

## Some Unusual Records of Birds Seen in the Sunraysia and Riverland Districts of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia

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### Introduction

The Riverland District of South Australia and the Sunraysia District of Victoria and New South Wales are very similar. Both contain extensive irrigation and fruit-producing areas, billabongs and riverine flats with associated vegetation e.g. Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, Black Box *E. largiflorens*, Lignum *Muehlenbeckia cunninghamii*, Common Reed *Phragmites communis*, and Cumbungi *Typha angustifolia*. The area under review is watered by the Murray-Darling and its anabranches and channels.

The following records are of birds which have appeared in Sunraysia and Riverland as a probable consequence of storms or unusual climatic conditions, or which have arrived there as vagrants. In some cases no details were available of the weather at or immediately prior to the date of the record; it is hoped that observers finding sea-birds or other vagrants will, whenever possible, make notes of weather patterns relevant to their discovery.

### Annotated list



Lesser Broad-billed Prion *Pachytila salvini*. A specimen now lodged in the National Museum of Victoria was collected by N. J. Favaloro at Mildura on 3 September 1954 (Wheeler 1967). Strong north winds occurring on the 1 September, which gradually changed to the south-west on 2 September, had probably been a factor in bringing the bird so far from the sea.



Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*. Details of a bird found near Waikerie, S.A., on 5 May 1971 indicate it may have arrived in the area as a result of stormy conditions and strong westerly winds of the previous day. The bird was kept alive and fed on 'oddments and grain' by Mr and Mrs Mack. Upon its release by Mrs Mack on 10 May the bird seemed quite strong and flew well.

No details are available for a specimen from Renmark, S.A. (Parker et al. 1979).

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A live specimen was collected in Mildura by N. J. Favalaro on or about 15 May 1960. The specimen was made into a study skin and lodged in the collection of the National Museum of Victoria (Wheeler 1967).

It is of interest to note the dates of these records since this species is generally considered to be absent from waters of Southern Australia between April and September. However, observations during recent and regular boat trips by ornithologists to seas off the South Australian and Victorian coasts suggest that a good number of Short-tailed Shearwaters spend the winter in these offshore waters (N. McCrie, R. Dunstan pers. comm.).



Wilson's Storm-Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*. A single bird was found dead in a vineyard at Irymple, Victoria, on 13 November 1965. It was noted that very strong westerly winds blew on 11 November and moderated on 12 November. The specimen was given to local ornithologist Alec Hawtin and was subsequently identified by him and the late H. F. Thomas (Hobbs 1966). A study skin was made from the remains and lodged with the National Museum of Victoria where its identification was confirmed.



Least Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*. A brief account surrounding the occurrence on 5 March 1983 of this species at Boggy Flat, near Waikerie, appeared in the *Sunraysia Bird Observers Club Newsletter* vol. 1, p.7, and a recent and more complete account in the *South Australian Ornithological Association Newsletter* no. 196, June 1983. The observers, Mr and Mrs R. J. Hollamby, were able to note such features as prominent bill, angular-shaped wings, white markings on side of body near shoulder, long and deeply forked tail and swift flight. This sighting occurred after 15 days of humid, almost tropical, weather with winds mainly from the north and east.



Cattle Egret *Ardeola ibis*. The first record of this species for the Sunraysia area was taken 2 May 1980 when a single bird was observed feeding in association with cattle on flooded pasture near the Mildura Water Ski Club (Sonter 1980). Subsequently two further sightings for Sunraysia were recorded: namely on 20 November 1980 when 15 Cattle Egret were found on a swamp near Dareton, N.S.W. (Sonter 1981a) and on 8 October 1982 when a single bird was observed in the same location as the first Mildura record (Sonter 1981b).

In the Riverland the first known sighting was made by Peter Schramm near Berri in 1973. Two birds in breeding plumage were observed among cattle grazing in a lucerne paddock between the Cannery, the Racecourse, and the Berri Golf Links. A second sighting was made by the Thorn family of a single bird on their irrigated dairy farm at Wool-

punda, S.A., on 8 December 1980. The bird, described by the Thorns as a squat, smallish, white egret with obvious orange bill and 'bib', stayed for several hours before disappearing. During its stay it remained with the grazing Jersey cattle as they cropped a maturing paddock of oats and lucerne.



Magpie Goose *Anseranus semipalmata*. There is some evidence to suggest that this species was relatively common along the Murray River in the past. Under the *nom de plume* of 'Rambler' H. S. Taylor (1921) wrote that 'Pied Geese are no longer common along the Murray and its great lagoons. In early days big flocks haunted our river . . .' H. (Harry) S. Taylor of Renmark was the son of Gilbert Taylor. 'H.S.', as he was also known, was a remarkable person and excelled in natural history and in his wide historical knowledge.

