

## Curlew Sandpiper predated by a Black Falcon

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Over 800 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*, 13 Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* and two Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*, feeding on a drying ephemeral wetland with muddy edges adjacent to the Morpeth Wastewater Treatment Works (MWTW), 32°44' S 151°37' E were disturbed by a Black Falcon *Falco subniger*. The majority of the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers took flight and settled as a dense flock in the centre of the remaining water. The Black Falcon turned and made a low-level pass at a small number of waders which continued feeding near a line of fence posts at the edge of the water and took one of these birds about one to two metres from the ground as it flushed. The Black Falcon then flew to an adjacent dried-out pond where it landed briefly before it took off, circled and departed in an easterly direction still holding its prey.

A series of photographs were taken during this sequence of events. Examination of these digital images confirmed, as anticipated, that the species taken was a Curlew Sandpiper based on the length, shape and black colour of the bill, the black legs and white underparts.

A previous paper (Newman & Lindsey 2007) reviewed the status of the Black Falcon in the Lower Hunter Valley and indicated that this species was often seen in areas like the MWTW, Ash Island and the Hexham Swamp where there is potential to prey on flocks of migratory waders. While we have previously seen a Black Falcon make a pass at flocks of waders this is the first time a kill has eventuated.

Many aspects of these observations represent the classical strategy of an attacking raptor and the defensive tactics of a flocking prey species. While the initial pass of the Black Falcon at about 25 m above the ground disturbed many of the waders it allowed the falcon to identify the most vulnerable birds, which continued to feed adjacent to fence posts near a dyke separating the ephemeral wetland from a dry pond. The falcon turned over the dry pond before making a low-level pass over the dyke wall and ambushed the small waders feeding by the fence posts, which would have had an obscured view of the falcon's approach. The majority of the waders immediately formed a dense flock at a point which afforded excellent 360 degree visibility when they became aware of the falcon's presence. It is difficult for a falcon to single out an individual bird for attack when this strategy is adopted.

It was predictable that the bird taken would be one of the less numerous species feeding with the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers even though they represented < two percent of the waders feeding on the wetland. The minority species are essentially outsiders which tend to feed separately from or at the extremity of the bulk of the flock and are less synchronised with the defence responses of the majority species when attacked.

### REFERENCE

Newman, M. and Lindsey, A. (2007). The Status of Black Falcon in the Lower Hunter Valley. *The Whistler* 1: 49-50.