**THE AUSTRALIAN**

**Weekend birder's**

**`mega' discovery**

**A keen birder spots a nondescript
wading bird in Cairns - and sends the
nation's twitchers all aflutter.**

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t is impossible to measure the length of a coastline and any attempt to do so always ends up being an imperfect approximation of reality. Do you measure at high tide or low, or the average between? Do you crawl around the whole coast on your hands and knees with a ruler, or just go to Google Maps and use the line-drawing tool? The measuring is not really the point with the Australian coastline: it's the *idea* of the vastness of it that should suffice. For those afflicted with the interminable condition of watching birds, or birding as most of us call it, that unmeasurable coastline is an endless horizon filled with hope.

The holy grail of birding is the sighting of an exceptionally rare bird, known as a "mega". Many birders keep a "life" list — a running total of birds that have been accumulated in one's lifetime. The particularly obsessed birders are in a category all of their own — the twitchers. Once wind of a mega blows through the various -birding networks, the twitcher can cover vast distances, almost as far as the migratory birds themselves, to catch sight of it.

I'm not a twitcher, but if I didn't have a family, a mortgage and a nine-to-five job, and was endowed with endless funds to fly off somewhere at the drop of a Rosy

Starling's tail feather, then maybe I might be. Birders like me potter around at the weekend for an hour or so and get excited to see a Black Bittern skulking beside their local swamp or to photograph a Whistling Kite. Birders like me never stumble across a mega. I've been birding for 40 years and haven't come close. Yes, I've seen a few rare birds. They're usually ones that have strayed off course during their migration. But to actually be the person who discovers a mega? That's an impossible dream that began for me many decades ago, when I read reports of an exceptionally rare and very lost Red-footed Falcon that was spotted near my home town when I was a kid. In the weird and wonderful world of birding, spotting a mega is like winning the lottery.

**On New Year's Day this year I was up early to** see if I could add any new birds to my long-running Cairns Esplanade list. I was now sitting a respectable sixth on eBird's table for that location (eBird is a popular birdlogging website and app used all over the world). I was pretty happy with that. I'd been spending more of my weekend early mornings birding on the Esplanade, honing my skills at identifying wading birds.

If there's one avian family that tends to polarise birders, it's the waders. Some birders will give up as soon as they see a flock of 1000 drab grey birds on a mudflat, smudging into one another, lamenting with stock statements such as: "They're all the same?' I was once one of those birders, preferring the flashy colours of the forest dwellers. However, since moving to Cairns more than a decade ago, I've learnt to love the waders. Sure, they're a challenge, but the first time you manage to ­differentiate a Red Knot in a sea of Great Knots (drab, plump, medium-sized waders), there's a quiet sense of achievement.

Identifying waders is like learning a foreign language as an adult — it's difficult and laborious, and you want to give up numerous times, but a spark has been lit inside you. It's a challenge that brings you back every week: is that a Bar-tailed Godwit or a Black-tailed Godwit? Once you have your eye in, however, it's like riding a bicycle.

It was an overcast morning on New Year's Day as I scanned the mudflats with my new Nikon P1000 camera and its 3000mm-equivalent zoom lens. I was picking up the usual suspects (Bar-tailed Godwits, Lesser Sand Plovers, Terek Sandpipers, Red-necked Stints), and hoping for an uncommon Beach Stone-curlew, when I saw something a little unusual. The fact that I didn't recognise it was not that strange —sometimes the bird is too far away, or the light is at a difficult angle — but there was

something about this bird that wasn't right. So I hit the video record on the camera and continued to observe. The first thing I noticed was the bill. It was quite stout and of a medium length. My mind started wandering into the land of rarities. I remembered the Asian Dowitcher that was seen here at the end of 2019 but, no, wrong body shape and bill.

This bird wasn't doing much. It had obviously fed that morning and was fairly inactive and docile, save for occasionally preening itself. Then a miracle happened: a Common Greenshank stood next to the mystery bird in exactly the same profile pose. I compared the bills — my bird's was similar, but thicker. The mystery bird looked "greenshanky", for want of a better word, only its body was a bit stockier, with shorter, more yellow legs, and the features weren't as fine. Its white eye-ring wasn't as pronounced, and it lacked the noticeable streaks on its head. This bird was more washed-out in colour and less delicately defined. Now I was scanning the memory banks, trying to think of any other greenshank species, when suddenly a name popped into my head: Nordmann's? *Nordmann's Greenshank!?*

I didn't know anything about the bird, save for having seen it over the years as I flicked through the pictures of vagrants in my guide books. Yes, it was a vagrant; that's birder-speak for a bird that wanders off course during its migration and ends up somewhere along Australia's vast stretch of coastline or anywhere in the even more vast and remote middle. I kept recording and taking pictures, getting more diagnostic information, because if this was a rare bird and I was going to submit it to the Birdlife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC), I would need to record as many defining features as possible, otherwise they would just reject it out of hand.

Then it called from the mudflats four times: I got that on video. It lifted its wings up to reveal the underwing pattern — I also recorded that. I glanced at my iPhone and quickly searched for pictures of the Nordmann's Greenshank in non-breeding plumage. I found one and enlarged it. It matched the bird I had in my viewfinder. I couldn't believe it. In fact, I *didn't* believe it. You have to be very sceptical: you don't want to look like a fool.

