

SATELLITE-TRACKING REPORT FROM NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA – 2019, NUMBER 1

This is the first of a series of reports detailing the results emanating from the deployment of satellite trackers on waders by the Australasian Waders Studies Group Wader and Tern Expedition in February 2019.

This information is circulated for the interest of everyone involved with wading birds worldwide, especially those carrying out studies on migration. Anyone is welcome to communicate the information more widely, but please bear in mind it will also form the basis of several scientific papers to be published later by the expedition and others.

Communiqués will be sent out regularly and will generally contain an update on all study species on which satellite transmitters have been deployed. This one will be dominated by news on the Oriental Pratincole transmitters, as so much has happened on these already.

We have been amazed by the unexpectedly rapid and long movements of Oriental Pratincoles on which we deployed transmitters in early February.

Normally when one deploys an electronic tracking device on a bird in the non-breeding area, it remains stationary for a period before it sets off on any migration or major movements. Tracks usually therefore depict the normal daily home range of a bird as it moves between feeding and roosting areas. This was very much the case with eight Eastern Curlew and five Little Curlew, which were fitted with satellite transmitters at Eighty Mile Beach and Broome in north-western Australia in mid-February. However, five Oriental Pratincoles fitted with similar transmitters on 8 February have exhibited markedly different behaviour. These are the first Oriental Pratincoles to be fitted with an electronic device and were particularly targeted because of our almost complete lack of knowledge of their migrations and breeding areas even though they are the most numerous migratory wader to visit Australia from the northern hemisphere in the non-breeding season.

Two birds started to move north eastwards almost immediately after release. Over the next three weeks they visited a range of different locations at distances up to 1200km from the catching location. One even crossed the Stuart Highway near Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory and nearly reached Darwin before turning back and returning to near Kununurra. It is not clear whether these two birds made these movements as part of their wide-roaming feeding strategy or whether they regarded it as the start of their return migration towards the northern hemisphere.

Two other Oriental Pratincoles have left us in no doubt of their motive – northward migration. After roaming around the southern end of Anna Plains Station for just over a week, one (with engraved leg flag SHE!), abruptly set off northwards out to sea from Eighty Mile Beach, around 16 February and proceeded virtually non-stop (via Indonesia and Borneo) to near Phnom Penh in Cambodia. It covered this 4200km journey in not more than five days which gives an average flight speed of around 45km per hour (including any time making short resting stops). For the last few days it has been situated near the largest lake in Southeast Asia in what looks like ideal Pratincole habitat. Whether it will remain here to breed or whether it will move on elsewhere in due course will be interesting to follow.

We have been incredibly fortunate in deploying satellite transmitters on Oriental Pratincoles just at the time some were setting off back on their northward migration. The majority arrive in Australia in December and were already known to mostly leave in February, a shorter time than any migratory wader species. Maybe further data will give us some idea of why such an early departure is favoured by this species. It will be interesting also to see whether the two Oriental Pratincoles still remaining in Australia move into 'long distance migration mode' in the future or whether they continue northwards in more gradual steps as they have done up to the present within Australia. We hope everybody enjoys this fantastic news which has emerged so early in this year's NWA satellite tagging project. Let us hope there are more exciting revelations to come on Oriental Pratincoles and on the other species over the next few months.

(Contributed by Clive Minton)

Acknowledgements – This is already a long report. We will give detailed acknowledgements to all those who have facilitated this project in a future Report.

Photos by Robert Bush

