

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

EASTERN CURLEW FAR EASTERN CURLEW

Numenius madagascariensis

Conservation status

Australia: Critically Endangered

Northern Territory: Vulnerable



Photo: BirdLife Australia*

Description

The Eastern Curlew is a very large shorebird with a very long down-curved bill, long legs and a long neck. The bill is pale at the base and darker towards the tip. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors) the head and neck are heavily streaked with dark brown, continuing but sparser on the breast. The wings have obvious mottling and scalloping of dark over lighter browns. There are narrow dark-brown bars on the tail, rump and vent.

Distribution

In the Northern Territory (NT), Eastern Curlews have been recorded all along the coast and on many offshore islands. Chatto (2003) considered the more important areas for the species to be along the coast either side of Darwin, the Millingimbi to Buckingham Bay area, the Roper and Limmen Bight River mouths and the Port McArthur area.

Conservation reserves where reported: Barranyi National Park, Casuarina Coastal Reserve, Charles Darwin National Park, Djukbinj National Park, Kakadu National Park and Limmen National Park.

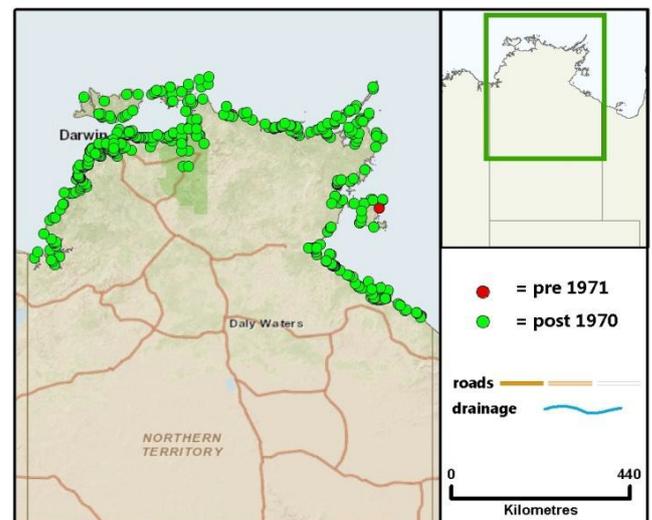


Figure 1 - Known locations of the Eastern Curlew

Ecology

Eastern Curlews breed in damp bogs and marshes of sub-arctic central-eastern Asia and migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway to overwinter in Australia. During this non-breeding season (the austral summer) birds in the NT are often solitary or in small flocks, rarely far from the coast. They are most common in mangrove areas, but will also forage on intertidal flats and saltmarshes. They feed on crabs and molluscs (Garnett et al. 2011).

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). Most of the global population winters in Australia, so the two assessments should be broadly similar. Garnett et al. (2011) considered that its recent decline in Australia was >30 per cent (based on many years of counts at key sites across Australia: e.g. Reid and Park 2003; Gosbell and Clemens 2006; Rogers et al. 2010) and hence they rated its Australian status as Vulnerable A2bc+3c+4bc; comparable levels of decline were reported globally by BirdLife International (2011) who considered its global status as Vulnerable.

Birds visiting the NT probably comprise a substantial proportion of the global population of this species: Chatto (2003) estimated that the minimum Top End population of eastern curlews was 6 800 individuals; BirdLife International (2011) estimated the current total global population at 38 000 individuals. The NT population can reasonably be assumed to have suffered a reduction of similar proportion to that in Australia as a whole. So, in the NT, this species qualifies as Vulnerable (under criterion A2a), based on:

- population reduction of >30 per cent over three generations (c. 30 years) observed in the past; and
- where the causes of reduction have not ceased and may not be reversible.

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; Hassel 2010), but habitat degradation has also occurred more gradually across most of its range.

The non-breeding grounds of the species in eastern and southern Australia are threatened by habitat degradation, loss and human disturbance (Garnett et al. 2011), but those in the NT are generally free of such disturbances.

Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain stable non-breeding populations by retaining healthy intertidal mudflat habitats.

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

Complied by

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