

Early reports of large numbers of Oriental Pratincoles in Australia

Following our paper on 'Extraordinary Numbers of Oriental Pratincoles in NW Australia' (Sitters, Minton, Collins, Etheridge, Hassell & O'Connor, *Wader Study Group Bull.* April 2004, 103: 26–31), I received the following information by email from Robert Gosford who is currently preparing an annotated *Bibliography of Arnhem Land Ornithology 1802–1964*.

He says that according to North (1898, *List of Birds Collected by the Calvert Exploring Expedition in Western Australia*), Mr G.A. Kearland collected for the South Australia Museum while in charge of a camp at the Fitzroy and Margaret rivers 45 miles from Derby. Kearland's field notes record the following observation (without giving specific details of date or location):

Glareola orientalis (Eastern Pratincole) occurred in numbers rising like a continuous column of smoke and circling overhead until they spread out so as to almost obscure the sky.

Kearland also mentions that they were "prohibited birds because of their propensity to bring rain".

This tends to support two of the conclusions of our paper: (a) that there have always been more Oriental Pratincoles in northern Australia than suggested by previous official estimates; (b) that the link between Oriental Pratincole movements and rainfall has long been recognised.

I have also recently been told by Peter Collins (pers. comm.) that the Oriental Pratincole is sometimes called

'rainbird' by local people in NW Australia. It would certainly appear therefore that its habit of moving ahead of heavy rain is quite well established and that this explanation for the extraordinary gathering of 2.88 million birds in the vicinity of Eighty Mile Beach in early February 2004 is correct. It would also seem that vast concentrations have been seen in the past, the one by Kearland being more than 100 years ago. The Fitzroy and Margaret rivers confluence is some 400 km northeast of Eighty Mile Beach.

Finally the above has triggered a further contribution from Chris Hassell, one of the authors of our paper. He writes:

Peter Collins' comment identifying Oriental Pratincoles as 'rainbirds' jogs my memory. In February 2001, at Mardi Station 60 km south of Dampier, the station manager told me that he had seen 'thousands and thousands and thousands of rainbirds as far as the eye could see flying towards the station homestead'. At the time, I did not realise that he was referring to Oriental Pratincoles, having never heard them called rainbirds before. I was there in Feb. 2001, but I cannot remember when he had seen the birds. However, it was not the only time he had seen them.

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Mobile hides: improvisation in Tierra del Fuego



The paper 'Using a mobile hide in wader research' (Szekely, Kis & Kosztolany, *Wader Study Group Bull.* April 2004, 103: 40–41) reminds me of the moveable hide or blind I used in 1974 to study Magellanic Plovers *Pluvianellus socialis* in Tierra del Fuego (see photo). It is a wooden crate for a refrigerator that I found on the local rubbish dump. We knocked off the back, added a hessian (burlap) flap on the rear, kicked out the bottom and made a hole in the front for the lens. It was very cheap and did not take long to make and could be left in place. No other type of construction would have stood up to Patagonian winds.

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