

## Australian Painted Snipe at West Byron Wetlands (by Jan Olley for Byron Bird Buddies)

Members and friends of Byron Bird Buddies (BBB) have been regularly monitoring bird-life in the West Byron Wetlands for Byron Shire Council since 2008 and there are nearly always surprises. Our evening survey on Friday January 13<sup>th</sup> was exceptionally exciting. Just as the sun was setting, so the light was not very good, Steve McBride discovered an Australian Painted Snipe in Cell E (second cell in from the front gate). Then, a short time later and close by, in the vegetation before the car park a Pale-vented Bush-hen was heard calling. Both of these birds have never been recorded in the wetlands and both are listed as threatened species in NSW. These two birds will bring the total avian species recorded at the wetlands since 2000 to a total of 221, an indication of how important and valuable the



wetlands are to the natural diversity of our community and a great example of sustainable management of a human waste product.

The Painted Snipe (*Rostratula australis*) is actually listed as endangered in NSW and is very rarely seen and difficult to detect. Its feathers are very patterned, black, grey, brown greenish and chestnut colouring with a buff stripe and white eye ring, so blending very well into its preferred

marshy environment. So, we were all absolutely amazed by Steve's ability to detect this well camouflaged bird as it was standing very still and looking out from a clump of sedge in the middle of the mud. It actually looked as if it had reversed in, as its back was well tucked into the clump and all that seemed visible was the head and beak looking forward. Even while looking in the right place, many of us had some difficulty in detecting it but eventually we all managed to get a good look. In August 2011, Steve also spotted four of this species from the road while looking at waterbirds on a farmer's property in Casino. They were huddled down amidst a clump of water hyacinth in the middle of a muddy swamp riddled with cow-hoof depressions, astounding detective work we all said!

Unlike the migratory Latham Snipe, which will suddenly take flight and will peep as it flurries away, the Painted Snipe is usually silent, skulking into the shadows and will only move when you're almost upon it. Any movement from the observers caused the Snipe in Cell E, to gradually lower its head, then its whole body to the ground, further reducing any ability to detect it.

It appears the Painted Snipe's movement in the landscape is unpredictable, they are nomadic, responding to local rain patterns and they prefer temporary freshwater swamps that have a combination of shallow water, wet mud and dense low vegetation. Cell E, is usually covered by shallow water, but had been fully drained, during a few weeks of low rainfall, leaving a large expanse of exposed wet mud. So, the habitat in the cell was favourable, as it is to many shorebird and waterbird species. But if the Painted Snipe is so rare how did it know?



Due to DNA work on the Painted Snipe, it has only recently been established as an Australian endemic species, previously grouped with the Greater Painted Snipe of Africa and Asia. Research also shows that very little is known of its habits, but in brief it occurs mainly singularly and breeds every two years. It is also possible they are polyandrous, that is the female maintains the territory while the eggs, in several nests, are incubated by more than one male. It emerges from its day hiding place at sunset, feeding during the night to early morning. It feeds on vegetation, seeds, insects, worms and molluscs, crustaceans and other invertebrates. Although there are more people observing, the reporting rate for this species has decreased by 90% since the 1950's and is estimated to be only 1500 birds in all of Australia, mainly due to the drainage of 50% of our wetlands. We should feel privileged.