

## An Australian Record of the Grey Phalarope

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### SUMMARY

The first Australian record of the Grey Phalarope, *Phalaropus fulicarius*, is reported. Field notes on some habits noted during the bird's stay are given as well as details of the plumage and soft parts. Supporting photographs by T. G. Lowe are published. The exceptional clarity of the photographs is alone sufficient to confirm identity. The Grey Phalarope, which is normally pelagic outside the breeding season, was originally sighted, in complete non-breeding plumage, by four observers together, and later by many others at a situation approximately 350 km inland from the nearest part of the Southern Ocean.

### THE FINDING OF THE GREY PHALAROPE

On February 22, 1976, the late V. T. Lowe and his son, T. G. Lowe, of Mystic Park, Victoria, R. J. Swindley of Croydon, Victoria, and the writer went to Lake Woorinen, a large area of approximately 180 Ha. of brackish irrigation water overflow lying in a shallow natural depression near the township of Woorinen on the west side of the Murray Valley Highway, about 17 km north of Swan Hill in north-western Victoria to observe birds, particularly waders. The Lake had attracted large numbers of small waders to its mud-fringed flat shores.

The species occurring in the largest numbers were Spur-winged Plover, *Vanellus novaehollandiae*, Red-capped Dotterel, *Charadrius alexandrinus*, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, *Calidris acuminata*, Red-necked Stint, *C. ruficollis*, and Curlew Sandpiper, *C. ferruginea*. Other waders, in considerably smaller numbers were Pied Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*, Red-necked Avocet, *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*, Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*, (1), Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa lapponica*, (1), Pectoral Sandpiper, *Calidris melanotos*, (2) and Long-toed Stint, *C. subminuta*, (3).

About halfway along the western side of the lake was a broad peninsula running into the water. On the northern fringe of the peninsula, towards the extremity where small samphire bushes, *Arthrocnemum* sp., grew on the shore and a few drowned remnants of the same shrubs protruded from the water near the edge, were over 100 small waders at rest, both on the shore and in water a few millimetres deep. While we were studying the resting birds in the water with 10 x 50 binoculars from about 90 m a very pale wader, partly obscured by a small, weed-draped, dead shrub, was noted.

Its body was not clearly visible but the head and neck were well seen. A dark patch on the side of the head in the vicinity of the eye and extending to the ear coverts indicated that the bird was a phalarope. A closer approach by the four of us allowed good views of the upper-parts which were plain grey. This confirmed our earlier suspicion that it was a Grey Phalarope, *Phalaropus fulicarius*.

Two members of the party (Swindley and Smith) had had



Plate 47

The Grey Phalarope at Lake Woorinen

Photo by T. G. Lowe

previous experience of the phalaropes and one (Smith) had, since December, 1962, seen a few each of the Northern Phalarope, *P. lobatus*, and Wilson's Phalarope, *P. tricolor*, in Victoria. The Grey Phalarope at Lake Woorinen was in complete non-breeding plumage. When seen clear of the obstructing snag it was soon differentiated from the Northern Phalarope in similar plumage state by its plain grey, unpatterned upper-parts, the relatively short thick bill and its size when compared to nearby Sharp-tailed Sandpipers.

The Grey Phalarope was a little larger than three nearby Sharp-tailed Sandpipers whereas even a large female Northern Phalarope would be smaller than the small female Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. The writer was aware of this from personal field observation. From Wilson's Phalarope the Grey Phalarope observed was not so outstandingly different in size — probably a little smaller — but had a darker and more definite "eye-patch" and again the relatively short thick bill. Wilson's Phalarope has a noticeably long thin bill and a less well-defined "eye-patch".

Having reached our conclusion in regard to identification, during which a written description was taken on the spot by the writer from the four observers, field-guides carried with us were consulted and they confirmed that our species determination was correct. This then meant that not only had a new species been added to the Australian list but that all three of the species of phalarope in the world could now be considered part of the Australian avi-fauna.

