Probable first record of a drinking seedsnipe (Family Thinocoridae) in the wild

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Seedsnipes (family Thinocoridae, genera *Attagis* and *Thinocorus* with two species each) are strictly vegetarian shorebirds occurring in some of the coldest and driest habitats of southern South America. It has been hypothesised that they retrieve all their water from their food, mostly leaves and buds from (succulent) plants. According to Fjeldså (1996), none of the seedsnipes "are known to drink in natural conditions. However, they may do so in captivity." In apparent contradiction, he also shows a photograph of a male Grey-breasted seedsnipe *Thinocorus orbignyianus* leaning over at the edge of a pond suggesting that it may have been drinking. Therefore it is not completely sure if drinking in the wild never occurs.

Here we describe an observation of a Least Seedsnipe *Thinocorus rumicivorus* almost certainly drinking. This species is locally common in Argentinean Patagonia (southern South America). On 2 Feb 2005, a flock of 8 Least Seedsnipes was encountered on the shores of Lago Argentino, Santa Cruz Province. It was sunny, about 20°C with a moderate wind (i.e. fairly normal weather for Patagonia at this time of year). The seedsnipes were in close proximity to some Baird's Sandpipers *Calidris bairdii*, and while we were concentrating on the sandpipers, we noticed that one of the seedsnipes (probably an adult female, based on the brown-striped chest with some black on the lower border) was behaving as if it was drinking. While we watched at a range of 30 m with 10× binoculars, it stood still with its body horizontal, and then slowly and rhythmically alternated the position of its head between the horizontal and a position low to the ground (Fig. 1A). The head was held at its lowest point for a short period and was then raised slowly and at a constant speed. This movement was repeated five or six times, and then, after some disturbance, three or four times more. As the bird stood between some fairly large stones, it could not be confirmed that its bill actually touched the water. However, from its position, it was clear to us that it had access to water from the lake and we inferred that it had been dipping its bill into the water.

Although what we saw looked very much like drinking, we cannot be absolutely certain that drinking took place. The bill was not seen but only inferred to have reached the water, and no water was seen in or on the bill; neither did we observe clear bill movements or swallowing as often seen in other species when drinking. Moreover during the head-lifting phase the bill did not point upwards, as happens when other species drink.

It is not easy to show with complete certainty that any bird has been drinking. This could be done with captive birds, e.g. by measuring water volumes in the digestive tract or in the external environment before and after apparent drinking, or by showing the ingestion of some kind of external marker in the water. However, such tests are almost impossible in the field. Therefore our observations will have to suffice until perhaps video footage is obtained that shows wild seedsnipe clearly drinking.

The only credible alternative explanation for the behaviour that we observed is that the seedsnipe was eating something. However, eating behaviour is rather different from what we saw. When seedsnipes eat – and we have seen this often – the bill jerks forward quickly to grab an item and then returns with equal speed to its original position (like a chicken pecking grain). Therefore the head is moved forward and backwards, not up and down as in what we infer to be drinking (Fig. 1, A & B).

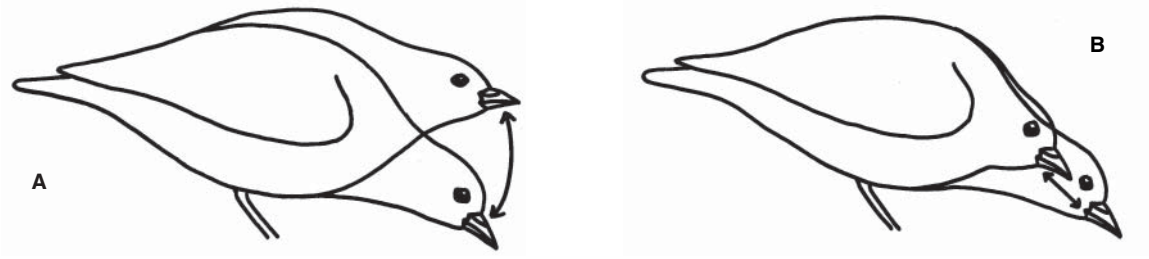

Fig. 1. The actions of a Least Seedsnipe that is (A) (believed to be) drinking or (B) eating.

