

An Australian Sight Record of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper

(Tryngites subruficollis).

By FREDERICK T. H. SMITH, Kew, Victoria

On March 17, 1962, while walking slowly along the eastern side of Cherry's Swamp, Altona, I spent some time in observing the many hundreds of small waders that were concentrated in the area. Among the migrants were large numbers of Double-banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*), Red-capped Dotterels (*C. alexandrinus*), Curlew-Sandpipers (*Erolia ferruginea*), Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*E. acuminata*) and Red-necked Stints (*E. ruficollis*).

Many of these birds were feeding on the sparsely vegetated, semi-solid, mud-flat near the waters edge. The numerous small birds walking and running about were somewhat confusing to observe. While making a final sweep with the field-glasses, before moving on to the nearby Kororoit Creek, I noticed a small wader approximately one hundred yards away which, because of the appearance of its upper-parts, seemed different from the dotterels and sandpipers with which it was mingling. After commenting to my companion on the observation, and lowering my field-glasses, I walked about one hundred feet nearer to the spot where the bird had been seen but I could not locate it again. Almost in the same position was a Double-banded Dotterel which, at the time, I thought might have been the bird, although its pattern was so different. As further observation revealed nothing unusual the incident, like so many similar ones over the years, was forgotten for the time being.

Next morning, March 18, I returned alone to the area. It was a fine, sunny, windless day, ideal for bird observation.

At approximately 8.45 a.m. I observed again, in the same place, the bird that had aroused my curiosity on the previous day. This time I could see that it was undoubtedly a member of the Scolopacidae that had not previously been recorded by me. I began an extremely cautious approach for closer observation, a precaution which I shortly found was unnecessary. The small bird allowed me to get within 30 feet before it started to move slowly away, feeding most of the time, but keeping a wary eye turned in my direction.

After following the bird for two periods, each of about a quarter of an hour, during the first hour, I came to the decision that it was a Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*). Its appearance closely tallied with the paintings and literature of this species which I had previously studied. Hoping to have at least one experienced bird-observer to confirm my identification, I jog-trotted about a half-mile to the nearest telephone booth and tried to contact some of my friends. However, I was unsuccessful and on returning to the area I could not immediately find the bird

again. A circuit of the swamp was made, a distance of over a mile, and the bird was finally located in the original area.

It was then studied, mostly at close range, for nearly two hours, during which time it walked about 500 yards. I followed closely in its track, making entries in a note book as we moved. Noticing that the bird's left wing was slightly drooped I thought that it had probably been hit by a shotgun pellet at some time and that it could not fly. In an endeavour to catch it for hand held study I moved quickly towards the bird, but it started running away and watching me over its back at the same time. When I had approached to within 20 feet it took wing and flew strongly for about 100 yards. A small white patch showed on the injured wing, apparently where a few small feathers from the coverts had been dislodged.

Later in the day, when I was about a mile away from the bird's position, I met three other observers and told them of the "new" bird. Returning to the swamp we found the Sandpiper within five minutes of leaving the car at nearby Millers Road, and soon we were having extremely good views of the wader. The three visitors then either squatted or lay on the ground, with their field-glasses trained on the bird, while I walked in a wide semi-circle and got around to its other side. By walking slowly towards the Sandpiper I forced it to move in their direction, until it was about 30 feet away from them. The bird, after being viewed under such favourable circumstances for several minutes, suddenly flew when a small flock of waders flashed low overhead. It went about 200 yards with them and alighted near where I had first noticed it, on the sparsely grassed mud-flat.

Having watched the bird for nearly three hours and recorded a lengthy description, with observations, I was anxious to return to my home and check my notes with the literature and plates. In the meantime the three visitors went to the nearby salt-works and informed other observers of the "find". I was subsequently informed that during the afternoon the bird was seen by a total of 15 observers and that one photograph, using a large telephoto lens, was taken.

The available literature confirmed that the bird was, without doubt, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

Several observers, in an endeavour to see the bird, searched the area for a few hours during the following Saturday, March 24, but without success. Next day I again visited the area, arriving at 9 a.m. and quickly located the bird. It was back where I had first recognised it on March 18. A cautious approach allowed us to get within 30 feet of the bird. It was loathe to fly and just kept trotting or running along in front of us, stopping to feed when we stopped, and moving on when we moved.

