

---

# THE AUSTRALASIAN WADER STUDY GROUP

## A Decade of Co-ordinated Research

By Hugo Phillips

The term 'Australasia' may at first seem to be a mere geographical convenience, lumping the continent of Australia and the large islands of New Guinea, Tasmania and New Zealand with the archipelagos of the south-west Pacific. Ornithologists recognise it as a zoogeographical region for the endemism of its terrestrial fauna. It also has importance, however, in the field of wader studies, as a large proportion of the Palearctic migrants of the West Pacific/East Asian flyway use the region during the non-breeding season.



The Australasian Wader Studies Group, is then, interested in research and information regarding all resident and migrant waders of the region and by extension, also those of the whole flyway.

The other great wader flyways of the globe, the East Atlantic and the New World, have received a lot of attention in the past, and the movements and dynamics of their species have become relatively well known. In contrast to these, the Western Pacific flyway had been less intensively studied until the late 1970's, and in a fairly haphazard and uncoordinated fashion.

Even within Australia there had been little coordination between the enthusiasts and researchers of the nation's scattered capitals. Students and their studies were often isolated from each other by time, space and methodology. Fragments of information came to light here and there, although much of the literature of that earlier period is obsessed with recording the occurrence of rare vagrants, and with defending the credibility of their observers.

Waders have always attracted the attention of 'twitchers' because of the level of experience and expertise necessary to separate some species, as well as the ever present possibility of seeing a bird far from its usual range. However, an increasing number of people were beginning to see waders as worthy of much attention than merely being ticked off, or added to, a list.

Studying the commoner species in depth became more important than recording rarities. The need for conservation of feeding and roosting habitats became a matter for concern and, in some places, for alarm. It became apparent that some sort of regional coordinating body was necessary to structure existing data and future research.

The origins of the AWSG date from 1980 after a steep increase in wader research in Australia over the previous few years, and after the ratification of the agreement between Australia and Japan concerning the protection of migratory birds and their habitats. Its formal birth came about in 1981, under the auspices of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union. It immediately initiated an ambitious program of counts to establish base-line data for future research. It also organised the first of the North-West Australia Wader Expeditions to examine the hitherto unrecognised importance of the Australian coast between Port Hedland and Broome for Palearctic migrants. Over the last decade the AWSG has grown in the breadth and depth of the research it has coordinated and sponsored, its membership, and its geographical coverage. Since the flyway includes the rapidly developing nations of south-eastern and eastern Asia where much wader habitat is threatened, the necessity of extending the Group's area of concern has become imperative, and it works closely with the Asian Wetlands Bureau (AWB).



The AWSG is now becoming a truly inter-regional organisation. *The Stilt* is



the main vehicle of the AWSG for disseminating information about wader studies within Australasia and Asia, and for publishing the results of research there. It appears twice a year, and some recent examples of the sort of material it contains are:

- News regarding two forthcoming training and banding expeditions, in conjunction with the AWB and local authorities, to Java and Vietnam. In west Java the annual waterbird harvest is estimated to be 330,000 birds. Of these about 45,000 are Oriental Pratincoles *Glareola maldivarum* and one expedition will focus on the population dynamics of this species. The Red River delta of Vietnam is south-east Asia's first Ramsar site and is an extremely important staging and wintering area; Vietnamese biologists will be trained in identification and counting techniques as well as capture and banding methods.

- News regarding the Broome Bird Observatory. This has now been officially opened and is running short courses which will include studies of the spectacular wader population of Roebuck Bay. It is the RAOU's first observatory in tropical Australia, in a place which is undoubtedly one of the most important in the world for waders, and possibly the best as far as suitability for long-term research is concerned.

- A study by Marilyn Hewish, based on the Australian Summer 1989 Population Monitoring Count, that indicates that numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica* in eastern Australia may be increasing.

- A study by Mark Barter on the morphometrics of the Eastern Curlew

*Numenius madagascariensis* demon-

strating strong sexual dimorphism and indicating that members of this species do not breed until the end of their third year year of life, a year later than most Palearctic species.

- Information resulting from five years of national wader counts in New Zealand, such as that showing differential annual breeding success in Red Knots *Calidris canutus* and Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*.

- A study by K.Sampath and K.Krishnamurthy on the shorebirds of the salt ponds at the Great Vedaranyam Salt Swamp in Tamil Nadu, India, showing how several species of wader interact with, and benefit from, the salt industry.

- Banding Round-up: details of international recoveries of birds banded in the flyway.

- A request for information hidden in field note-books which may be used in the preparation of Volume Two of the forthcoming *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, which will include waders.

- A study of the dynamics of body composition of overwintering Dunlin *Calidris alpina* near Shanghai, by Shi Ming and Lu Jian-jian, indicates that the severity of the winters causes the weight of the birds to decrease until the mudflats begin to warm up in the spring.



Waders have always been birds for the

more dedicated bird-watcher, the more poetic naturalist, the more rugged researcher. They are also pre-eminent as a group that requires international conservation. Wader enthusiasts, possibly, have to think and act globally as well as locally, and the AWSG is well placed to assist in information and research coordination for the West Pacific/ East Asian flyway.

Membership of the AWSG is essential for those interested in waders in this segment of the world. It includes *The Stilt* and costs A\$15 for Australasian members, and A\$20 for those further away. Enquiries regarding membership should be directed to the Administrative Secretary, AWSG, 34 Centre Avenue, VERMONT, VIC 3133, Australia. Telephone: (03) 874 2860.

*The Wader Study Group has a reciprocal arrangement with the AWSG, where membership can be paid in sterling equivalent direct to the Membership Secretary, WSG, PO Box 247, Tring, Herts, UK. Details of ASWG activities are available from the WSG Membership Secretary.*

