

Bird Notes

Observations of Lewin's Rail at Goolwa

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Lewin's Rail *Lewinia pectoralis* is rarely reported in South Australia (SAOA 2008), with most records from the South-East, Coorong, Murray Lakes, Mount Lofty Ranges and Adelaide Plains (Parker unpublished; Carpenter *et al* 2003). Because the bird is secretive, occupying dense wetland vegetation, most observations are brief.

Between 9 March 2009 and 11 March 2010, two adult birds and two young were seen by several observers on many occasions near the Goolwa Barrage (Table 1). Over this period I made personal observations on 10 occasions. In this paper I document the observations of these birds including evidence of successful breeding and aspects of behaviour and feeding that are rarely reported.

Locality and times of sightings

Two Lewin's Rails were first observed during an SAOA field trip on the 13th March 2009 and Bill Alcock and John Turner reported the sighting in *S A O Newsletter* (SAON), May 2009. They were seen about 50 metres south-east of the Goolwa barrage on the saltwater tidal side. Subsequently, there were many sightings of rails at this site including at times two adults, two chicks and one larger juvenile. Personally, I visited the site when the tide was low and the weather suitable 18 times (64 hours) and saw one adult eight times and one juvenile twice (Table 1). At high tide the water extends into

the reeds, making observation at the reed edge impossible.

Serventy (1985) stated that "*Lewin's Rails are extraordinarily difficult to observe, they prefer to feed in shallow water or muddy ground, close to cover and seldom venture far into the open. Like many Rails they are more active at dusk than during the day and avoid bright sunlight. The best chance of seeing them is on cloudy days when the sky is overcast.*" However, when first seen by the Birds S.A. group the rail was feeding at noon. Subsequently I found that it usually appeared at dawn when the tide was low but reappeared later in the day, feeding in bright sunlight, especially when other species of birds were feeding and calling. Twice I observed rails feeding in the open after 1100 h. Johnstone (1987) also observed that, while Lewin's Rail is considered to be crepuscular (Frith 1986) she had observed activity at various times of the day.

Identification and habitat

I identified the adult Lewin's Rail on the basis of several characters: its size, slightly larger than my recollection of the size of crakes *Porzana* spp. a medium-long, decurved bill, pink at the base grading to a black tip; chestnut nape, eyebrow and upper mantle; plain olive-grey breast; and black belly and vent, finely barred white. By comparison, the Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* can be ruled out because it has a stout red bill, white eyebrow and buff breast-band. The juvenile was darker than the adult, lacked chestnut head markings and had less distinct barring on its underparts but had a conspicuous white chin and upper throat. Chicks observed by Teresa Jack were small and mainly blackish (Table 1)

Table 1. Observations of Lewin's Rail at Goolwa.

Date	Observations	Observer	Reference
19 Mar 2009	Two adults, one bathing, at 1200 h for 30 min	B. Alcock & J. Turner	SAON 210
29 Mar 2009	Adult feeding along shore-line filmed for 10 mins, 0800 h	G. & A. Dare	SAON 211
5 Apr 2009	Adult briefly feeding, 0800 h	G. Dare	SAON 211
2 May 2009	Adult filmed feeding for 25 mins., 0800 h	G. Dare	SAON 211
3 May 2009	Adult filmed feeding & bathing for 30 mins, 1100 h	G. Dare	SAON 211
28 Jun 2009	Adult feeding, 1000 h	G. Dare	SAON 211
24 Jul 2009	Adult feeding, 1200 h	G. Dare	SAON 211
14 Nov 2009	Two adults & 2 chicks photographed	T. Jack	SAON 213
15 Nov 2009	Two(?) chasing Red-kneed Dotterels, 1800-1900 h	S. Hull, J. Hawkes & J. Fennell	Birdpedia.com
18 Nov 2009	Adult & 2 chicks bathing, 1800-1900 h; adult bathing, 1930 h	W. Syson	Birdpedia.com
26 Nov 2009	Adult & chick, 0930 h	W. Syson	Birdpedia.com
3 Dec 2009	Juvenile filmed feeding & sunning, 1300 h	G. Dare	Birds SA DVD
4 Dec 2009	Juvenile & adult feeding, 1500 h	G. Dare	Birds SA DVD
18 Dec 2009	Juvenile, 1000 h	G. Dare	Birds SA DVD
6 Jan 2010	Adult, 1150 h	T. Jack, J. Turner, T. Russell & M. Wood	SAON 213
9 Jan 2010	Adult & immature bathing	K. Stracey	SAON 213
9 Jan 2010	Three, 1000 h	T. Cowie	SAON 213
27 Jan 2010	Adult bathing	D. Cutten	SAON 213
18 Feb 2010	Three, 0900 h	T. Cowie	SAON 213
25 Feb 2010	Two adults	W. Syson	SAON 214
25 Feb 2010	Adult photographed	G. Jones	Birdpedia.com
11 Mar 2010	Adult	T. Jack	SAON 214

Where I observed the rails the habitat was dense lignum *Muehlenbeckia florentula* and rushes *Juncus kraussii*, growing in soft mud, with the rushes being close to the waterline at high tide. However, even at high tide in winter the water is only a few centimetres deep around the rushes. Directly opposite and 20 metres

from where the rails were observed was a small island, 50 m x 10 m, which can be accessed on foot at low tide while wearing waders. This made an ideal, unobtrusive site from which I could view the rails. Behind the dense 35 m x 10 m area of lignum and rush, which was the rail's refuge, a bitumen road ran parallel to the shoreline.