As I followed the bird it got closer to the waters edge and finally waded out into the swamp for a distance of a few feet, the depth of the water being no more than one or two inches. Here

it fed on a few small black flies which were swarming on the surface of the water. A slow advance, now through soft mud, brought me to within 15 feet of the bird, which had now ceased to feed and stood quietly watching me. This was the closest that I had ever been to a migratory wader, in the field, under natural conditions. I was so close that I was unable to focus 10 x 40 field-glasses on it and I had to step back a few feet in order to do so. All the other waders that had been nearby moved away and, leaving the Sandpiper standing where it was, I retraced my steps to dry land.

At this time some other bird-observers arrived but before they could see the bird closely it suddenly flew with several other waders and went at least a quarter of a mile away to the west, straight over the centre of the swamp and was lost to view. About one hour later it returned alone and alighted near the original area. All the new observers obtained excellent views and once again I walked around to the other side of the bird and forced it to walk towards the waiting group. I was later told that the bird approached to within 20 feet of them.

After watching the wader for several minutes as it fed and moved about it was made to fly so that those present could see its mode of flight and the upper and lower wing pattern. It was not easy to flush but finally it flew away from the observers then, turning sharply, it flew back only a few feet above the ground, allowing an excellent view to be obtained before it alighted about 100 yards away. All the observers who were present that day agreed that their observation of the wader, under ideal conditions, left little to be desired.

During the following weeks, until May 7, a total of over 50 interested observers went to the swamp to see the rare visitor and most were successful.

When it was first located the bird was easy to approach but later it became wary and developed the habit of flying suddenly, particularly when other startled waders flew up nearby. This jumpiness lasted about four weeks and coincided with the coming and going of large flocks of Curlew and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints, as they made their way northwards on their migration. Perhaps the urge to go with them had been stimulated by the actions of the thousands of small waders. When they had all departed, and only the wintering birds remained, the *Tryngites* settled down and became easy to approach once again.

While preferring to feed over a relatively small area near other waders the Sandpiper managed to stay aloof much of the time. However, on a few occasions it was seen in the midst of the large flocks which were feeding about the grassy mud-flat. Several times it was noted squatting, at rest, in short grass with other waders, but usually it kept to the outer fringe of the groups.

From the start of the observations the bird was noted mainly near and in company with dotterels. It seemed to prefer a family

party of two Red-capped Dotterels with two young birds, the latter being downy-chicks of a day or two old when first seen near the little wader. When Double-banded Dotterels began arriving, it alternated between the two species. Often, of course, both the two species of dotterels moved about together, feeding and resting.

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper was a most interesting bird to watch, a very gentle species, and even when attacked by other birds such as the two species of dotterels previously mentioned and once by a Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*), whose perching rock it came too near, it would just trot a few steps out of the way, without showing any sign of retaliation. It was often sent scurrying by the adult Red-capped Dotterels when it got too close to the chicks.

The method of feeding was interesting and in this it behaved more like a dotterel than a typical sandpiper. It walked or trotted about, with its head jerking back and forth, in the short sparse vegetation, from a few feet to over a hundred yards back from the waters edge and, as it went, picked rapidly at the ground. Sometimes, crouching down, it would take insects and small caterpillars from the plant-stems.

Occasionally it would crouch with its head drawn back and secure a desired morsel with a sudden horizontal darting action of the bill. It sometimes waded out into an inch or more of water, when forced there by enthusiastic observers, but it never really seemed at ease in that element and always made its way back to grassed land or mud-flat at the first opportunity. Once or twice, when the big swamp was drying out fast, I saw the bird go into the shallow water and very soft mud, mainly after small surface flies, but sometimes it pushed its bill straight down into the mud.

On two occasions, when disturbed, it flew with other waders towards the shore of Port Phillip Bay, which was about a mile away. Usually it would be back within an hour at its favoured feeding area on the east shore of the swamp. It had a habit of holding its wings straight up over its head for a few seconds, allowing good views of the beautiful under-wing pattern. To see this species alive in the field and not to observe the under-wing markings is to miss much of the attraction of the bird.

Two or three times, over the weeks, with wings raised it performed a sort of shivering dance of a few seconds duration. The feet left the ground and gave the impression of a slow running on the spot. Occasionally it would incline its head over to one side and gaze straight up at the sky for a few seconds as if it were going into a trance. I could not decide what this action signified. Possibly a form of "sunning" or displacement display. It was doubtful if it was watching for birds of prey for many other nearby waders fed unconcernedly.

After becoming used to the bird I was able to pick it out, when it was facing me in good light, without the aid of field-glasses from a distance of a few hundred feet, but the moment its back was



The Buff-breasted Sandpiper showing the characteristic upright stance.

turned it blended so completely into the surroundings that if one's eyes were taken from the bird, even from 20 feet away, there was difficulty in finding it again. When standing the bird frequently turned its back and "froze" for a few seconds, and occasionally would crouch, facing away from an observer, with its breast touching the ground and the tail pointing upwards at an angle of about 45°. In this attitude it was noted that the bird's head was turned sufficiently to one side to allow it to obtain a view to the rear.

