

## A Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* at Port Fairy, Victoria

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### Introduction

The Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* breeds over the high Arctic in North America, Greenland, Iceland, Spitzbergen and northern Asia. Migration in the non-breeding season is usually across the eastern Pacific and Atlantic Oceans to wintering grounds off Chile and west Africa. Vagrants in southern latitudes have occurred off the Antarctic Peninsula, in the Falkland Islands, in Argentina, New Zealand (first recorded in 1883) and Australia (Hayman et al. 1986).

The first record of the Grey Phalarope in Australia was at Lake Woorinen near Swan Hill, Victoria, from 22 February to 25 March 1976 (Smith 1976). Subsequent records in Australia (as listed in Higgins & Davies in prep.) have been at Lake Bolac, Victoria, on 1 April 1986 (Mitchell 1986, Peake 1991), McGrath Flat, South Australia, from 7-11 July 1989 (Hewish et al. 1990), and Discovery Bay, Victoria, on 30 May 1992. The latter record was of the remains of a beach-washed specimen. This paper details a further record at Port Fairy, Victoria, from 12-15 July 1992.

### The sighting

The bird was first sighted on 12 July at the Sandy Cove Reserve in Port Fairy by a local naturalist, Ian Kearney, who thought it to be a phalarope. Its presence was drawn to the attention of MG who on the following morning confirmed that it was probably a Grey Phalarope.

GA and MG observed the bird for approximately 30 minutes in mid morning on 13 July. The initial look of the bird was of a small, short-billed phalarope in non-breeding or juvenile plumage. It was constantly swimming, spinning and pecking at insects on the surface of a remnant saltmarsh pool within the Sandy Cove Reserve (see Plate II). The bird's relatively stout bill, slightly thickened distally, was immediately noted, and this led to the positive identification of the bird as a Grey Phalarope. Two reference books (Hayman et al. 1986 and Pringle 1987) were immediately consulted at the field site.

RF observed the phalarope between 1600 and 1650 h on 13 July and took several photographs. He too identified it as a Grey Phalarope on the basis of the stout bill.

The bird's habitat was a brackish to saline pool with extensive flooded Beaded Glasswort *Sarcocornia quinqueflora* mixed with lesser amounts of Creeping Brookweed *Samolus repens* in the higher parts, and small areas of mudflats. This pool is less than 100 m from the lower estuary of the Moyne River and is approximately 200 m from an exposed rocky coastline. The seaward side of the Reserve is skirted by a relatively busy road, with a foot and bike path around the inland edge. A drain from a wetland developed for recreation runs through the pool into a branch of the Moyne River.



**The Grey Phalarope at Port Fairy, Victoria, July 1992.**

The phalarope was nearly always seen swimming in water which was at least belly-deep for Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* and it was always feeding vigorously on the two days that it was watched closely. Only once, the bird was observed to walk through shallow water with some of the upper legs exposed.

Other species seen with the phalarope were up to 10 Silver Gulls (the phalarope occasionally fluttered a short distance when an individual gull passed closely) and up to 30 Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* which generally did not feed close to the bird. Other birds noted using the pool from 13 to 16 July were up to three Red-kneed Dotterels *Erythronyx cinctus*, five Black-fronted Dotterels *Euseyornis melanops*, seven Grey Teal *Anas gracilis* and five White-fronted Chats *Epthianura albifrons*.

The bird was not seen on 14 July but it was again found at the Sandy Cove Reserve on the morning of 15 July. The last sighting of the phalarope was late in the afternoon of 15 July when it suddenly flew high towards the sea. Several nearby locations (including saltmarsh pools, an estuary and an exposed rocky coastline with some pools) were searched for the bird between 14 and 17 July but it was never sighted away from the Sandy Cove Reserve.

The phalarope was seen by more than 24 observers. Observations from as close as 4 m were made with equipment including 15-60× and 25× telescopes and binoculars. Several photographs on black-and-white film were taken through a 600 mm lens and some video footage was recorded.

## Description

This field description was drawn from black-and-white and colour photographs (taken by GA and RF), video footage (taken by Max and Lois Phillips) and also field notes.

**Upperparts.** A broad dark grey stripe extended from each side of the crown, joining on the back of the crown and extending to the base of the hindneck and spreading to the sides of the breast (see Plate 11). The middle of the crown up to the forehead was mottled paler grey. A broad dark grey stripe ('orbital patch') extended at a slightly downward angle from each lore around the eye to the ear-coverts. The rest of the plumage around the head was white. The mantle to the back was mid grey with four pale grey-fringed blackish feathers in the scapulars. The mid grey of the mantle graded into the darker grey of the lower hindneck which extended to the side of the breast.

**Underparts.** The underparts from the chin to the vent appeared to be mainly white except for broad grey-streaked feathers extending along the flanks almost to the vent.

