

# Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

## CURLEW SANDPIPER

### *Calidris ferruginea*

#### Conservation status

Australia: Critically Endangered

Northern Territory: Vulnerable



Photo supplied by BirdLife Australia

#### Description

The Curlew Sandpiper is a small-medium sized shorebird with long legs and a long black tapering down-curved bill. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors) the top and back of the head and the upperparts are grey-brown with little mottling or scalloping.

There is a white 'eye-brow'. The underparts are light with a grey wash across the breast. A white rump and broad wing bar are apparent in flight.

#### Distribution

Curlew Sandpipers breed in central and eastern Siberia (Russia). Annual southerly migration takes them to Africa, southern Asia and Australasia. Their distribution in Australia during the non-breeding season is quite widespread, with records in the north and south, and scattered through inland Australia (Garnett et al. 2011).

In the Northern Territory (NT), Curlew Sandpipers have been recorded from most coastal areas and these are important non-breeding and stop-over areas. Chatto (2003) considered the Fog Bay and Chambers Bay areas and the Port McArthur area as the main areas for the species in the NT. They have also been reported at Alice Springs and Newhaven Station (presumed to be migrants passing through).

Conservation reserves where reported: Barranyi National Park, Djukbinj National Park, Kakadu National Park, Keep River National Park and Limmen National Park.

#### Ecology

After breeding in the northern summer on the arctic tundras of Siberia, those that overwinter in Australia migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway. These non-breeding birds forage around coastal brackish lagoons, intertidal mud and sand flats, estuaries, saltmarshes and occasionally on inland freshwater wetlands (Garnett et al 2011). They feed on marine worms, molluscs and crustaceans.

#### Conservation assessment

The status of this species in Australia and globally was reviewed in 2010 (by Garnett et al. (2011), and BirdLife International (2011), respectively). For the population(s) migrating to Australia, Garnett et al. (2011) considered that its recent decline was 50-79 per cent in three generations (c. 23 years). This was based on many years of counts at key sites across Australia: e.g. Rogers et al 2010. Garnett et al (2011) rated its Australian status as Vulnerable A2bc+3c+4bc. Globally, other populations have not shown such declines and BirdLife International (2011) rates its global status as Least Concern.

Birds visiting the NT probably comprise a minor proportion of the global population of this species: Chatto (2003) estimated that the minimum Top End population of Curlew Sandpipers was 17 800 individuals; BirdLife International (2011) estimated the current total global population at 1.8 -1.9 million individuals.

Birds occurring in the NT are a component of the migratory Australian population, and can reasonably be assumed to have suffered a reduction of similar proportion. So at first pass the species rates as Endangered (under criterion A2ac+4c):

- observed reduction of the migratory population visiting Australia of >50 per cent over the last three generations (c. 23 years), expected to continue in the future;
- causes of reduction have not ceased and may not be reversible; and
- decline in habitat quality of northern hemisphere breeding grounds.

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However, following the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Regional Guidelines, this status should be downgraded by one level because conditions within the NT are not deteriorating and the global population is large and relatively stable such that the breeding population could rescue the regional population if it declined. Consequently, this species is listed as Vulnerable (A2ac+4c) in the NT.

### **Threatening processes**

The main acute cause of population decline for birds migrating to Australia is habitat loss at migratory stop-over grounds (mudflats in the Yellow Sea area: Barter 2002; Moores et al. 2008; Hassell 2010), but habitat degradation has also occurred more gradually across most of its range.

### **Conservation objectives and management**

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain stable non-breeding populations by retaining healthy coastal mudflat, sandflat, estuarine and other wetland habitats.

Secondarily, the Australian Government should be supported in its international endeavours to promote conservation of shorebirds along the East Asian-Australasian flyway.

### **Complied by**

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### **References**

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