Feeding observations

While feeding, the adult bird walked slowly and deliberately with its neck outstretched, picking at the surface of the mud or drilling vigorously with its long bill. It mainly fed along the water line, but did enter the water to belly depth where it appeared to be feeding, probing in the water before it bathed. I did not observe it swimming or see it fly and, when disturbed it always ran rapidly into cover.

The rail's main item of food was a species of mud crab *Helograpsus haswellianus*, around 19mm in size. Crustaceans in the diet have been noted by Marchant and Higgins (1993). On the majority of occasions that it found a crab it took it to the water where it dismembered and ate it, employing its bill only and not its feet. Lewin's Rails have been said to move quickly into dense cover after securing food (Gilbert 1936; Baxter 1981) but this bird (or birds) risked being exposed while eating the mud crabs in the water, possibly to wash the crab but more likely to prevent it from escaping into the mud. If a crab was being dismembered in the rushes, it often managed to dash away briefly before being recaptured; this behaviour was filmed (Dare 2009).

Tail flicking and other behavioural observations

Through all my observations the adult rail was not seen to flick its tail whereas the juvenile did give an occasional flick. Marchant and Higgins (1993) stated that Lewin's Rail walks with a "stumpy tail erect and flicked", and most field guides agree with this, but Pizzey and Knight (2007) state that "the Lewin's Rail seldom flicks its tail". P. Schute (pers. comm.), who has closely watched Lewin's Rails at Mount Saint Joseph Pond, Altona, Victoria and used video, observed that they do not flick the tail and Dr. T. Cochran (pers. comm.) who has filmed the Tasmanian subspecies on her property on South Bruny Island also observed that the tail is not flicked while feeding. These observations strongly support my own, that Lewin's Rail does not commonly flick its tail like other rails and crakes.

The juvenile was observed several times and on one occasion it fed for at least fifteen minutes. It fed in a limited area, a small five metre strip along the tide line, never more than half a metre from cover and was very much more cautious and abrupt in its movements compared to the adults, feeding and then frequently running to the reeds. On one occasion, while a Red-kneed Dotterel *Erythrogonys cinctus* was feeding nearby, it appeared to sunbathe, standing out from the reeds with the sun on its chest and revealing its conspicuous white throat and chin.

During my observations of Lewin's Rails, they were very quiet. On occasion I heard grunting sounds within the reeds as described by Pizzey and Knight (2007), but no other sounds attributable to the rails were heard.

Breeding

Records of breeding in SA from 1918-1975 were listed by the late Shane Parker in an unpublished manuscript in S A Museum files, with most records from the South-East at Bool Lagoon, Naracoorte, Robe, Millicent and Kingston districts. Other areas listed by Parker were Policeman Point, Coorong and Nangkita, MLR (Ragless Collection). There have been further breeding reports near Little Dip CP, South-East by R. Jaensch (1987) and at Nangkita by C. Houston (Rogers 2002). There are no clutches from South Australia in the SA Museum. On 14 November 2009 at Goolwa two dark chicks were seen with two adults by Teresa Jack (pers. comm.) and on 3 December 2009 I observed one juvenile feeding and sunning itself without the adult present (Table 1); subsequent observations included a single juvenile and later three individuals (presumed to include one non-adult bird). The 2009-10 observations at Goolwa therefore lie within the known breeding range of this species in South Australia.

Visitor or resident?

Lewin's Rails have mainly been sighted in South Australia during the summer months, which led Parker (1985) to report that it is "chiefly a

Table 2. Winter sightings of Lewin's Rail in South Australia.

Date	Place	Observer	Source
5 Jun 1990	Flinders Chase CP, K.I.	R. Furner	G. Carpenter et al. Bird Report 1982-99
11 Jun 1990	Scott Creek CP MLR	D. Close	G. Carpenter et al. Bird Report 1982-99
26 Jul 2000	Pitches Swamp MLR	T. Russell	C. Rogers Bird Report 2000
28 Jul 2000	Square Waterhole MLR, south of Mount Compass	D. Edey & V-J. Russell	C. Rogers 2000
28 Aug 2002	Onkaparinga River RP	P. Ginnane	C. Rogers 2002
10 Jun 2004	Hackett Hill NFR, SE	B. Taylor	C. Rogers 2004

summer visitor with no authenticated record between 1 June and 8 August." There were 17 reported sightings between 1982-1999 (Carpenter *et al.* 2003) and 15 between 2000-2007 (Rogers 2002-2010) with only six in winter (Table 2) yet the birds reported here bred successfully at Goolwa and were observed throughout a full year. Lewin's Rail is therefore resident in the sense of being present at one site all year, at least occasionally and/or temporarily in South Australia.

CONCLUSION

Lewin's Rail is observed relatively infrequently in South Australia and breeding is rarely reported. However, the site of this report near Goolwa, with a convenient observation position opposite the birds' feeding territory, allowed close and detailed observations over an extended period. More usually in South Australia these birds have been observed in freshwater habitats. If these birds remain they should be studied further because there is still much to learn about this poorly known rail.

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