**Bill.** All black or very dark grey; straight, relatively stout bill (for phalarope: Hayman et al. 1986), slightly thickened distally.

**Eyes.** Not noted.

**Legs and feet.** Feet not seen, upper legs seen but colour not noted owing to poor light.

**Call.** Not noted.

**Upperparts in flight.** Definite narrow white wing-bar; no more detail was recorded owing to the 'explosive' take-off of the bird.

## Discussion

From the short length of the bill and the presence of the dark grey face-patch, the bird observed at Port Fairy was either a Grey Phalarope or a Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* and not a Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*. The distinctive features of the Grey Phalarope relative to the Red-necked Phalarope (after Cramp & Simmons 1983 and Hayman et al. 1986) are as follow.

*All ages*

- (1) Thicker or wider bill in the Grey Phalarope (Plate 63 in Hayman et al. 1986 shows that, when seen from above, the bill of the Red-necked Phalarope is narrow and tapers evenly from its base to tip; by comparison, the bill of the Grey Phalarope is stout and thickens distally after tapering from the base).
- (2) Slightly bulkier body of Grey Phalarope (therefore floating higher when swimming).
- (3) Proportionally longer wings than the Red-necked Phalarope.

*Breeding*

- (1) Obviously different plumage.
- (2) Yellowish colour at the base of the bill of the Grey Phalarope.

*Non-breeding*

- (1) paler and plainer plumage on the upperparts of the Grey Phalarope.
- (2) bill 'black with brown or grey tinge, base sometimes yellowish or reddish-flesh' (Cramp & Simmons 1983); bill always blackish in the Red-necked Phalarope.

*Juvenile*

According to Hayman et al. (1986), the Grey Phalarope in juvenile plumage has dark feathers on the upperparts (crown, hindneck, mantle, scapulars, coverts and tertials) that are fringed or lined with 'buffish-brown'. In the juvenile plumage of the Red-necked Phalarope, the feathers of the crown, hindneck and some median or greater coverts are also dark but are unfringed or obscurely fringed buff, and the dark feathers of the mantle, tertials, scapulars and larger coverts are fringed or lined narrowly with 'bright orange-buff'. Prater et al. (1977) note that the juvenile Grey Phalarope has a blackish bill with a brown-tinged base.

An important similarity between the two species in juvenile and some non-breeding plumages is that both have an all-dark bill.

**Diagnosis**

Since the phalarope seen at Port Fairy had a relatively thick and wide bill and quite plain grey upperparts, it was identified by the authors independently as a Grey Phalarope. RF, in particular, has had previous experience with the Grey Phalarope (one sighting in South Australia and examination of the specimen found at Discovery Bay) and the Red-necked Phalarope. Photographs of the bird were sent to Rory O'Brien of the Museum of Victoria who identified the bird as a Grey Phalarope on the evidence of greater extent of the eye-patch, thicker bill, and presence of the black nape compared with the Red-necked Phalarope. While visiting the Museum of Victoria, Abbotsford, shortly before this sighting, GA had had the opportunity to observe the reference collection of skins of the three phalarope species (including the specimen from Discovery Bay) so was familiar with differences between the three species. The Records Appraisal Committee (RAC) of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union also accepted the identification, adding that 'the more robust jizz' points to the Grey Phalarope rather than the other two phalarope species (RAC 1993).

The age of the Port Fairy bird is harder to determine than its identification. Adult Grey Phalaropes are plain grey by September with 'all coverts grey'. Juveniles moult into 'first-winter' plumage from August to November and 'buff-fringed coverts are retained and sometimes also a few dark feathers in the cap, back or rump' (Hayman et al. 1986). About March-April, first-winter birds moult into 'first-summer' plumage

('often a poor version of adult breeding plumage') and then moult completely into adult winter plumage about June-October (J. Cox pers. comm.).

The Port Fairy phalarope had some fresh dark scapular feathers which suggest that it was in 'first-summer' plumage. Juvenile plumage can be discounted because these feathers were not brownish and worn. Early adult breeding plumage can be discounted because this plumage normally appears several months earlier.

The photograph on page 408 of Pringle (1987) shows a juvenile Grey Phalarope moulting into 'first-winter' (non-breeding) plumage in September 1985; this example is very similar to the Port Fairy bird, including the dark feathers in the scapulars, but differs in appearing slightly darker grey on the wings and mantle. On this evidence, it is most likely that the Grey Phalarope recorded at Port Fairy from 12-15 July 1992 was an immature bird approximately one year old.

It is interesting to review the other Grey Phalarope records in Australia which show that non-breeding-plumaged birds were recorded between 22 February and 1 April and that breeding-plumaged birds were recorded between 30 May and 11 July. The Port Fairy bird is thus the first winter record of a non-breeding-plumaged individual in Australia.

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