

# Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

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## FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

Firstly, take in the beauty of this photo of the Latham's Snipe taken recently at Brookfield. Now, look closely at the 'form' of the body of this bird; in particular, the long yellow legs and the very long straight, strong beak. What 'function' do the legs and beak serve in the life of this wonderful summer migrant?

Latham's Snipe (length 30 cm, wingspan 50cm, mass 200 gm) is a cryptic, migratory wader that breeds in Japan during the northern summer and spends its non-breeding season in eastern Australia during the southern summer. To get a year of endless summer the Snipe flies about 7000 km! The flights south and then north are synchronised to the Earth's orbital position to compensate for the earth's 23.50 tilt! In Australia they usually occur singly or in small groups because there is no breeding, no nest building and no territories to defend.

In Australia they usually inhabit shallow freshwater wetlands

of various kinds and sizes, with bare wet mud or shallow water for feeding and nearby vegetation cover for shelter. Latham's Snipe forage at the water's edge during the day or at night. It is their habitat and foraging method that match the 'form' of their bodies. Their long legs are required in the shallow water and mud, and their long strong bills jab and probe into the mud with an up and down 'sewing-machine' action to hunt for prey. They feed on seeds, flies and beetles, earthworms, centipedes and molluscs.

The greatest threat to Latham's Snipe in Australia and Japan is the loss of habitat caused by the drainage and modification of wetlands. The form of their bodies is perfectly matched to their functioning. This perfection of form limits their life options. They require wetlands.

Happily look for form following function in birds

~ Jim

Image: Latham's Snipe, photo by Ed Frazer at Brookfield ©