The Grey Phalarope seemed fairly quiet although it was obviously watching our movements with interest. It waded and swam short distances occasionally, and sometimes appeared to be deliberately hiding itself from our view by going out of sight behind the small bits of weed-draped samphire. Sometimes although the front half of the bird was well-concealed, the rear section was unobscured and in full view. From time to time it was noted from behind one or other of the small snags with its head just clearing the top of the obstruction, or now and then peering at us through gaps in the draped weed when only a bright dark eye was evident to us. In effect it appeared to be playing a game of "hide-and-go-seek" with us, or "ostrich head-burying."

A 35 mm camera with a 400 mm lens was immediately available so it was decided that a photographic record should be attempted. Tom Lowe carried out this assignment. After preparing the camera he decorated his hat with pieces of samphire for its camouflage effect, then, lying prone, wriggled snake-like through the short samphire. He encountered soft mud as he neared the bird.

In the light of later events this extreme caution was unnecessary but at the time of the original observation it was thought that care should be exercised in case the phalarope became alarmed and flew away to be lost to us completely before its presence could be recorded on film. A few Red-necked Stints



Plate 48

Grey Phalarope swimming.

Photo by T. G. Lowe

were between the photographer and the phalarope at his closest approach but the Stints did not become greatly alarmed, moving quietly off, although one remained about 3 m from him all through the ensuing photography. Nineteen photographs — colour transparencies — were taken of which several when processed were of sufficient quality to prove the identity of the bird as the Grey Phalarope. During Tom's photographic efforts he became liberally stained with mud and baked under the glaring sun.

The bird was first seen at approximately 11.15 hours. Just over an hour later there was a sudden disturbance among the waders in front of us and all quickly sprang into the air and flew rapidly towards some islets well out into the centre of the lake, where the phalarope disappeared from sight. A few minutes later a Black Falcon, *Falco subniger*, dashed at birds near the islets causing several densely packed flocks, formed from the hundreds of waders, to hurtle about over the water, which made it more unlikely that we could relocate the phalarope in a short time.

#### DESCRIPTION OF GREY PHALAROPE FROM FIELD NOTES OF FEBRUARY 22, 1976

**Size:** A little larger than three nearby Sharp-tailed Sandpipers.

**Upper-parts:** Head all white with a blackish mark commencing in front of eye and continuing below it, extending on to the ear coverts. Rear of crown deep grey (blackish) becoming lighter and narrower down nape. Mantle, back and wing-coverts light unmottled grey with a faint bluish wash extending to sides of breast near wing bend. Primaries and tail dark grey-brown. Shafts of primaries white (a noticeable feature) and tips of primaries and tail with a pale rusty tinge.

**Under-parts:** Pure white from chin and sides of neck to undertail coverts. Feather of underparts along sides and flanks extending up to enclose edge of the folded wing.

**In flight:** White below. Above, a well-defined white wing-bar showing clearly against the dark primaries and overall pale grey of the wing-coverts and back. White sides to the dark rump.

**Bill:** All dark. A little shorter than head length.

**Legs:** Greyish.

**Eye:** Dark.

**Call:** A single low "twit", or the same note repeated in a short series.

**N.B.** From later field observation and from colour transparencies where it was well-shown, the dark bill was noted to have some brownish-yellow at the base and a suggestion of the same colour on the culmen. The legs were slate-grey, including the lobing of the toes which also showed a little dull pink in the webbing between them.

#### LATER OBSERVATIONS

The Grey Phalarope remained at Lake Woorinen till at least March 25, 1976. Throughout the duration of its stay many observers, including some participants in an official Bird Observers Club campout, visited the lake to see the bird and most

were successful. A number of observers came specially from places as far away as southern Victoria, parts of southern New South Wales and from the Australian Capital Territory. It was interesting to hear the various comments made on the activities of the phalarope. A few found it to be fairly shy while most thought it tame, or approachable to the point of stupidity. Often the phalarope was seen ashore and one visitor was reported to be as close as one metre. Others were able to approach so near that, if they wished to view the bird with binoculars, they had to move back to place it in closest focus.