He was a resident of Renmark and Lake Victoria, N.S.W., and it may have been in that region of the Murray River whence his observations and records originated.

In Hobbs (1961) it was stated that H. J. Frith saw two Pied Geese at Fletcher's Lake, Dareton in 1958.

H. F. Thomas (1968) stated that two Magpie Geese were recorded by Mr P. Wilkinson on 7 March 1964 in the King's Billabong Sanctuary near Mildura. Further to this record Thomas (1968) says a shooter saw a small flock fly over the Main Water of the sanctuary in 1940, but he believed this to be a rather dubious account.

Mr D. Kneebone of Berri, S.A., reported seeing a single bird on 17 November 1972 on the Cobdogla Flat which lies between Cobdogla and Kingston-on-Murray, west of Barmera, S.A.; Kneebone, having been a resident of the Northern Territory for 20 years, was familiar with the Magpie Goose in that State.

Formerly this species bred at Bool Lagoon near Naracoorte, S.A. (Frith 1967).



Wandering Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*. Peter Schramm observed two birds resting on an exposed log in a swamp 1 km south of the Pumping Station, Cobdogla, S.A., during 1975. Mr R. Germein, a competent ornithologist, observed eight birds at the same swamp in 1979. Details surrounding these observations were not recorded.

Though this species appears on three separate bird lists (Anon. undated) for the Sunraysia District there does not appear to be any other documented evidence for its inclusion.



Plumed Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna eytoni*. As in the case of the preceding species there is little evidence to suggest how it came to be placed on all three separate bird lists for Sunraysia prior to 1964-65. Hobbs (1965) gives reference to 'about 10 birds seen near Boiel

Creek, N.S.W., prior to the opening of the duck season' (1965?). As these 10 birds were in the 'flapper' stage, it was assumed that they were reared in the near vicinity of Boiel Creek and the observation would constitute the first known breeding record of the species for Sunraysia. Hobbs (1969) when reviewing the Plumed Whistling-Duck in Sunraysia, failed to acknowledge the above observation of the 10 birds at Boiel Creek. However in his review he makes mention of two birds being shot on Mindook Station, about mid way between Mildura and Euston, some 40 years ago and also of a live specimen, believed to have come from the vicinity of Euston, N.S.W., being kept in an aviary at the Gol Gol Hotel.

Another reference concerns an observation made by Mr Bruce Morris. In September 1964 Morris saw two ducks at the edge of the King's Billabong Sanctuary and from his description of them it was concluded that they were Plumed Whistling-Ducks. However Thomas (1968) who had a remarkable penchant for keeping records may have doubted the credibility of Morris, for no mention is made of the September 1964 sighting in his paper on the avifauna of King's Billabong Sanctuary.

In view of the above 'rather flimsy evidence', as Hobbs put it, the species was hardly considered a 'Sunraysia bird'. However on 29 December 1968 Hobbs finally encountered the Plumed Whistling-Duck in the region when he observed five individuals amongst 1 500 Grey Teal *Anas gibberifrons* at Fletcher's Lake.

In the Riverland there is but a single record. Peter Schramm and others observed about 25 birds perched on a dead Black Box in Chamber's Creek near Cobdogla. The observation was made in the spring of 1956 when the Murray River was in flood.



Cape Barren Goose *Cereopsis novaehollandiae*. The Riverland District seems to have fared better with records of this species than Sunraysia. The late Mr 'Curly' Jarret of Berri told Peter Schramm that dozens used to occur on the river flats near Berri and towards Loxton, S.A., prior to the installation of locks on the river in the 1920s.

Schramm records sighting four on the flooded Moorook Oval in about June or July during the 1956 flood, and two at Paddy Perry's bridge above the Loveday Swamp in March 1952.

Mack was informed that small numbers had appeared during 1974-75 in the Riverland but the reports were received too late for investigation.

A more recent record reported to Mack concerns an immature bird that had 'crash-landed' on a roof during the night of 21 June 1981 at Ramco Heights, S.A. The incident followed a day of strong north winds and a severe storm from the west. It remained for six days, during which time it was fed with grain by local residents, particularly by Mr K. Lewis, of Ramco.

The few accounts of Cape Barren Geese for Sunraysia are mainly based on unreliable sight records through verbal contacts. Hobbs (1961) states that N. J. Favaloro had received a specimen that had been shot, supposedly from the Mildura district.

Simpson (1972) received reliable reports during a field trip to the south-west corner of New South Wales that three geese stayed on Moorna Station 32 km west of Wentworth for two months from December 1967 to February 1968. The birds, during that period, favoured two irrigated paddocks of lucerne.



Brolga *Grus rubicundus*. Again, records relating to this species prior to 1960 for both Sunraysia and Riverland are very few indeed. It appears on all three bird lists for Sunraysia. Observations of Brolgas prior to 1960 may have either been taken for granted or simply went unnoticed. Despite their size, colour and slow deliberate walk, they are wary and easily overlooked.

