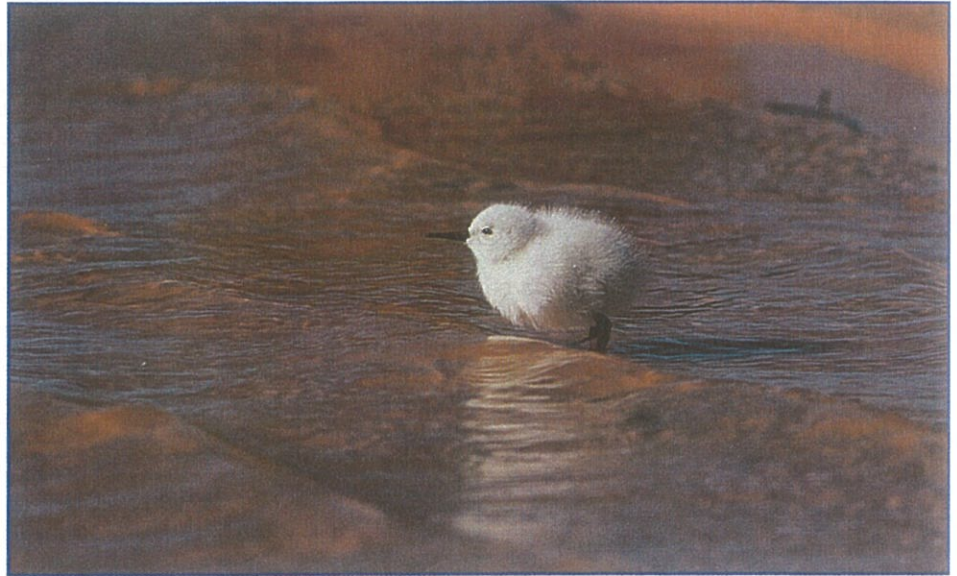


Update on Banded Stilt breeding event

The June edition of *Wingspan* (Vol. 5 (2): 13-15) featured an article by Clive Minton, Jim Lane and Grant Pearson, describing the beginning of this historic Banded Stilt breeding event at Lake Ballard, WA. Banded Stilts only breed on recently-flooded salt lakes, and only about 20 nesting events have ever been recorded. In the June feature, we left the breeding colony just as the chicks were hatching. Here is an update on how they have fared since...

Research work by Jim Lane, Grant Pearson and other officers from the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in Western Australia has continued at the Banded Stilt breeding locations in the Goldfields. The ABC Natural History Unit also made a follow-up visit in late May to film chick creching and fledging.

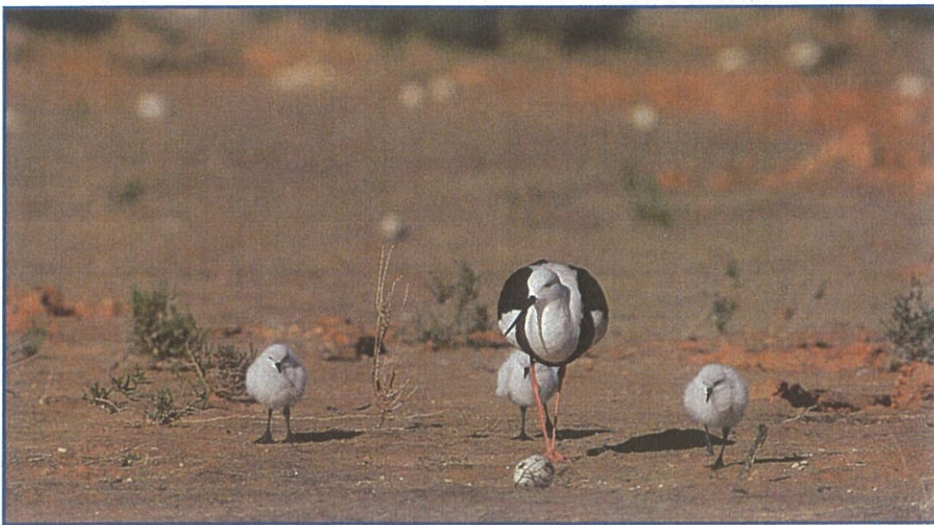


Above: Banded Stilt chick taking a first drink at the water's edge.

Left: Each brood is accompanied only by a single parent as it leaves the colony for the water.

Below left: A newly-hatched chick, still wet, is visible under this incubating adult.

PHOTOS BY CLIVE MINTON



It seems that breeding has been successful, with an excellent rate of young birds surviving to fledging. Mark Lambie, the ABC camera-man, reported 'tens of thousands' of well-grown chicks on the western end of Lake Ballard.

Although the newly-hatched chicks could swim and feed in the normal metre-deep water, they seemed to prefer to make their way gradually down to the shallow parts of the lake (30 km away) for the bulk of their fledging period. There they marched around on the wet mud or

in very shallow water picking up minute items of food — too small to be the brine shrimp that are thought to be their preferred diet.

In contrast, the accompanying adults — which had greatly reduced in number as the chicks gradually coalesced into hundred-strong groups — seemed to find feeding in the shallows unsatisfactory. Thus they periodically left the chicks to fly to deeper water, presumably to feed on the now abundant supply of brine shrimps.

Banding and colour-flagging of chicks went very well, with nearly 1,000 birds marked. To do this, we caught chicks in a handnet from a moving boat — a method which proved reasonably straightforward. When the chicks were still in family parties we found it necessary to catch only part of the brood at a time, then to return these birds to the parent before catching the rest of the brood. We also followed this precautionary procedure with larger groups of chicks. Incidentally, the behaviour we observed while catching the chicks provides yet another con-



trast between Banded Stilts and other waders: Banded Stilts neither actively defend their young nor perform distraction displays (such as the 'broken-wing trick') to deter intruders, as do other waders.

So far there has apparently been no second round of breeding at Lake Ballard, unlike the breeding event at Lake Torrens in 1989. However, plenty of adults are still present on the Lake, and some excited gathering and even copulating has been observed, so further nesting may occur.

A further aerial survey is planned for mid-July to see if any further nesting attempts have been made, and to log the number of adults and juvenile birds still present. The water levels are holding up well, which is encouraging.

A small nesting colony (5,000 pairs) did form on nearby Lake Marmion, and at least 2,000 chicks were seen in June, but nesting success was probably lower there than at Lake Ballard due to the regular presence of predators in the form of a Wedge-tailed Eagle and a Peregrine Falcon.

Would everyone, especially in Western Australia, please keep a look out for banded and leg-flagged birds? Please also monitor, by regular counts, the return of birds to traditional non-breeding areas as they leave the drying salt lakes in the future.

CLIVE MINTON, JIM LANE AND GRANT PEARSON