In eating, pecks may be repeated (such as when a bird is taking different leaves from the same plant), but are not usually rhythmic: some pecks may follow one another quickly, such as when prey items are small, while others only after a pause, such as when larger items are taken that need more than a moment's handling.

Given that the observed behaviour was unlike the normal eating behaviour, that very little food (if any) was present where the bird was seen but water *was* present, and that the behaviour showed similarities to the drinking behaviour of other birds, in our view it is most likely that this particular seedsnipe was drinking. As such, it is the first record of probable drinking in the wild for any species of seedsnipe.

While it is likely that drinking water is normally to be found in the habitats used by seedsnipes, in some circumstances it may be unavailable, such as when water is frozen or saline or in times of drought. By virtue of an ability to live on water retrieved from food, seedsnipes are able to occupy habitats in which few other birds could survive. Given that seedsnipes do drink in captivity and apparently also (but probably rarely) in the wild, we suggest that they (or certainly Least Seedsnipes) are opportunistic in their behaviour: they may drink when suitable water is available, but can do without it too.

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Fjeldså, J. 1996. Family Thinocoridae (Seedsnipes). Pp. 538–545, in: Del Hoyo, J., Elliot, A. & Sargatal, J. eds. (1996). *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol. 3. Hoatzin to Auks. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.

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Polygyny in American Black Oystercatchers: the better option or the only option?

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Twenty years ago this journal published (Briggs 1984) one of the first observations of polygyny in the Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*. In Europe, researchers have continued to gain insight into this unusual breeding behavior for a typically monogamous species using multiyear studies of colour-banded birds. In the well-studied oystercatcher population at Schiermonnikoog in the Netherlands, only 28 polygynous territories were documented over 14 years of study, involving less than 3% of the breeding females (Heg & van Treuren 1998). Meanwhile the life history of a North American congener, the American Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmani*, has remained comparatively less well known, particularly in Alaska where more than half the population breeds (Andres & Falxa 1995). Here I describe the first observation of polygyny in the American Black Oystercatcher.

I began colour-banding American Black Oystercatchers breeding in Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska in 2003 as part of a study investigating the effects of recreational disturbance on oystercatcher productivity. Oystercatchers were captured during early incubation at the nest site using noose mats or a dipnet. I marked individuals with unique colour band combinations, and collected a 1cc blood sample from the wing for DNA-based sex identification (Griffiths *et al*. 1998). Forty-five adults were banded in the first year of study; with the exception of two pairs, at least one member of all pairs breeding in the study area (150 km of shoreline) was banded.

I observed strong site and mate fidelity of American Black Oystercatchers, as have other researchers (Hartwick 1974, Hazlitt & Butler 2001). Forty-three of the 45 banded adults returned to the study area in 2004; most banded pairs (n = 11) reunited, and all but two birds used the same nesting territory. Mate switching was observed in two pairs, both of which involved widows (the banded mate was never resighted). Divorce is known to have occurred in only one case where a banded male abandoned his mate and nest during early incubation and paired with a widowed female on her nesting territory 12 km away. This incidence of divorce is similar to the average annual divorce rate of 7.9% observed in Eurasian Oystercatchers (Heg *et al*. 2003).

A polygynous trio was observed in both the 2003 and 2004 breeding seasons. The male of this trio was observed incubating eggs at two nest sites separated by 1.2 km. Throughout both breeding seasons this male was observed incubating and performing territorial displays with the females at the two nest sites. We did not observe any copulation behavior, nor do we have genetic data from the chicks to confirm extra pair copulations, but all three birds were colour banded and sexed making identification of the birds involved unambiguous. Rarely was the trio observed together, and only once was one female observed near the other female's nest site.

In 2003, female one initiated a nest on approximately 10 May and produced one chick that had died by 7 July, approximately 25 days post hatch. The first nest of the second female was initiated on approximately 15 May and was abandoned