

The Painted Snipe and its Nestlings

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The Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*) is an anomalous bird whose structural relationship with other groups is not very clear. Lowe, after an examination of the osteology of the genus, concluded (1931, p. 532) that the species was probably a surviving relic of a primitive sandpiper-plover stock and thus not closely related to the true snipes (*Capella*) though superficially resembling those birds. It is, in effect, an evolutionary offshoot and, like all such birds, is of considerable interest to ornithologists, and especially so to the field observer.

The distribution of the genus (one species and two subspecies are now recognised) includes Africa, southern Asia, India, China, and the Philippines to Australia and Tasmania. A Painted Snipe (*Nycticryphes semi-collaris*), belonging to the same family as *Rostratula*, occurs in South America.

It is known that the female is polyandrous and that she initiates courtship with the smaller and less colourful male. The latter attends to the nest-building, incubation and the care of the young, and in the meantime the female seeks another mate. However, there is still a very considerable field open for a detailed investigation into the general behaviour of the species.

In Australia the Painted Snipe appears to be nomadic, with a liking for freshwater lakes and swamps, particularly those that are shallow and boggy and contain small grassy islets. It was in such an environment that two of these rare birds were seen near Windsor, some 30 miles west of Sydney, early in November, 1959. The species is indeed a rarity in the Sydney district, since less than a dozen occurrences have been noted during the past 25 years.

The presence of the two Painted Snipe near Windsor caused a mild sensation among Sydney bird-lovers, most of whom had not previously seen the bird in life. On one occasion, in December, 1959, the species was a "new" bird for seven of the eight experienced observers present. Incidentally, it was noticed that the "odd man out", having then seen the bird on two occasions, rather enjoyed his eminence.

Graeme Chapman first located the pair of Painted Snipe on November 8, 1959. Visits were then made to the swamp by various observers at weekly intervals or less until mid-December, when the birds seemed to have left the area; nor could they be found during subsequent trips extending into early January.

It was thought that the birds might be about to nest because they were frequently flushed from, or near, two small islets on which were a couple of well-formed depressions or "scrapes", amongst the grass. Nothing came of these hollows but, if we had cogitated on the habits of the female, we might have searched rather more



Painted Snipe Nestlings showing the striped pattern of the back. Each bird has been banded with a numbered C.S.I.R.O. band.

assiduously for a second, or even a third, male. The fact that a second male was present and brooding during this period escaped our notice until December 12, a month after the pair of birds was first seen in the locality.

On that particular morning, after disturbing a female and a male from near their favourite place, we flushed a lone male from some grassy tussocks growing in water about 100 yards away. The bird settled some distance off but shortly afterwards flew back and seemed anxious to return to a particular area of some ten square yards in extent. During the next hour or so that male was purposely disturbed several times and always he came back within a few minutes. Eventually, E. S. Hoskin found three nestlings in down, well hidden in the thick grass.

At no time did the male call or indulge in any distraction display, nor did he show any aggressiveness. He was alert and rather wary when returning to the nestlings but did not come near us when they were being examined and photographed. The female and her male consort were not seen again after they had settled about a quarter of a mile away in a grazing paddock in which there was a considerable growth of tussock-grass.

As far as we could ascertain only one female and two males were present on the swamp. Our observations are in agreement with the known polyandrous habits of the female and are in keeping with the presumed fact that she takes no further interest in nesting activities after laying her eggs. (These eggs usually number four and are a dull, yellowish-stone colour, heavily blotched with black and dark brown.)

Although nestling Painted Snipe have been observed on a number of occasions in Australia (Morse, 1918; Bright & Tayson, 1932; Bright, 1935), the plumage of such birds, as far as I know, has never been described. The nestling of the Australian race – *australis* – agrees closely with that of the nominate race – *benghalensis* – as figured (side view) in colour by Sir William Jardine in 1852 from specimens bought at an Indian bazaar (1852). Stuart Baker's account (1929) of the young appears to have been taken from Jardine's illustration.

The following description is based on field notes and a later study of colour transparencies of the three nestlings found near Windsor. The birds were considered to be not more than a week old; they were approximately 3 inches in length, including the comparatively long bill, which was some three-eighths of an inch long and leaden-grey in colour. The legs and toes were olive-green and the iris umber-brown. The only call heard from them was a weak "cheep", almost inaudible at a distance of a few feet.

DESCRIPTION OF NESTLING PAINTED SNIPE

General colour of upperparts, including crown, light fawn; underparts slightly darker. A black stripe from the base of the upper mandible extends over the centre of the crown, where it opens out

into an elongate-oval, to close again on the nape; the colour between the oval on the crown is light brown. A bright tan stripe, approximately $\frac{1}{8}$ inch wide, extends along the entire back, and is bordered by narrower black lines. A narrow black stripe commences at the base of the lower mandible and extends through the eye along the entire length of the body about level with the small, undeveloped wings. A shorter black line, about half the length of the body, occurs on the sides of the abdomen below the wings.

Protruding, hair-like down on the nape, sides of the body and on the tail, gives the nestlings a very soft appearance and rather suggests "hairy caterpillars", as noted by Neil McGilp (*in litt.* to V. Lowe). The striking and colourful pattern of longitudinal stripes of fawn, bright tan and black, whilst apparent enough in the open, effectively conceals the young birds in their grassy environment.

In flight the adult birds have a strong, steady wing-beat more like that of the plovers than the rapid movements of sandpipers and true snipe. When disturbed they often fly 100 yards or more, mostly in a fairly direct line, and rather low, before alighting. On the ground they move with a kind of running walk and while doing so they tip the tail and the body, and less frequently the head. It has been suggested that Painted Snipe are to some extent crepuscular, or nocturnal, in their habits.

A male shot in the Windsor (Sydney) district in December, 1947, weighed $3\frac{1}{2}$ ounces.

Interesting observations, accompanied by excellent photographs, on the aggressive or intimidatory display and the defensive behaviour of a female Painted Snipe in captivity were published by Athel D'Ombra in 1944 (1944). Informative notes by J. N. McGilp, on the nesting of the species in South Australia appeared some years ago in the *South Australian Ornithologist* (1934).

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