Hobbs (1961) found no evidence of Brolgas in the Sunraysia district and did not include them in his paper the 'Birds of South-west New South Wales'. He did, however, subsequently list four birds which were present at Fletcher's Lake on 2 December 1965 and noted a possible record of two birds said to have been at Moorna Station until August 1966 (Hobbs 1966).

The Moorna Station record is interesting as Mack received a report of 'several dozen' near Wentworth during December 1968. Further to these records, Sonter (1981b) also received a verbal report of Brolgas at Kelso Station just west of Wentworth, where several birds stayed for many months feeding among Bluebush and Saltbush (*Chenopodiaceae*). At Dareton, N.S.W., two birds stayed for some weeks in flooded irrigated pasture (Sonter 1981b).

Other reports received during 1980-83 in the Sunraysia district confirmed the presence of Brolgas at Boiel Creek and Pooncarie, N.S.W., and at South Merbein, Nangiloc, Iraak and Red Cliffs, all in Victoria. A successful breeding attempt was thought to have taken place on a swamp near Karadoc, Victoria, in 1982 (Sonter pers. obs.).

Records indicate a similar increase in the occurrence of this species in the Riverland between 1971-83 with a peak in 1980-83. Two birds were observed on Maize Island near Waikerie on 25 February 1971 and reported by Mack. Eight birds were observed by Mack along the Snake River near Paringa, S.A., in 1980-81. Just prior to 1981 when the Spectacle Lakes, S.A., dried up, two birds were observed there by Schramm; at around the same time several (?) were reported to Mack as being present in a dry paddock south of Waikerie. Up to six birds were observed along the Pike River (near the Snake River) during January-February of 1983 (J. Mack pers. obs.).



Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*. Corbould and Dunstan (Corbould 1976) observed a single specimen on 14 December 1976 at Lake Ranfurley, Victoria. A further record for Sunraysia relates to a single bird seen at Dareton (Morris et al. 1981). The date, observers and specific locality are not given.

It is not a common bird even as a passage migrant, and it was not surprising that a specimen gained attention when it stayed for 10 days on a property owned by the Thorn family at Woolpunda, S.A., from 29 November 1981. On 27 November strong north to north-west winds had persisted for most of the day prior to an evening storm, abating to south-westerlies and humid conditions on 28 November. Observers found the bird easy to approach as it fed in the pasture or rested on the irrigation spray line.

Thomas (1970) in his paper on waders migrating across Australia gives reference to a Lesser Golden Plover being observed at Morgan, North-west of Waikerie.



Pacific Gull *Larus pacificus*. A bird identified as this species was first observed at the then Mildura Council Tip on 23 August 1975 (Corbould 1976). Subsequently a number of ornithologists visiting the district observed what may have been the same bird in various places over a wide area during several months. It was last seen by a newspaper photographer on 6 March 1976.

A solitary Pacific Gull was observed on the southern shore of Lake Bonney, near Barmera, S.A., on the morning of 15 August 1980 by Schramm. It is thought the bird may have arrived in the area following a cool change which swept through the district accompanied by strong winds from the south-west. Peter Schramm is familiar with this species, having resided at Tumby Bay, S.A., during his early years.



Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*. A Crested Tern, banded (no. 071-05142) by M. H. Waterman at Troubridge Island, S.A., on 19 January 1969 was found in a wounded and exhausted condition at Sunlands North near Ramco, S.A., on 4 July 1969. The bird, thought to have collided with overhead wires, was found on a front lawn. Mr F. McGuire, who owns the house, had little difficulty in capturing the bird. The tern was fed on fish by Mack and his wife and released at Hart's Lagoon, Waikerie, on 5 July. Upon release, and with the band still attached, it flew strongly away. It was thought that the strong winds and rain had driven it off course to reach Sunlands North.

A sight observation of a Crested Tern at Hart's Lagoon was made on 26 April 1970; there was speculation whether it could be the same tern that had been released there some 10 months earlier (J. Mack pers. obs.).

A record of a Crested Tern found alive on the edge of the Calder Highway on 23 March 1967 is just as remarkable. N. J. Favaloro found the bird and had no difficulty in capturing it owing to its exhausted condition. The bird subsequently died (Hobbs 1968). The only details relating to the weather are that strong south-westerly winds, with raised dust, occurred on the previous day.

## Discussion

The authors are well aware that such a paper as this poses various problems, e.g. how much detail should one enter into; which species should one include? The sea-bird records illustrate the distance inland such birds can travel when they have become disorientated or are subjected to inclement weather. Some records show a decline in historical abundance, while others indicate a possible modern extension of distribution. It is noted that the areas reviewed are similar in geographic position, climate and habitat, and also that several of the species listed above appeared at approximately the same time of year.

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