PALEARCTIC WADERS "SUMMERING" IN SRI LANKA

by David Melville

The summering of certain palearctic waders in their tropical winter quarters is a well known phenomenon and has been well documented for some areas e.g. Seychelles (Feare and High 1977). Both Henry (1971) and Phillips (1975) record a number of species as being present in Sri Lanka during the summer months, however it appears that larger numbers and a wider range of species may be present than previously thought.

South-east Sri Lanka lies in the "low country zone". For much of the year the climate is hot and dry with heavy rainfall only during the north-east monsoon which starts in mid-October. The land is low-lying with rice paddy cultivation around the villages, irrigation water being supplied from "tanks" - mud banked reservoirs. Although the tanks provided important breeding sites for many piscivorous birds such as the Indian Shag Phalacrocorax fuscicollis, waders were generally absent except for the local Red-wattled Lapwings Vanellus indicus.

At Bundala, which is largely a no-shooting area, waders were observed around a small tank and a large shallow tidal inlet. At Hambantota observations were made around another large, muddy, shallow tidal lagoon and a run-down commercial saltpan complex. The Yala National Park, which covers some 240 sq. miles of scrub jungle, is well known for its rich birdlife as well as herds of elephant, deer etc. There are many shallow tidal inlets along the coast; however due to lack of time it was only possible to look for waders on a few of them. Interestingly, although most tidal inlets around Yala had at least some Curlew Sandpipers, I was unable to find any palearctic waders during a brief visit to the large tidal inlet leading to Batticaloa to the north.

My observations, made in south-eastern Sri Lanka in late June 1977, are summarised in Table 1. Limited time and the large size of some of the saltpan/lagoon complexes result in the figures not being accurate total counts for each area, but I believe that they indicate the relative abundance of the species recorded.

Grey Plover. All in non-breeding plumage.

Lesser Sandplover. All in non-breeding plumage, except for one at Bundala which showed traces of a chestnut breast-band. This species is not recorded during the summer months by Phillips(1975).

Black-tailed Godwit. All in non-breeding plumage.

Greenshank. The bird at Kumana on 24.6.77 was moulting the middle primaries.

Turnstone. All birds were in partial breeding plumage but there was considerable individual variation.

Little Stint. Non-breeding plumage.

Curlew Sandpiper. Most birds were in non-breeding plumage, but about 5% showed traces of a pink/chestnut flush to the breast.

References

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Henry, G.M. 1971. A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon (2nd. ed.) O.U.P., London

Phillips, W.W.A. 1975. A 1975 annotated checklist of the birds of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Ceylon.

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TABLE 1 - observations of palearctic waders in south-eastern Sri Lanka.

	21 June 77 Bundala area	21 June 77 Hambantota area	24June 77 Panama-Kumana	25 June 77 Kumana area
Grey Plover	3	10	2	2
Lesser Sandplover	47	3	-	5
Black-tailed Godwit	8	-	-	-
Redshank	9	25	9+	9
Marsh Sandpiper	8	1	-	5
Greenshank	1	3	1	-
Turnstone	6	-	7	2
Little Stint	1	-	-	-
Curlew Sandpiper	688+	310+	135+	91+