Vic. Lowe, while watching the phalarope with three other observers, was struck particularly by its almost unbelievable tameness. The bird was feeding about two metres from them when it suddenly flew up to pass low over a shoulder of one of the group to alight again on the water approximately 4 m from them to commence feeding again. Vic. commented that he thought "the bird had never seen a human before, not even an Eskimo", and that it appeared to regard the observers as "four upright seals".

Robert Swindley and the writer — two of the original observers — returned with J. Barkla to the lake on March 6 when the bird was watched closely at length under good light conditions allowing more detailed study of the bird including bill and leg colour. During its stay the Grey Phalarope was photographed by several people. It is believed that, as a result, a few hundred colour transparencies of the bird are in existence. Because of the approachability no doubt many of those taken by Tom Lowe in March are excellent. They include shots of the bird ashore showing it in complete detail down to the colour in the webbing between the toes.

### THE GREY PHALAROPE

The Grey Phalarope is midway in size between the smaller Northern Phalarope and the larger Wilson's Phalarope, the other two of the three species in the world. The breeding plumage of the Grey Phalarope is in direct contrast to the pale greyish non-breeding plumage. Both sexes at breeding time become generally reddish-brown with large white patches on the sides of the head which encompass the ear-coverts. The female is larger than the male, this is the case with the other two species also, and has a black crown and face. The Grey breeds further north than the other two species in Iceland, some other Arctic islands, Arctic Siberia and Arctic North America.

After the breeding season it moves southward, dispersing mostly to well-established pelagic feeding areas and is then only found coastally or on inland lakes or in similar situations during migration, or when seeking shelter from prolonged rough weather at sea, or as a vagrant. There are three specimen records of the Grey Phalarope in New Zealand over a period of years, the last in 1934. All were females in full breeding plumage collected during the southern winter.

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**Further reports of unusual feeding method in Ardeidae.** With reference to the note, "Unusual feeding method of Plumed Egrets," by Jaroslav Klapste in *Australian Bird Watcher* 6:179, I have to record two other uses of the same method by other members of the family Ardeidae.

In July, 1975, my wife, daughter and I were camped for a week on Eyre Creek, approximately 130 kms north of Birdsville. Large areas of flood water remained, creeks and channels were full and many species of water birds were present in large numbers.

Where we were camped, Eyre Creek was steep-banked and deep, its banks thickly lined with Lignum and overhung with Coolabahs. This gave the large egret/heron population no chance to hunt by the normal wading and stalking method. It was here we saw the method of feeding described by Klapste adopted by both the White-necked Heron, *Ardea pacifica*, and the White Egret, *Egretta alba*.

The birds were perched on any available overhanging limb, sometimes up to five or six metres above the water, watching intently. On sighting movement the birds would dive straight on to the surface of the water, landing with a splash and spearing forward with the bill, then with some difficulty, flying back up to their perches. It appeared that some care was being taken to keep the wings out of the water as much as possible. The main food being taken seemed to be a freshwater shrimp.

*Ellis Tucker, Halls Gap, Victoria, 1/9/76.*

#### CORRIGENDUM

Due to an unfortunate oversight the following material was omitted from "The Birds of the Bendigo District," *The Australian Birdwatcher* 6:186-208. It should be inserted on p. 197, following the first line on that page.

**Phaps chalcoptera**, Common Bronzewing.

Fairly common resident in most forest areas and especially in the Whipstick. Breeding.

**Phaps elegans**, Brush Bronzewing.

Rather rare resident, most sightings in the Whipstick area. Also found at Sedgwick to the south and Wychitella to the north. Breeding.

**Ocyphaps lophotes**, Crested Pigeon.

Rather rare. Nests at Huntly every year. Also found in the northern areas of the district. Increasing in numbers.

Also, on p. 194, **Falco niger** should read **Falco subniger**.