

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Far eastern curlew

Numenius madagascariensis

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 Far Eastern Curlew is the largest migratory shorebird in the world. It has a very long down-curved bill and long legs. The bill is pale at the base and darkens towards the tip. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors), the head and neck are heavily streaked with dark brown; the breast and flanks are similarly streaked, but more lightly; the wings are intricately mottled with dark over lighter browns; and the tail, rump and vent are patterned with narrow dark-brown bars.

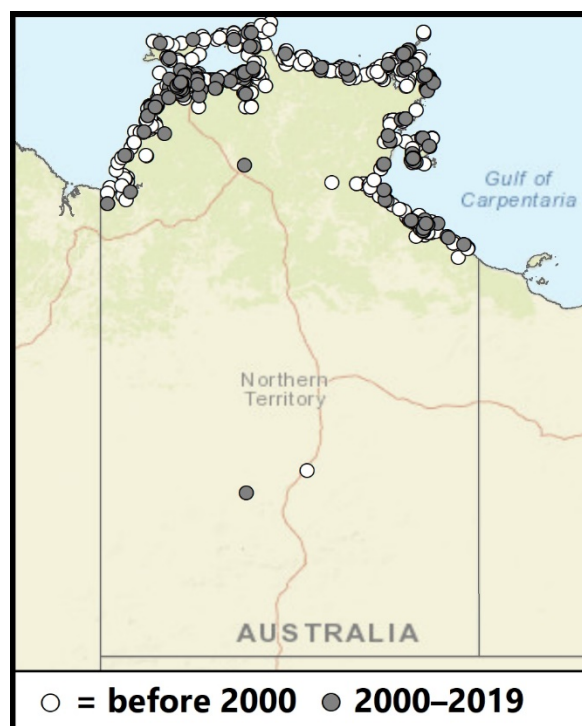
Distribution

The Far Eastern Curlew is endemic to the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The species breeds in Russia, Mongolia and north-eastern China and overwinters primarily in Australia and Southeast Asia. In the Northern Territory (NT), Far Eastern Curlews have been recorded in low numbers all along the coast and on many offshore islands. Important areas for the species are along the coast either side of Darwin, the Millingimbi to Buckingham Bay area, the Roper and Limmen Bight River mouths and the Port McArthur area¹.



Credit: D. Portelli

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



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

Ecology and life-history

Far Eastern Curlews breed in damp bogs and marshes of subarctic central-eastern Asia. In contrast, the species occurs almost exclusively along the coast and island shores during the non-breeding season over the austral summer.

The Far Eastern Curlew forages mostly on extensive tidal mudflats or sandflats, often near mangroves, and saltmarshes. They feed mostly on crabs, ghost-shrimps and small molluscs. Females have noticeably longer bills than males, which results in sexual differences in diet and foraging behaviour. At high tide, Far Eastern Curlews roost on sandbars, sandy spits, islets and amongst coastal vegetation. The species is often solitary but also congregates in small flocks.

Threatening processes

The main acute cause of decline for the Far Eastern Curlew is habitat loss and degradation at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region³⁻⁶. Habitat degradation has also occurred more gradually across most of its range. Human disturbance and hunting threaten birds on their breeding grounds.

The non-breeding grounds of the Far Eastern Curlew in eastern and southern Australia are threatened by ongoing human disturbance; habitat loss and degradation due to pollution and invasive plants; and changes to hydrological processes^{2,4}. These threats are less severe in other parts of Australia, including within the NT.

Anthropogenic climate change is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the Far Eastern Curlew, particularly through the loss of intertidal habitats due to sea-level rise⁴.

Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to: retain healthy intertidal mudflat habitats; improve protection of roosting sites; manage anthropogenic disturbance at important sites when Far Eastern Curlews are present; and

incorporate requirements for the species into coastal planning and management.

References

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- ⁴ Department of the Environment, 2015. Conservation Advice *Numenius madagascariensis* Eastern Curlew. Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- ⁵ Rogers, D., Hassell, C. Oldland, J. Clemens, R., Boyle, A. Rogers, K., 2010. Monitoring Yellow Sea Migrants in Australia (MYSMA): North-western Australian shorebird surveys and workshops, December 2008. Birds Australia; Department of Water and the Arts, Victoria.
- 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.