Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

LESSER SAND PLOVER

Charadrius mongolus

Conservation status
Australia: Critically Endangered
Northern Territory: Vulnerable

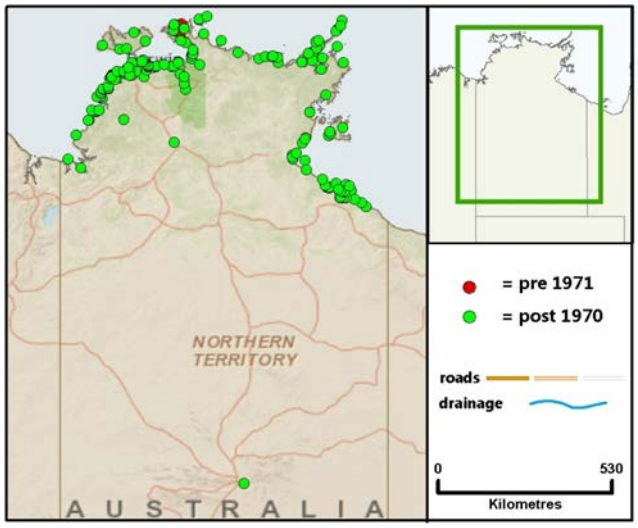
Photo: J. Barkla

Description

The Lesser Sand Plover is a small-to-medium-sized shorebird with a short stout bill and short grey legs. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors) the head, nape and upperparts are dark brown-grey and there are large brown-grey patches on the sides of the breast. The lores and cheeks are dark brown. The forehead and eyebrow are white, as are the chin, neck and underparts. Males in breeding plumage have a broad chestnut breast-band with a black upper margin, a chestnut forehead and nape, and black on the face.

Distribution

The Lesser Sand Plover breeds across a large arc from central Asia to eastern Siberia. Garnett et al. (2011) distinguish between two subspecies of Lesser Sand Plover that migrate to Australasia (C. m. mongolus and C. m. stegmanni). Both breed in far eastern Mongolia and Siberia north-eastern Siberia (Russia), migrate south along the East Asian-Australasian flyway, overwintering in East Asia, South-East Asia, New Guinea and Australia. Both can be found around coastal Australia but C. m. stegmanni is more prevalent in northern Australia and C. m. mongolus in eastern Australia. No attempt will be made to distinguish between the distribution and status of these two subspecies in this document.



Known locations of the Lesser Sand Plover

In the Northern Territory (NT), Lesser Sand Plovers have been recorded from most of the coastline. The most significant areas for the species identified by Chatto (2003) were the coast from Anson Bay to Murgenella Creek, the northern Arnhem coast, Blue Mud Bay 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, Keep River National Park and Limmen National Park.

Ecology

After the breeding in the northern summer in the mountain steppes and tundras of Mongolia or the sand dunes and open habitats of eastern Siberia, those that overwinter in Australia migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway. These non-breeding birds forage on sheltered mudflats, sandy beaches, estuaries and mangroves (Geering et al. 2011). Chatto (2003) reported them occasionally also using inland saline wetlands but always close to the coast. They feed on molluscs, marine worms and crustaceans. Lesser Sand Plovers are gregarious, often in small to large flocks and often intermingled with other shorebirds such as Greater Sand Plovers.

Conservation assessment

The status of this species globally and in Australia was reviewed in 2010 (by Birdlife International (2011), and Garnett et al. (2011), respectively). Globally, Birdlife International (2011) considers the species to be widespread and numerous, and the population trend unknown. However, many years of counts at key sites across Australia (e.g. Rogers et al. 2010) indicate that, for the subspecies that migrate to Australia, there has been a recent decline of >60 percent. On the basis of this observed decline in numbers visiting Australia, Garnett et al. (2011) rated its Australian status as Endangered.

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 A2a):

- global population reduction of >50 percent over three generations (c. 16 years) observed and continuing; and
- the causes of reduction have not ceased and may not be reversible.

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 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.

The non-breeding grounds of the species in south-eastern Australia are threatened by habitat degradation, loss and human disturbance (Garnett et al. 2011), but those in the north 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 endeavours to promote conservation of shorebirds along the East Asian-Australasian flyway.

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