# Threatened species of the Northern Territory

## Lesser sand plover

## *Charadrius mongolus*

### Conservation status

**Australia: Endangered**
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

**Northern Territory: Endangered**
Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Credit: J. Barkla

### Description

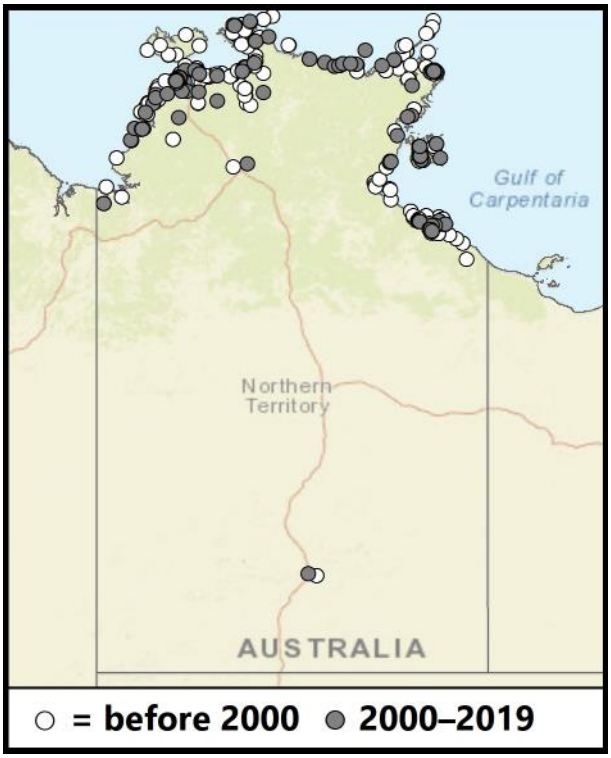
The Lesser Sand Plover is a small to medium-sized shorebird with a short stout bill and short grey legs. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors), the head, nape and upperparts are grey-brown and there are large grey-brown patches on the sides of the breast. The lores through to the ear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

Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers can be difficult to distinguish. Characteristics that are useful for differentiating Lesser Sand Plovers from Greater Sand Plovers include a shorter and blunter bill, smaller and more compact body, and a proportionally smaller and rounder head.

### Distribution

The Lesser Sand Plover breeds in central Asia and eastern Russia. Two subspecies occur in Australia as seasonal migrants: *Charadrius mongolus mongolus* and *C. m. stegmanni*.

Both subspecies breed primarily in far-eastern Siberia (Russia), and migrate along the East Asian-Australasian flyway to overwinter in East Asia, South-East Asia, New Guinea and Australia.




Caption: Known localities of the Lesser Sand Plover in the NT (nrmaps.nt.gov.au)

In Australia, *C. m. stegmanni* is more common in northern Australia, while *C. m. mongolus* is more common in eastern Australia.

In the Northern Territory (NT), Lesser Sand Plovers have been recorded along most of the coastline, particularly the coast from Anson Bay to Murgenella Creek, the northern Arnhem coast, Blue Mud Bay and the Port McArthur area[1].

NT 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 and life-history

After breeding during the northern summer on mountain steppes and tundras of inland eastern Russia (*C. m. mongolus*) or sand dunes, shingle and other open habitats of eastern Siberia (*C. m. stegmanni*), those that overwinter in Australia migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway. These non-breeding birds occur almost exclusively along the coast, where they forage on sheltered intertidal mudflats and sandflats, sandy beaches, estuaries and mangroves. Inland saline wetlands close to the coast are also used occasionally. They feed on marine worms, molluscs, crustaceans and insects, which are captured on or just below the surface of sand or mud. Lesser Sand Plovers are gregarious in the non-breeding season, usually occurring in small to large flocks, especially when roosting at hide tide. They often intermingle with other shorebird species, including Greater Sand Plovers. The estimated generation length is 8 years[2].

## Threatening processes

The main acute cause of decline for Lesser Sand Plovers migrating to Australia is habitat loss and degradation at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region[3–4]. Habitat degradation has also occurred more gradually across most of its range. Other threats include pollution and contamination impacts, reduced river flows, human disturbance and hunting[2,4]. Threats in Australia, particularly along the coastlines of south-eastern coastlines, include ongoing human disturbance, habitat loss and degradation from pollution, changes to hydrological processes and invasive plants[2,4]. Anthropogenic climate change is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the Lesser Sand Plover, particularly through the loss of intertidal habitats due to sea-level rise[4].

## Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain stable or increasing the number of non-breeding Lesser Sand Plovers by: retaining healthy intertidal mudflat habitats; improving protection of roosting sites; managing anthropogenic disturbance at important sites when Lesser Sand Plovers are present; and incorporating requirements for the species into coastal planning and management.

## References

[1] 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.

[2] Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., and Dutson, G., 2011. The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.

[3] 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.

[4] Threatened Species Scientific Committee, 2016. Conservation Advice *Charadrius mongolus* Lesser Sand Plover. Department of the Environment, Canberra.

[5] 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.