I looked a bit more at the Nordmann's data: it *had* been seen a few times in Australia. That was a good sign. I dug more into the data: it had been seen only a handful of times on a remote beach in Western Australia by a few serious twitchers. And when I say "handful", I'm talking less than 10 sightings, for the whole of Australia, for all time; and most of those sightings were the same bird logged by

different birders. It had never been seen in Queensland; it had never strayed to the east coast of Australia. That's a huge coastline that stretches thousands of kilometres with a lot of birders who are looking at birds all the time. Australia is one of the top birding countries in the world; us birding folk log thousands of checklists every day in every state. And currently, in terms of how many species I've seen in this great land, I'm way down the list in 1196th place.

I continued to doubt what I was seeing. I took more photographs. I looked more closely. The Nordmann's Greenshank is a ridiculously rare bird, with only a thousand or so individuals left in the wilds of its breeding grounds in eastern Russia and non-breeding migratory passages, including South Korea, Japan, Myanmar and Indonesia. It *had* to be a Nordmann's Greenshank, though. It couldn't be anything else. And me, little old dabbling weekend birder me, was looking straight at it —quite possibly the only one of its species on the whole of this enormous, empty continent: the rarest living bird in Australia, and it was having a summer holiday in Cairns!

Forget the legendary Night Parrot. This was a bloody Nordmann's Greenshank on the mudflats near Cairns CBD! I looked at it and blinked. Hooked around and blinked. Not a single other camera lens or pair of binoculars as far as the eye could see. Just me. A twitcher joked later that I should have just grabbed a random stranger and hugged them. However, I knew what I had to do. It was 7.30am when the bird flew off. The tide would turn on the mudflats and the birds would be back at around 3pm for more feeding. I raced home and downloaded my photographs.

**Even though I've lived and birded in Cairns** for more than a decade, I didn't really know any other birders. It's been more of a solo hobby for me, one that I've kept to myself, rarely mentioning it to friends or work colleagues. However, I was a member of a local birding email group, so I emailed the facilitator of the group, informing him of what I thought I'd found. I remembered the Australian Bird ID Facebook page, too; I grabbed my best photographs and posted them, along with one very simple question: "Is this a Nordmann's Greenshank, next to a Common Greenshank?" I waited. Was I going to get trolled by a world bird expert and called an idiot for thinking a Common Greenshank was one of the world's rarest birds? I sat there preparing for the worst. What I didn't know was that everywhere in the vast twitcher-sphere of Australian birders, heads were exploding in disbelief at the sight of this simple post and its photographs of a drab wading bird standing on a beach in Far North Queensland. Or that twitchers from all over Australia were

already frantically calling travel agents to book flights to Cairns, or had already hopped in their cars to drive for hours just to bag this bird for their life list.

One of those twitchers, who just happened to be one of the very few who had seen the bird on the remote beach in Western Australia, was typing a response to my post: "Yep, sure is! Well done." I sat there in disbelief. More comments quickly poured in: "What an amazing sighting!", "What an astonishing record!", and my ­favourite, which succinctly summed up the monumental mega that I'd just discovered: "F..k!" Yes, that's right. I'd just found a mega. I felt like I'd won the lottery.

And, I realised, I was doing myself a disservice: I was underselling my ability to identify a tricky wading bird. There was nothing remotely easy about this ID. In the ensuing days, some were mistaking it for the Common Greenshank. Others were confusing it with a Terek Sandpiper because of its feeding habits. Some just couldn't see it in the vast acres of dark mud as I zoomed in with my camera's lens and gave running commentaries of where it was while pointing in its general direction. I met a couple of "forest" birders from the nearby Atherton Tablelands who had no experience with waders, and they even struggled to identify the Common Greenshank, never mind the Nordmann's.

That afternoon, there must have been 30 to 40 birders lined up on the Esplanade and wandering the mudflats successfully spotting the Nordmann's. I mingled. I met other birders. I hobnobbed with experienced twitchers, ones whose life lists were stratospheric, and I felt proud of what I'd achieved.

One of them gave a knowing nod and said: "This is your bird." I knew exactly what he was trying to say. I remembered the 11-year-old me, the one who would cycle 20km every week in wind and rain to a local wildlife reserve to spend the day watching migrant wildfowl fly into their winter feeding grounds; and how that young boy just became completely hooked on the spectacle and the gift of watching birds; and the dream of seeing a Red-footed Falcon — that 11-year-old's idea of the ultimate mega. I wanted to call that boy from the future and tell him to be patient, tell him to keep dreaming, because one day he would find his falcon and it would be his bird, and nobody could ever take that away from him.

The next day brought even more birders into town — they'd flown in from Brisbane and driven from Townsville and come down from the Tablelands. The tide went

out, someone saw a bird fly in, and they called my name — Adrian! Adrian! Is this it?" Suddenly, I was the expert I zoomed in with my camera and mentally ticked off some of the features: 'Yes, that's it," I replied. Confirmation. Happiness. Smiles all around. High-fives and handshakes. Everyone had bagged the mega.

As I write this a month later, the Nordmann's Greenshank is still having a summer holiday on the Cairns Esplanade mudflats. I'm still going down there when I can and pointing it out to anyone who's interested. But life goes an, the Nordmann's will soon depart for its distant home shores and I11 go back to working during the week and pottering around at the weekends for a few hours, trying to bump up my wader list.

So, if you just happen to see someone with a camera looking at birds on the Cairns Esplanade mudflats, come and say hello: it just might be me and, well, have I got a story to tell you. It's about the day I found a mega and briefly became the most celebrated birder in Australia. But you can just call me Adrian — the Nordmann's Guy