

Wildlife Matters

MOGGILL CREEK CATCHMENT GROUP

Latham's Snipe

WE have a number of secretive birds that live around our creeks and dams. One which arrives here regularly but is seldom seen, is the Latham's Snipe. They are never far away from the protection of long grass or shrubs. If exposed, they freeze until they think you are getting too close when they will take off.



Latham's Snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*) Photo: Ed Frazer

It's a small bird about 30cm with an enormously long bill. Nearly the same length as the body and when they fly, they are not far off the ground. It uses its bill to feed on its favourite food at our farm, Tubificid worms (sludge worms), very skinny red worms that grow in the wet mud around overflow and soaks. The Tubificids have tiny, peaked castings in the mud and are about 7cm long. The Snipe pull the worms out very slowly, so they don't break off.

Studies have found that Latham's Snipe are omnivorous and eat seeds and pieces of plants and all sorts of insects, snails and water bugs, but I have only seen them eating the aquatic worms.

Latham's Snipe (which were called Japanese Snipe) are migratory birds and I look forward to seeing them arrive from Japan in early August each year. There are about 15,000 snipe that fly to Australia in just a few days in non-stop hops of around 1000 km. Many of the Snipe that stop off here stay only a day or two then travel down south to Victoria and Tasmania. Until 1984 the Victorians shot 10,000 annually.

Most years we have three to five staying on our farm for the summer. They can also be seen around Gold Creek dam. When spooked they take off with a single "krek" and fly about 50 metres very close to the ground before settling. After arriving they go into a moult, which is not obvious and this is over by January when they fatten up for the Journey to Japan where they breed. They are far more vocal in Japan, but in Australia they go about their feeding in silence. They breed mainly in Hokkaido, but also in the eastern Asian mainland.

Ed Frazer

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