The muddy flat was well marked by horses' hooves and frequently the bird crouched in one of these indentations, and sometimes in short grass, and completely disappeared from view for periods of a few seconds to a few minutes. However, every now and then a small dark eye would appear just above the level of the short vegetation and, after looking about, be withdrawn again.

When in undisturbed flight over short distances it flew close to the ground in a direct line but if alarmed, usually with other waders, it would leave the ground swiftly and fly erratically about low over the swamp or the nearby mud-flats. Sometimes it was seen to rise quickly up to a height of over 100 feet and fly with small flocks of other waders before breaking away and alighting somewhere near the far end of the swamp. On one occasion the bird flew low, in small circles, within a few feet of me and I obtained exceptionally fine views of the whole upper and lower surface markings. When alighting after a disturbed swift flight it sometimes pitched and yawed on stiffly extended wings before touching the ground.

If alarmed it would lengthen its neck considerably and then hurry away giving all the appearance of a small, slim, Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominicus*).

It was a rather silent bird and although I was close by when it flushed on many occasions I heard it call on five of them only. The first time was when the bird flew up from near me uttering a soft "Twut-Twut-Twut". Twice the call sounded like a subdued, but sharp, "Chek-Chek" and on another two occasions an almost inaudible drawn out "Cheek".

During the weeks, from the time of finding the bird to May 5, I saw it on 12 different days, mostly at week-ends, and most of the time was taken up with detailed study of the markings and its habits. I consulted as much literature as possible and perused the accompanying plates closely and in so doing was able to check the references against the bird in the field.

Apart from the obvious buffiness of the underparts, the yellow legs and other salient features the concluding aspect of field identification lay in the under-wing pattern. This I saw many times from close range and in good light. An excellent illustration of the under-wing markings is to be found on Plate 51 of *Birds of Japan in natural colours* by K. Kobayashi. The upper-wing pattern,

although not so outstanding, is also distinctive and I saw it several times when the bird was preening and a wing was stretched downward till the tips of the primaries touched the ground. This is well shown on Plate 116 of *The Handbook of British Birds*, Witherby.

FIELD DESCRIPTION

The following description is compiled from the field-notes made during the 12 periods that I had the Buff-breasted Sandpiper under observation.

Size: Slightly smaller than a male Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Erolia acuminata*) and probably a little larger than a female of that species. The male *acuminata* is larger than the female and the difference can be noted in the field when the sexes are together.

Bill: Relatively short and slender, without being thin. Straight without any suggestion of a decurve. Generally appears blackish but when wet it has a dark olive-green tinge. Where it joined the face it was wider giving the gape area, particularly the upper part of the chin, a slightly swollen appearance.

Legs and Toes: Yellow with, in good light, the faintest orange tinge. Medium length, certainly not short or outstandingly long.

Eyes: Dark brown. Appeared slightly bulged in the small head. There is a very pale buff, almost white, orbital ring which is apparently composed of minute feathering.

Upper-parts: Frons pale buff with some fine dark spots which do not extend to the base of the upper mandible. Ear coverts sandy-buff with a pinkish tinge appearing darker in certain lights and attitudes. Sides of neck and above eye sandy-buff with a pinkish tinge. Crown sandy-buff heavily marked with small black spots margined with light buff.

Nape sandy-buff heavily marked with small dark spots. Mantle well marked with much larger dark brown to blackish spots or blotches. Back and scapulars dark brown to blackish feathering well margined with pale sandy-buff. Primaries long, extending a little beyond the end of the tail, very dark brown almost black, tipped whitish.

Rump and upper-tail coverts brownish with some darker mottling. Tail short, rounded appearance in flight, dark brown with small pale buffy-white tips which, although not very noticeable, can be seen when the bird is flying. The central feathers extend slightly beyond the remainder of the tail.

Under-parts: Chin very pale buff. Throat, cheeks and underneath to the thighs pale sandy-buff with a pinkish tinge which is irregularly edged with a slightly lighter shade, showing, at very close range, an almost indistinct barred effect. Lower abdomen and under-tail coverts white with a very faint buffish wash.

Some small, rounded, sparsely distributed, blackish spots extending from the lower neck, near the mantle, down onto the sides of the breast in the region of the wing bend.

