

The day we caught six Painted Snipe

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On 25th March 2002, I went to a cattle bore on Roebuck Plains, near Broome, NW Australia, to investigate the possibility of cannon-netting Oriental Pratincoles *Glareola maldivarum* after a tip-off from George Swan. When I got there, the pratincoles were widely spread and, even with a big net, a catch of around five birds would have been lucky. I decided to wait until dusk to see if the 'prats' bunched together then as George said they had when he saw them previously.

While I waited, I took photos of terns and then casually scanned the small waterhole. You can imagine my surprise and delight when I saw 7 (SEVEN) Painted Snipe *Rostratula* on the edge of the water feeding in belly-deep, grey muddy water. "Gosh!" I said to myself (those of you who know me well will know what I really said!). I got extended views through my scope and then crept closer in the car to photograph them. I got some good shots with my 200 mm lens and 2x converter. (Again, for those of you who know me well, 'good' in relation to my photographs is a somewhat relative term!)

Now, as I looked at them and marvelled at their beauty, a thought came into my mind: they looked very catchable (too long spent with Clive Minton means I can never just admire a bird for its beauty these days, I have to consider catching it).

As a good friend of Danny Rogers, I was well aware Painted Snipe is the centre of much attention, being the subject of a special *Birds Australia* project of which Danny is the coordinator. Also, having with Danny just completed an article for *Stilt* on Painted Snipe in the Kimberley, with notes on a nest I found in 1999, I had a strong interest in the species. Therefore, seeing seven sitting in belly-deep water, looking very cannon-nettable was too much to bear!

I returned home and rang Danny who, after some considerable persuasion, agreed it would be worth a go, especially if we could get some blood samples to confirm the predictions of D. Rogers and B. Lane that the Painted Snipe in Australia is a separate species from Painted Snipe found in Asia and Africa. The time Danny took to make his protracted decision was about 0.000001 of a second!

Many phone calls later and I had five other people, as odd as my good self, prepared to attempt a catch two days later: depart 2 am or meet 3 am at the site! The following day, George went to the cattle bore, mid-morning, and saw eight male Painted Snipe. This bode well as the birds obviously stayed near the water all day.

We got to the site to be greeted by 300 cattle. They left in a very orderly fashion and were thoughtful enough to leave behind 17 billion mozzies (mosquitoes). The net was set very efficiently, considering it was dark, and we retired to 150 m for a cuppa (tea) and to wait for first light. Meanwhile, the mozzies feasted well.

At first light, we left Jan at the firing box with radio and the two vehicles and moved to where we could see the waterhole and the catching area.

There was now enough light to see eight snipe, seven males and a female. Patience was all that was no required, so it was a pity that I was there!

We sat, we watched, we talked earnestly on the radio. Dan got all excited "cos he saw a pipit"! I said "Oh damn!" when a Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles* chased the snipe away from near the net and I said "Oh gosh!" and "Golly!" on numerous other occasions, because there wasn't much else to do.

Eventually being patient was too much for me and after twice having a single bird in front of the net, I got George to do a vehicle-based twinkle, this worked a charm and six birds promptly walked in front of the net and we fired.

The resulting dash to the net was the usual entertaining affair, with C.J. Hassell flying like the wind, G. Swann doing a fair job in his thongs (note for non-Aussies, thongs are flip-flops, not a g-string!) and D. Blunt nowhere to be seen with a pulled hamstring! I presumed the grey, cow-dung filled water wasn't too deep and plunged in, closely followed by George and a hopping Dan. We grabbed the five birds we could see and extracted them without moving the net.

Meanwhile, the cage was going up with alacrity but something was bothering me. We had fired over six and were certain we would catch them all; so where was number six? I started to check the net where it was, still in the murky water, and number six popped up right in front of me. I don't know if the bird was deliberately submerged to protect itself or if the net was holding it down but it was in fine spirits. Indeed, despite the foul-looking water in which they had been dunked, none of them looked the slightest bit worse for wear. They were all very aggressive and hissed continually until put in the cage and then continued to do so and perform

