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Front Cover: Male Red-necked Phalarope in breeding plumage, Barrow, Alaska (R. Noske)

A review of records of Red-necked Phalaropes in Queensland, including northern Cape York Peninsula

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Abstract

The Red-necked Phalarope breeds in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic region and migrates south to equatorial waters to feed at sea during its non-breeding phase. Of the 13 records of this species in Queensland, four were located at Lake Moondarra, Mt. Isa, and two at sea off Weipa in the Gulf of Carpentaria. We report up to three birds seen in three locations at the northern tip of Cape York over 13 days and suggest that their appearance was related to an extreme weather event. We urge birders visiting Queensland in summer to familiarise themselves with the appearance and habits of this species to ensure that it is not overlooked.

Introduction

The Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* breeds in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions, including Canada, Alaska, Siberia, Scandinavia, Europe and Greenland. After breeding, birds move to pelagic feeding grounds off the Peruvian coast (from North America), the Arabian Sea off Oman and South Yemen (from Europe and West Siberia), the Celebes Sea off southern Philippines, and south to the Moluccas, and east to the Bismarck Archipelago off northern Papua-New Guinea (from East Siberia) (Saunders & de Rebeira 1987; Rubega *et al.* 2020).

The first record of this species in Australia was in 1962 at Werribee, Victoria (Saunders & de Rebeira 1987). Since then, it has been recorded reasonably frequently in all mainland states and territories other than Queensland where the first was noted in 1986 (Atlas of Living Australia 2023; Birddata 2023; eBird 2023). Here we document our observations of Red-necked Phalaropes at the tip of Cape York in 2014, and collate other Queensland records of the species from the literature and standard databases (Higgins & Davies 1996; Atlas of Living Australia 2023; Birddata 2023; eBird 2023). We also searched the “Birding Aus” archives website (Forsyth 2003) and “Cairns Birders Newsletter” (Phillips 2019).

Observations

On 31 January 2014, the first author (RR) was conducting a bird survey at the Bamaga Water Treatment Plant (Bamaga WTP; 10.90°S, 142.39°E), when he noted a small grey and white shorebird which he had not seen previously. The bird was confiding, allowing observations and photographs at close range over 30 min (Plate 1). It was sitting high on the surface of the water near the edge of the pond, and swimming, moving erratically and thrusting its bill rapidly into the water in the “pump action” typical of phalaropes (Geering *et al.* 2007; Hollands & Minton 2012). The bill was thin, straight and approximately the same length as the head, and there was a distinct black stripe through the eye which curved downwards. The crown had a broad grey stripe which continued as a tapering line down the hind neck. The back was darker grey with white edges on the feathers. It flew about 10-15 m twice, showing the white wing bar as it landed on the water again. While flying it uttered a short, reasonably high pitched “tserp”.

On 1 February, a second bird was noted at Lake Wicheura (10.77°S, 142.56°E), a “perched lake” on the east coast 23.6 km ENE of the bird still present at Bamaga that day. It was standing on the mud on the water’s edge with two Black-fronted Dotterels *Elseyornis melanops* which flushed whilst the Phalarope remained. RR was able to creep to within 4 m of the bird, noting its black legs and feet and watching it feed off surface insects in the mud. During a short flight, its white wing bar was noted. Upon landing on the water, it began swimming erratically and feeding but soon made a longer flight across the lake, during which it called every 2-3 seconds.

On 4 February two individuals were observed at Bamaga WTP, and immediately afterwards, a third bird was seen 5.9 km away, at Umagico Water Treatment Plant (10.90°S, 142.34°E). At least one bird was seen each day until 12 February, including one sighting of three individuals together (Table 1), but thorough searching after this time failed to find further birds. There were no noticeable plumage differences between individuals.

Excluding the above sightings, we found nine records of Red-necked Phalaropes in Queensland from 1986 to 2014, and three since 2014 (Table 2). All records pertain to single birds except our record of three in the Bamaga area, and two birds from Ayr (Plate 3), 88 km south of Townsville, during January-February 2014. There were no Queensland records of the species in either of the national atlases despite there being records from all other mainland states and territories (Blakers *et al* 1984; Barrett *et al.* 2003).

Discussion

There have been relatively few sightings of Red-necked Phalaropes in Queensland compared to other states and territories of Australia. All of the 13 known Queensland sightings took place from October to April and four were located at Lake Moondarra, Mount Isa. Apart from the two records from Weipa, which involved birds seen at sea (Plate 2), all sightings were of birds in freshwater wetlands, as is typical of records in other parts of Australia (Higgins & Davies 1996; Saunders & de Reberia 1987).