Under-wing Pattern: Axillaries and most of under-wing pure white, some dark markings on leading and trailing edges. A small arc of dark feathering on the white under-wing coverts near the bases of the primaries. Whitish inner webs of the primaries and secondaries marbled with dark brown or blackish.

On April 9, at the National Museum, Melbourne, I examined two skins of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper that had been collected in America. Both of these skins agreed exactly with the description of the Altona bird, excepting for a slight fading of the plumage and the leg colour, undoubtedly caused by the age of the skins.

DESCRIPTION OF AUSTRALIAN WINTERING LOCALITY

Cherry's swamp, Altona, is approximately seven miles southwest of the City of Melbourne, Victoria. Situated just over a half-mile from the shore of Port Phillip Bay it is close to buildings on the south side and a busy road on the eastern boundary. A low rise in the ground separates it by a few hundred yards on the north side from Kororoit Creek, and at the western end are open fields.

The swamp lies in a wide shallow depression in the coastal plain and when full the shoreline is well over a mile in extent. There is no surface vegetation and the wide flat shores surrounding it support only a sparse growth of short salt-marsh herbage which is comprised mainly of the Beaded Glasswort (*Salicornia australis*). The water, which is fresh, comes from a small creek that flows into the western end. Unfortunately, the swamp is due for total reclamation in the near future.

GENERAL

Several observers have remarked on the similarity between the Buff-breasted Sandpiper and the Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) when seen at a distance. On several occasions I thought I had the Sandpiper in view only to shortly realise that it was a Skylark.

It was interesting to hear other observers describing the shade of buff of the under-parts. Some said it was "greyish" and under dull lighting conditions it did appear so. Others mentioned "pale-salmon", "pinkish", "sandy", "yellowish" and "creamy-yellow". Indeed, all of these shades did appear at different times of the day or in varying light.

Most of the observers agreed that the bird itself resembled a dotterel or a small plover in carriage and habits rather than a typical sandpiper.

When watching the bird, even at close range, I used 10 x 40 and 16 x 50 field-glasses.

On April 4, television channel ABV-2 sent a cameraman to the swamp to photograph the Sandpiper. The film was shown the same evening on the 7 p.m. and 10.30 p.m. news services.

My last two visits to the swamp, on May 13 and 19, failed to reveal the bird during four hours of searching on both days.

Probably it had left on its long northward flight urged on by cold mornings and dense fogs. I trust that the engaging little creature returns to its breeding haunt unmolested. W. R. Wheeler and H. M. Wilson were the last observers to see the bird when on a visit to the area on May 7.

SUMMARY

The first recorded occurrence of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Australia is described with field notes on plumage and habits. The bird had been seen and studied on 12 days by the writer during the period from March 18 to May 5, 1962, and on other days by other observers.

Over 50 interested people, including many competent field-workers, have seen the bird and confirm, by sight, the presence of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I must express my appreciation to Mrs. B. Temple-Watts for the skill, patience and care that she has exercised in the preparation of the excellent painting of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper that is reproduced on Plate 42. It represents the Altona bird so faithfully that each time I look at it I recall the wide shores of Cherry's Swamp and the many pleasant hours spent in watching this unusual visitor.

REFERENCES

- BANNERMAN, D. A. 1961, *The Birds of the British Isles*, Vol. 9, 383-390.
BENT, A. C. 1929, *Life histories of North American Shore birds*, Part 2, 69-78.
BOND, J. 1960, *Birds of the West Indies*, 89-90.
CHAPMAN, F. M. 1932, *Birds of Eastern North America*, 288.
COWARD, T. A. 1950, *The Birds of the British Isles and their Eggs*, Series 2, 205-6.
GABRIELSON, I. N., and LINCOLN, F. C. 1959, *Birds of Alaska*, 400-402.
HAUSMAN, L. A. 1946, *Field Book of Eastern Birds*, 288.
HERKLOTS, G. A. C. 1961, *The Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*, 97.
KOBAYASHI, K. 1956, *Birds of Japan in natural colours*, plate 51.
PEARSON, T. GILBERT. 1936, *Birds of America*, 249, plate 37.
PETERSON, MOUNTFORT and HOLLAM. 1954, *A field guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, 132, plate 34.
ROBERTS, T. S. 1960, *Bird Portraits in colour*, plate 35.
SEEBOHM, H. 1888, *The Geographical Distribution of the Charadriidae*, 446-447.
SNYDER, L. L. 1957, *Arctic Birds of Canada*, 175-178.
WITHERBY, JOURDAIN, TICEHURST and TUCKER. 1948, *The Handbook of British Birds*, Vol. 4 : 287-289, plate 116.