

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Curlew sandpiper

Calidris ferruginea

Conservation status

Australia: Critically Endangered

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Critically Endangered

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Curlew Sandpiper is a small to medium-sized migratory shorebird with long legs, a long, fine-tipped, down-curved black bill, and a wingspan of 38–41 cm. 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. The face has a distinct white eyebrow. The underparts are white with grey-brown streaking on the sides of the breast. A white rump and broad wingbar are visible in flight.

Distribution

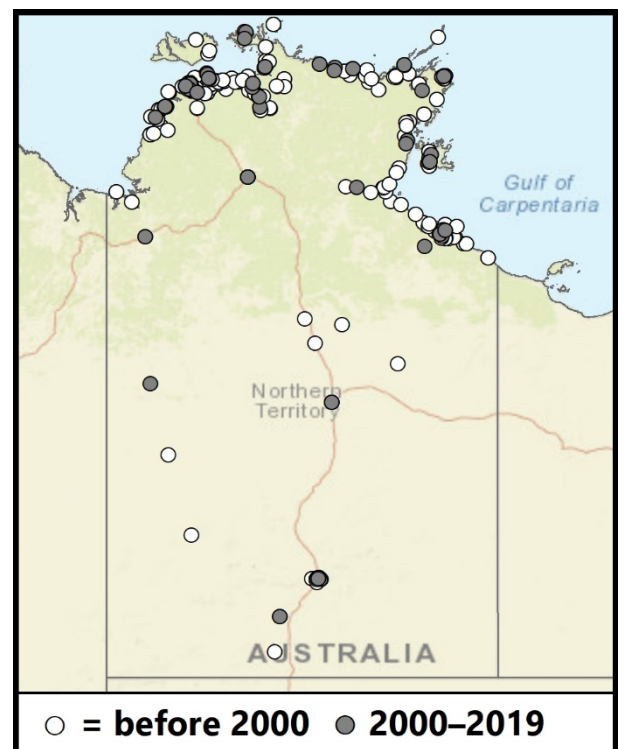
Curlew Sandpipers breed in central and eastern Siberia and migrate annually along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF) to overwinter in Africa, southern Asia and Australasia. They have a widespread distribution in Australia during the non-breeding season; most birds occupy coastal areas, but records of the species are scattered across most inland regions¹.

In the Northern Territory (NT), Curlew Sandpipers have been recorded from most coastal areas, which are important non-breeding and staging grounds.



Credit: D. Portelli

The Fog Bay, Chambers Bay and Port McArthur areas are particularly important for the species in the NT². Inland records include the Victoria River District, Barkly Tableland and Alice Springs region.



Caption: Known localities of the Curlew Sandpiper in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

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

Ecology and life-history

After breeding in the northern summer on tundras in the Russian Arctic and New Siberian Islands, Curlew Sandpipers that overwinter in Australia migrate southwards along the EAAF. These non-breeding birds occur on intertidal mudflats and sandflats, estuaries, coastal brackish lagoons, saltmarshes and occasionally on inland freshwater wetlands. They feed on invertebrates such as marine worms, molluscs and crustaceans, which they obtain from the surface of mud or sand or by probing deep into the substrate. Curlew Sandpipers have an estimated generation length of 7.6 years³.

Threatening processes

The main acute cause of decline for Curlew Sandpipers migrating to Australia is habitat loss and degradation at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region^{4,5}. Habitat degradation has also occurred gradually across most of its range.

Threats in Australia, particularly eastern and southern coastal areas, include habitat loss and degradation from pollution and coastal development, ongoing human disturbance, changes to hydrological processes and invasive plants¹.

Anthropogenic climate change is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the Curlew Sandpiper throughout its range, particularly through the potential loss of intertidal habitats due to sea-level rise⁵.

Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain a stable or increasing numbers of non-breeding Curlew Sandpipers by: retaining healthy intertidal mudflat habitats; improving protection of roosting sites; managing anthropogenic disturbance at important sites

when Curlew Sandpipers are present; and incorporating requirements for the species into coastal planning and management.

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

References

- ¹ Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., Dutson, G., 2011. The action plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.
- ² 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.
- ³ BirdLife International, 2020. Species factsheet: *Calidris ferruginea*. <http://www.birdlife.org> (accessed on 7 February 2020).
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ Department of the Environment, 2015. Conservation Advice *Calidris ferruginead* Curlew Sandpiper. Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- ⁶ Studds, C.E., Kendall, B.E., Murray, N.J., Wilson, H.B., Rogers, D.I., Clemens, R.S., Gosbell, K., Hassell, C.J., Jessop, R., Melville, D.S., Milton, D.A., 2017. Rapid population decline in migratory shorebirds relying on Yellow Sea tidal mudflats as stopover sites. *Nat. Commun.* 8, 1–7.