

A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply (e.g. godwits). Flight strong and direct. Often form flocks while roosting or flying, but disperse to feed. Many species seen in NZ breed in the Arctic and arrive in September, with remnants of breeding plumage, and depart in March, often in breeding plumage. Most subadults and a few adults spend the southern winter here.

**AUSTRALIAN RED-NECKED AVOCET** *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*

Rare Australian vagrant

44 cm, 300 g. Distinctive black and white wader with chestnut head and neck, and fine upcurved bill (more steeply in male) and long pale blue-grey legs. White body; black and white pattern on wings and back especially noticeable in flight. Juvenile has paler chestnut head and neck, and brown and white wing markings. Feeds with scythe-like sweep of the bill. **Habitat:** Formerly bred on South I riverbeds; now a vagrant to lakes and estuaries. [Sp 173]



**STILTS and AVOCETS**

Recurvirostridae

Of 7 species, 2 breed in New Zealand and a third may have bred in the nineteenth century.

These are medium-sized waders with long, slender bills, necks and especially legs, which suit their wading up to the belly to feed in shallow fresh, salt or brackish water. Stilts have a fine, almost straight bill. Avocets have a fine, upturned bill, more sharply turned in

females, with complex lamellae which they use to sift out tiny food particles. Sexes are alike, but males have longer legs. Most species have a pattern of black above and white below. Webbing between the front three toes is much reduced in stilts. Although having long legs, which trail behind the short, square tail in flight, they are slim and graceful. Adult plumage is gained in their first or second year; they first breed at 2–3 years.

**173. AUSTRALIAN RED-NECKED AVOCET**

*Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* Plate 39

**Size:** 44 cm, 300 g

**Distribution:** Breed only in Australia, mainly in southern parts. Between 1859 and 1892, avocets were reported widely from Whangarei to Invercargill, and they attempted breeding at several estuarine localities in Canterbury. Only two recent records, both of single birds: Lake Ellesmere (1912), and Westport (1968–70).

**Behaviour:** Gregarious. They feed in flocks at shallow wetlands of fresh, brackish or preferably saline water. In Australia, they are often inland at saltlakes, especially when evaporation has raised the salinity, but they move to coastal wetlands in summer–autumn. They utter loud barking and wheezing whistles.

**Reading:** Kaigler, C.G. 1968. *Notornis* 15: 123.