Table 1. Counts of Red-necked Phalaropes at three sites on northern Cape York Peninsula in 2014. WTP, Water Treatment Plant; –, not surveyed.

| Date | Bamaga WTP | Umagico WTP | Lake Wicheura |
|-------------|------------|-------------|---------------|
| 31 January | 1 | – | – |
| 1 February | 1 | – | 1 |
| 2 February | 1 | – | – |
| 3 February | 2 | – | – |
| 4 February | 2 | 1 | – |
| 5 February | 2 | 0 | – |
| 6 February | 3 | 0 | – |
| 7 February | 1 | 0 | – |
| 8 February | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 9 February | 1 | – | – |
| 10 February | 0 | 1 | – |
| 11 February | – | 1 | – |
| 12 February | 0 | 1 | – |



Plate 1. Red-necked Phalarope at Bamaga WTP, 31 January 2014 (Rob Reed)

Table 2. Records of Red-necked Phalarope in Queensland

| Year | Date | Location | Source* | Details |
|------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1986 | 3 December | Lake Moondarra, Mt. Isa | ALA, Redhead (1988) | |
| 1988 | 8-22 October | Helidon, Southeast Qld | ALA, Britton (1990) | |
| 1991 | 25 December | Lake Moondarra, Mt. Isa | ALA, Britton (1992) | |
| 1994 | 25 January | Swan Bay, North Stradbroke Is. | ALA | |
| 2003 | 23-29 November | Lake Moondara, Mt. Isa | Forsyth (2003), eB, ALA | |
| 2010 | 11 February | Weipa | B. Bright (pers.com.), Bd, ALA | 23 km offshore |
| 2012 | 3 December | Bowra Station, Cunnumulla | eB, Bd, ALA | BQRAC (2019) #169 |
| 2013 | 22 October | Rinyirru (Lakefield) Nat. Park | eB, ALA | |
| 2014 | 3-12 January | Ayr | eB, Bd, ALA | 2 birds over 9 days |
| 2014 | 31 January to 12 February | Bamaga | Authors (eB) | 3 birds over 13 days |
| 2018 | 16 November | Lake Moondarra, Mt Isa | Whitehead (2018) | |
| 2019 | 21 April | Karumba wetlands | Phillips (2019) | |
| 2023 | 13 March | Weipa | B. Bright (pers.com.) | 42 km offshore |

*ALA, Atlas of Living Australia; Bd, Birddata; eB, eBird

Most sightings of the Red-necked Phalarope in northern Australia appear to be linked to cyclonic or other severe weather events. The first records in the Northern Territory were in January 1974, soon after the passage of tropical cyclone Fiona-Gwenda (McKean *et al* 1975; McCrie & Noske 2015). From 5 to 8 February 2014, up to 16 birds were noted in Darwin, an influx that was possibly related to severe weather in Indonesian waters following catastrophic cyclone Haiyan, which struck the Philippines in November 2013 (McCrie & Noske 2015). Perhaps not coincidentally, the Darwin records fall within the period of the authors' sightings at the tip of Cape York (Table 1). Between 10 and 23 January 2014, "Tropical Low 05U" formed within the monsoon trough in the Arafura Sea, and cyclone warnings were issued for parts of the NT and WA coasts. Rainfall totals for both Darwin and the tip of Cape York in that month were well above average for both regions (BoM 2014a, 2014b). We suspect that this monsoon trough originated in the Arafura, Banda and Timor Seas, where Red-necked Phalaropes occur regularly, resulting in their southward displacement to the Top End of the NT and Cape York.



Plate 2: Red-necked Phalarope off Weipa coast on 13 March 2023 (Ben Bright)

The two pelagic sightings in the Gulf of Carpentaria were 13 years apart, and made by a pilot boat operator and professional fishing guide who was resident in Weipa for 20 years. There have been few other pelagic sightings near the Australian mainland. However, on 27 October 2000, two groups of 70 and 33 individuals, respectively, were reported 20 minutes apart, about 55 km NNW of Onslow, Western Australia (Birdata 2023). There have been no sightings on pelagic birding tours in South-east Queensland since the first such tour was conducted in the late 1970s (P. Walbridge pers. comm., G. Roberts pers. comm.).

Cape York was rarely visited by birders during the wet season until 1986 when Klaus Uhlenhut became a full-time resident from April 1986 to February 1988, and much later, conducted "Cape York Bird Week" in the first week of January from 1990 to 2015 (K. Uhlenhut, pers. comm.). The first author resided in the area from 2008 to 2015, and subsequently, both authors have visited for a week each year in the months of December or

January. Thus observers have been resident during the wet season for only nine of the last 36 years. This lack of observers may explain why Red-necked Phalaropes have not been seen until relatively recently. Like others (e.g. Saunders & de Rebeira 1987) we suspect that the species has been overlooked in the past in Queensland.

We urge all birdwatchers to maintain a vigil for this species on both land and sea, and to submit records to appropriate databases and rarities committees (e.g., BARC, BQRAC) so that its status in Queensland may be clarified. The only species with which the Red-necked Phalarope is likely to be confused is the Red Phalarope *P. fulicarius* which is a very rare visitor to Australia with only one record from Queensland at Lake Mitchell in 2003 (BARC 2023). However, the former has broad white streaks on its grey upperparts whereas the latter is all light grey (Higgins & Davies 1996; Hollands & Minton 2012; Rubega *et al* 2020; Danny Rogers pers. comm.). In addition, the bill of the Red-necked Phalarope is fine, straight and tapering whereas that of the Red Phalarope is stouter and slightly shorter (Higgins & Davies 1996; Hollands & Minton 2012; Rubega *et al* 2020).

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Plate 3: Two Red-necked Phalaropes at Ayr on 3 January 2014 (Roger Mortlock)

