | 2 | 20 roosting |
| Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | | 1 |
| Eastern Reef Egret <i>Egretta sacra</i> | | 1 dark phase |
| *Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | | 1 |
| *Red-necked Stint <i>Calidris ruficollis</i> | 5 | 4 |
| *Sharp-tailed Sandpiper <i>Calidris acuminata</i> | | 16 |
| *Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i> | 1 | |
| *Pied Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus longirostris</i> | 1 | 2 pairs + 1 juvenile |
| *Sooty Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i> | 1 | |
| *Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> | | 1 part breed plumage |
| *Pacific Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis fulva</i> | | 1 |
| *Red-capped Plover <i>Charadrius ruficapillus</i> | 20 | ~70 |
| *Double-banded Plover <i>Charadrius bicinctus</i> | 1 | |
| *Red-kneed Dotterel <i>Erythrogonys cinctus</i> | | 1 immature |
| Jaeger <i>Stercorarius sp.</i> | | 1 offshore, dark phase |
| Silver Gull <i>Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae</i> | 1 | |
| Pacific Gull <i>Larus pacificus</i> | 3 | 4 |
| Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bergii</i> | 1 beach-washed | 60 |
| Caspian Tern <i>Hydroprogne caspia</i> | | 2 |
| TOTAL species | 13 | 19 |

Shorebirds are marked “*”, remains of dead birds found on the beach or fore-dunes are defined as “beach-washed”.

Bird Observatory. However, the diversity and species composition was similar to that at Eyre in May and October (5 and 10 shorebird species respectively). The repeated surveys at Eyre found that the species and abundance of shorebirds varied considerably between weeks and between years, indicating considerable movement of birds through the area (Congreve and Congreve 1985, Dymond 1988). The long-term observations at Eyre also show

that a large variety of other waterbirds occur sporadically, including many species normally associated with freshwater habitats (e.g. Red-kneed Dotterel). A similar flux of birds is likely at Merdayerrah beach, so more species and individuals would be expected from more surveys.

Interestingly, the Hooded Plover *Thinornis rubricollis*, a species that inhabits extensive

sandy beaches, was not recorded at Merdayerrah, and is only rarely found at Eyre. This suggests that populations on Eyre Peninsula and south-western Western Australia are separate. Also of interest on the October survey was the observation offshore of a jaeger chasing terns, tentatively identified as the Pomarine Jaeger *Stercorarius pomarinus*. There are few reports of either Pomarine or Arctic *S. parasiticus* Jaegers in the region (e.g. Blakers et al. 1984, Storr 1987), although they are likely to be frequent visitors to seabird colonies at islands on either side of the Nullarbor.

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