

## Some observations on the behaviour of the Australian Painted Snipe

Ann Lindsey  
37 Long Crescent, Shortland, NSW 2307

The Australian Painted Snipe, *Rostratula australis*, formerly *Rostratula benghalensis*, was described as a separate species in 2000 (Lane & Rogers 2000, p.26). Other than this reference, the information cited in this short note was written before the Australian Painted Snipe was considered a separate species. The Australian Painted Snipe is listed as “endangered” under the NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995 and “vulnerable” under the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

Records of the Australian Painted Snipe come from shallow, fresh or brackish wetlands over most of Australia, but it is the least known of the resident shorebirds and may be overlooked because of its cryptic plumage and occurrence in habitat in which it is difficult to observe the bird. Although considered secretive, most records are of motionless, unobtrusive birds in open areas (Lane & Rogers 2000, p.29). When disturbed it relies on freezing for concealment (Lowe 1963, p.232).

The Australian Painted Snipe has been known to breed in the Hunter Region. In 1972 seventeen individuals and two nests with three and four eggs were found at Minmi (Rogers 1973). Since 1993 most records in the Lower Hunter Estuary have come from Irrawang Swamp near Raymond Terrace, Ash Island and the accessible western (Minmi) and eastern (Hexham) sides of Hexham Swamp (Stuart 1994-2008).

Increased surveying of the eastern side of Hexham Swamp 32°51'S 151°41'E has led to two sightings of this species. On the 6 January 2009 a group of Hunter Bird Observers Club members were searching for Pectoral Sandpipers *Calidris melanotos* which had been seen a few days earlier. One of the group, Grant Brosie, suddenly exclaimed that he could see a snipe. Closer observation revealed two birds, a male and a female Australian Painted Snipe standing side by side on bare ground shaded by a clump of reeds on

the edge of an open expanse of dried out wetland. The birds were clearly visible and remained motionless for the next 30 minutes as the group continued to search for other species. They were still in the same position when we left the area.

On the 19 February, early in the morning, I drove onto the maintenance track of the Hunter Water Corporation’s water pipeline and immediately saw a male Australian Painted Snipe standing in the open on the track in a pool of water left after 140mm of rain on the 13,14,15 February. It stood there for several minutes occasionally dipping its bill into the water. It quietly moved off the track into a muddy drain on the eastern side of the track. The drain was narrow – about a metre wide, half a metre deep and approximately four metres long. The drain was bordered by thick grasses on three sides but terminating at a lay-by which was free of vegetation at its southern end. Water pooled in the mud at the bottom of the drain. I drove very slowly alongside the bird which was standing completely still apart from one moment when it briefly opened and closed its wings and lowered the head and upper part of its body in what was probably a truncated threat display. Australian Painted Snipe have two threat displays, a frontal and a lateral display which can be provoked by the presence of humans. I apparently observed an incomplete frontal display which is described as “the head forward and low with both wings fully extended and fanned, and tail raised and spread” (Marchant & Higgins 1993, p.662). I observed the bird for ten minutes taking several photographs during which time, apart from the brief display, it stood completely still. At this point I was only three metres away. I drove another 20 metres forwards and continued to observe the bird which had by this time moved into a larger more open pool of muddy water with thick vegetation on one side and the open lay-by on the other.

The snipe commenced feeding, moving un-hurriedly in all directions about 66 cm at a time. It

dipped its bill vertically into the water to a depth of approximately a quarter of its bill length rapidly opening and almost, but not completely, shutting it so that the bill looked open all of the time. This action took place whilst the bill was in the water. When the bird moved to another position, it repeated the action. I did not see the bird take any obvious food item and I did not see it swallow or perhaps I did not recognize that it swallowed. Eventually the bird moved into the dense wet vegetation and I lost sight of it.

Very little is known concerning the food and foraging behaviour of the Australian Painted Snipe. Johnsgard (1981) describes *Rostratula* feeding by probing in mud and ooze for worms, insects, molluscs and crustaceans, and it also eats some vegetable matter such as grains and weed seeds. Foraging is typically done by probing and by a lateral scything movement of the bill in shallow water, like that of an avocet. Subsequent overview publications (Marchant & Higgins 1993, Cramp 1983) do not provide additional information. My observations did not involve the movement of the bill with a scything action and appear distinct from the prior literature. However, it is possible that a mechanism involving the transport of water droplets up the bill by capillary action is involved as has been described for the Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* (Rubega & Obst 1993).

## REFERENCES

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Australian Painted Snipe feeding with open bill as discussed (A. Lindsey)