Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Greater sand plover

Charadrius leschenaultii

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Vulnerable
Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Caption: D. Portelli

Description

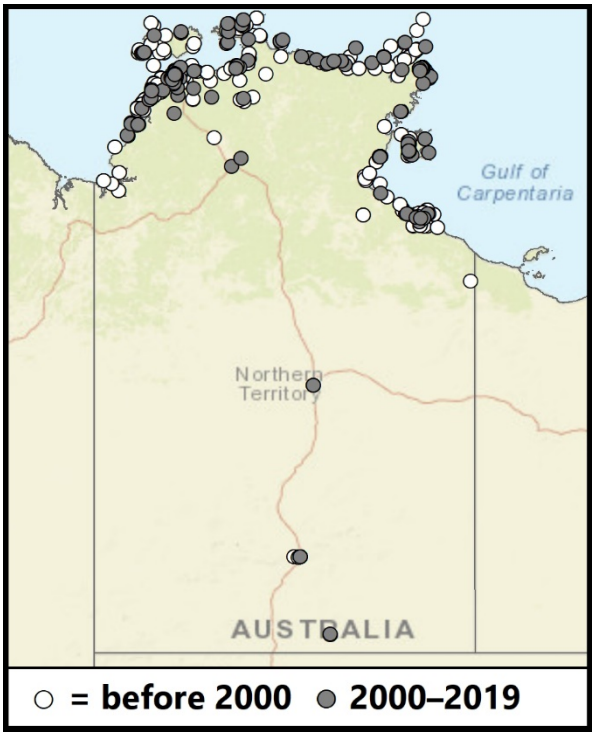
The Greater Sand Plover is a small to medium-sized shorebird with a straight robust bill that has a pointed tip. The legs are long and olive-grey. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors), the head, nape and upperparts are grey-brown and there are large brown-grey patches on the sides of the breast. The lores through to the ear coverts are dark brown. The forehead, eyebrow and underparts are white. Males in breeding plumage have a chestnut breast-band, forehead, nape and lateral crown, and a black-and-white face.

Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers can be difficult to distinguish. Characteristics that are useful for differentiating Greater Sand Plovers from Lesser Sand Plovers include a longer and pointed bill, larger body, and a proportionally larger and squarer head.

Distribution

The Greater Sand Plover breeds in eastern and central Asia. Only one of the three recognised subspecies, *Charadrius leschenaultii leschenaultii*, migrates to Australia.

After breeding in north-western China, Mongolia and southern Siberia, this subspecies migrates along the East Asian-Australasian flyway to overwinter mostly in Australasia, but also on the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia.



Caption: Known localities of the Greater Sand Plover in the NT (nrmaps.nt.gov.au)

The Greater Sand Plover occurs along most coastlines in Australia, but is more common in the north. In the Northern Territory (NT), Greater Sand Plovers have been recorded in most coastal areas, particularly Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, the coast from Anson Bay to Murgenella Creek (including the south coast of the Tiwi Islands), the northern Arnhem coast, and the Port McArthur area[1].

NT conservation reserves where reported: Barranyi National Park, Casuarina Coastal Reserve, Charles Darwin National Park, Djukbinj National Park, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, Kakadu National Park, Limmen National Park, Nitmiluk National Park, Shoal Bay Coastal Reserve and Tree Point Conservation Reserve.

Ecology and life-history

After breeding during the northern summer on predominantly treeless plains in arid and semi-arid regions of east Asia, those that overwinter in Australia migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway. These non-breeding birds occur almost exclusively along the coast, favouring sheltered sandy, shelly or muddy beaches, large intertidal mudflats and sandbanks, estuaries, tidal lagoons, rocky islands and coral reefs. Inland saline wetlands close to the coast are also used occasionally. They feed on marine worms, molluscs, crustaceans and insects, which are captured on or just below the surface of sand or mud. Greater Sand Plovers are gregarious in the non-breeding season, usually occurring in small to large flocks, especially when roosting at hide tide. They often intermingle with other shorebird species, including Lesser Sand Plovers. The estimated generation length is 8 years[2].

Threatening processes

The main acute cause of decline for Greater Sand Plovers migrating to Australia is habitat loss and degradation at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region[3–4]. Habitat degradation has also occurred more gradually across most of its range. Other threats include pollution and contamination impacts, reduced river flows, human disturbance and hunting[2,4].

Threats in Australia, particularly along south-eastern coastlines, include ongoing human disturbance, habitat loss and degradation from pollution, changes to hydrological processes and invasive plants[2,4].

Anthropogenic climate change is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the Greater Sand Plover, particularly through the loss of intertidal habitats due to sea-level rise[4].

Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain stable or increasing numbers of non-breeding Greater Sand Plover by: retaining healthy intertidal mudflat habitats; improving protection of roosting sites; managing anthropogenic disturbance at important sites when Greater Sand Plovers are present; and incorporating requirements for the species into coastal planning and management.

References

[1] Chatto, R., 2003. The distribution and status of shorebirds around the coast and coastal wetlands of the Northern Territory. Technical Report 73. Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, Darwin.

[2] Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., Dutson, G., 2011. The action plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.

[3] Barter, M.A., 2002. Shorebirds of the Yellow Sea: importance, threats and conservation status. Wetlands International Global Series 9, International Wader Studies 12, Canberra, Australia.

[4] Threatened Species Scientific Committee, 2016. Conservation Advice *Charadrius leschenaultii* Greater Sand Plover. Department of the Environment, Canberra.