

Australian Curlew Sandpiper on passage through Sri Lanka

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On 20 August 2005, a Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* carrying a yellow flag was observed at the saltpans in Bundala National Park, Sri Lanka (6°11.195'N, 81°14.589'E). The bird was 300 m from the observers, and was located with a 30 × 60 telescope. It was in about 90% breeding plumage and was feeding among other Curlew Sandpipers and Lesser Sandplovers *Charadrius mongolus* along the banks of the saltpans. This bird was one of the many shorebirds banded each year in NW Australia between Broome and Port Hedland by the Australasian Wader Studies Group team led by Clive Minton. It was recorded at a distance of about 5,250 km and at a bearing of 298° from the location at which it had been marked.

Curlew Sandpipers breed on the high arctic tundra of northern Siberia from the Yamal Peninsula to the Kolyuchiskaya Gulf (N Chukotskiy Peninsula) (Pringle 1987, van Gils & Wiersma 1996). They move from Siberia to non-breeding areas generally south of 35°N (Higgins & Davies 1996). Populations breeding as far to the east as 128°E migrate south across Russia to the western half part of Eurasia and Africa (American Ornithologists Union 1983); populations that breed as far west as 98°E go to Australasia. Therefore there is an overlap in the breeding distribution of those populations that migrate southwest and those that migrate southeast.

In the Indian Subcontinent, Curlew Sandpipers are common winter visitors to coastal zones, with small numbers recorded inland. In Sri Lanka, they are common winter visitors to the country's dry zone but infrequent in the wet zone (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

Over the past 30 years, around 35,000 Curlew Sandpipers have been banded in Australia, and in the last 10 years some 13,000 of these have additionally been marked with coloured leg flags (Minton 2002).

At least some of the Curlew Sandpipers that winter in Australia are known to make a loop migration using different routes during southward and northward passage. When flying north, most migrate from Australia via the south-east and east coasts of China to the breeding grounds. The southward migration is through southern China but some birds occur further west in Indo-China and even as far as India (Lane

1991, Minton 1993a,b, Higgins & Davies 1996, C.D.T. Minton pers. comm.). The yellow-flagged bird seen in Bundala National Park is only the second Australian Curlew Sandpiper to have been recorded outside the main East Asian–Australasian Flyway. The previous record was of a bird banded in November 1976 at Werribee Sewage Farm near Melbourne, Australia, and recaptured at Point Calimere in SE India in August 1980.

There is another record of a Curlew Sandpiper with a yellow flag that was seen at Langebaan Lagoon, South Africa, during 24–29 March 2002 (Minton 2002). However, it was subsequently discovered that yellow flags had been put on some Curlew Sandpipers in W Africa (D. Oschadleus pers. comm.), making that the most likely source of the South African bird. The possibility that it is also the source of the bird seen in Sri Lanka would seem to be extremely remote. Sri Lanka is on the route known to be taken by some Australian birds in August; those found in W Africa are on a completely different flyway, 10,500 km to the west.

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