

## SHORT NOTE

### First records of marsh sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) in the Solomon Islands

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The marsh sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) is a widespread migrant across much of Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996; Higgins & Davies 1996). It is generally scarce across the Pacific, being considered a regular visitor in western Micronesia only (Pratt *et al.* 1987; van Perlo 2011). It has been recorded as a vagrant to northern Melanesia (Dutson 2011), to Hawaii (van Perlo 2011), Norfolk Island (Hermes 1985), Grande Terre in New Caledonia (Barré & Dutson 2000; Tarburton 2014a) and to both main islands plus Chatham Island in New Zealand (Southey 2009; Gill *et al.* 2010), but it appears to be unrecorded elsewhere in Oceania.

In mainland New Guinea, the marsh sandpiper is regarded as a locally common passage migrant with a relatively high proportion of birds present during the austral winter (Coates 1985; Bishop 2006). However on nearby Bougainville (politically part of Papua New Guinea but geographically part of the northern Solomon Islands chain), the first record was as recent as 1977, and there have been only a small number of subsequent sightings (Hadden 2004; Tarburton 2014b).

Within the national borders of the Solomon Islands, the marsh sandpiper appears to have been unrecorded - or more likely overlooked - during more than 100 years of ornithological observation up until 2009. This paper summarises recent sightings of marsh sandpipers in the Solomon Islands, and we suggest that the species should be regarded as

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Fig. 1. The Solomon Islands showing locations where marsh sandpipers have been recorded up until February 2015.



Fig. 2. Marsh sandpiper at Rennell Airstrip, September 2009 (Photograph: Roger Clifft, reproduced from Birdquest website).

an uncommon migrant to the country rather than a rare vagrant as suggested by Dutson (2011).

The Solomon Islands (Fig 1.) comprise a 1500 km double chain of 6 main islands (Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira) and hundreds of smaller islands, located between latitudes 5° and 13° S, and longitudes 155° and 169° E in the western Pacific Ocean. The country is situated east of Papua New Guinea, north-west of Vanuatu, and north-east of Queensland, Australia. Generally considered part of the West Pacific Flyway and to lie beyond the eastern boundary of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (Wetlands International 1995; Bamford *et al.* 2008), the Solomon Islands host

several migratory holarctic wader species (Dutson 2011), and marsh sandpiper can now be confirmed as an addition to that list.

The first confirmed record of marsh sandpiper in the Solomon Islands was of a single bird on Rennell Island (Rennell and Bellona Province), the southern-most island in the archipelago. This bird was found on about 22 September 2009 by a participant on a commercial birding tour operated by Birdquest (Van Beirs 2009). This bird was first observed associating with Pacific golden plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*) on the island's airstrip (11°32.60'S, 160°3.70'E). Two days later the bird's identity was confirmed when it was found again and watched by the full tour party as it foraged in a shallow puddle and in grass near the airstrip's check-in hut (Fig. 2).

The second to fifth records of marsh sandpipers were made at a small wetland known as "The Creek" beside the airstrip at Taro Island (6°42.34'S, 156°23.46'E) off the northern coast of Choiseul, the northern-most province of the Solomon Islands. This freshwater wetland is c. 5.5 ha in size with a varying extent of open water and mud (depending on water level), emergent 'islands' comprising tree branches and partially vegetated tree stumps, and a narrow vegetated edge of secondary forest vegetation. Although surrounded by houses on 2 sides and somewhat degraded by human activity, this site and the adjoining airfield typically supports 30 to 120 waders during the peak passage periods, with 13 wader species recorded up until January 2015 (S. Butcher, *unpubl. data*). This site was under regular observation by SB from November 2010 to November 2012. One marsh sandpiper was recorded on 1 October 2011, with 2 birds observed on 15 October, 1 on 13 November and 27 November and then no further sightings over the 2011-2012 migration season. These sightings constitute the second verified record for the Solomons. The third record was of a single bird observed on 17 June 2012 – an austral mid-winter date. The fourth record was of 1 bird present briefly during the southward migration period on 25 November 2012. The fifth record was made 2 migration seasons later, when a single bird was photographed by SB at The Creek on 2 January 2015 (Fig.3). This bird was feeding on the exposed muddy edges of the wetland, loosely associated with 3 sharp-tailed sandpipers (*Calidris acuminata*) feeding 10 - 15 m away. Most marsh sandpipers seen at this site were feeding or roosting in close association with sharp-tailed sandpipers, lesser sandplovers (*Charadrius mongolus*), turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), common sandpipers (*Actitis hypoleucos*) or grey-tailed tattlers (*Tringa brevipes*).

The sixth record was made by the authors at Lake Kolaoka (9°06.39'S, 160°20.32'E) on the east coast of Nggela Pile, an island in the Florida

Group (Central Province) on 27 February 2015. Lake Kolaoka is a small tidal lagoon, surrounded by forested low hills and located c.400 m inland of the coastline. The site is connected to the sea by a mangrove-lined creek and comprises c.19 ha of shallow open water, inter-tidal mudflats and a narrow fringe of mangrove forest. A survey of this lake found a congregation of 156 waders of 13 species, including a single marsh sandpiper and several individuals of other species with few previous records in the Solomon Islands, including common greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), Terek sandpiper (*Xenicus cinereus*) and eastern curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*). The marsh sandpiper fed over soft mud and in shallow water, mainly around the roots of mangrove trees on the edge of the lake (Fig. 4). It tended to be solitary, but roosted during a brief period of rain beside a sharp-tailed sandpiper and several grey-tailed tattlers.

The 6 records outlined in this paper document the occurrence of marsh sandpipers in the northern, southern and central parts of the country. Sightings have been made in June, September, October, November, January and late February, indicating that the species can occur during both the southward and northward migration periods as well as during the Austral winter. Most avifaunal surveys undertaken in the Solomon Islands to date have tended to focus on forested habitats, particularly in montane areas where many endemic species are located (Mayr & Diamond 2001). Coastal wetland habitats have received relatively little attention and the occurrence, distribution and abundance of migratory waders in particular, remains poorly understood. Despite just a handful of records to date, we suggest the geographical and temporal spread of marsh sandpiper observations is more consistent with this species being an under-recorded annual migrant rather than it being a rare vagrant. It is likely that as more shorebird sites in the Solomon Islands are discovered and surveyed, further records of marsh sandpiper will be forthcoming. Furthermore our observations suggest that even relatively small sites with habitat that may be degraded or otherwise sub-optimal, may be regular destinations for this and other species currently considered vagrants.

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Fig. 3. Marsh sandpiper at "The Creek" beside Taro Airport, Taro Island, Choiseul Province on 2 January 2015 (Photograph: S. Butcher).



Fig. 4. Marsh sandpiper on Lake Kolaoka, Nggela Pile Island, Central Province, 27 February 2015 (Photograph: A. Crossland).

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