

# Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

## Bar-tailed Godwit (western Alaskan)

### *Limosa lapponica baueri*

#### Conservation status

##### Australia: Endangered

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

##### Northern Territory: Vulnerable

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

#### Description

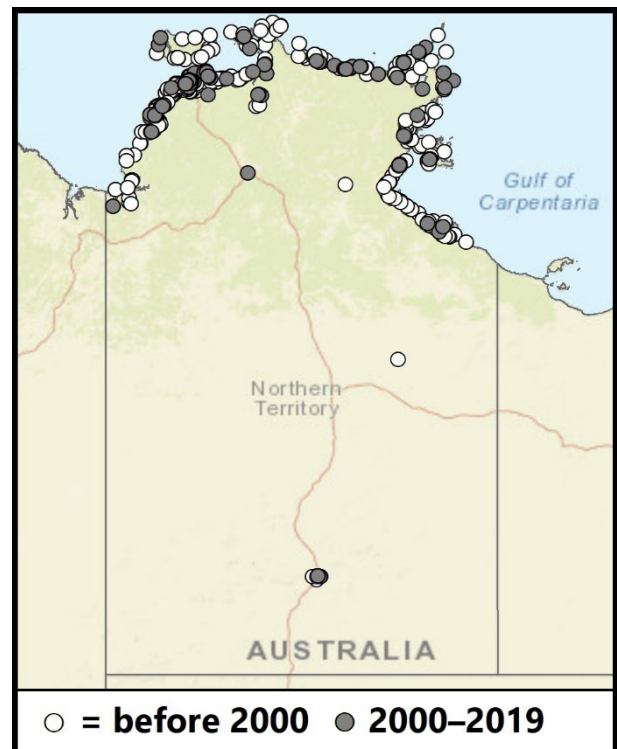
The Bar-tailed Godwit is a large, migratory shorebird with a long, slightly upturned bill that is pink at the base and darker towards the tip. The legs are long and dark. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors), it has a streaked brown forehead, crown and nape, a dark line from the base of the bill through the eye and a white eyebrow. The upperparts are scalloped in browns and the underparts are white with fine brown streaking on the breast and flanks. The tail is white with strong grey-brown barring.

#### Distribution

Two subspecies of the Bar-tailed Godwit, which breed in separate breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere, overwinter in Australia<sup>1</sup>. *Limosa lapponica baueri* breeds in western Alaska and north-eastern Siberia and overwinters mostly in northern and eastern Australia and New Zealand. *Limosa l. menzbieri* breeds in northern Siberia and overwinters mostly in north-western Australia and in southeast Asia. Both subspecies likely migrate to the Northern Territory (NT) but records of Bar-tailed Godwits rarely identify the subspecies as they are usually only distinguishable in the field when in flight.



Photo: D. Portelli



Known localities of the Bar-tailed Godwit (both subspecies) in the NT ([nrmmaps.nt.gov.au](http://nrmmaps.nt.gov.au))

In the NT, Bar-tailed Godwits have been reported along almost the entire coastline, including all major islands. The species is one of the more frequently recorded and abundant shorebird species<sup>2</sup>. In the 1990s, counts of more than 1,000 Bar-tailed Godwits in a flock were not

uncommon<sup>2</sup>. There are also records from Alice Springs, presumably of transitory birds.

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

## Ecology and life-history

After breeding during the northern summer on the Arctic tundras of western Alaska and north-eastern Siberia, Bar-tailed Godwits (western Alaskan) migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway to overwinter in Australasia. During this non-breeding season (the austral summer), godwits in the NT usually congregate in flocks, rarely far from the coast. They forage on intertidal mudflats or in shallow water, feeding on worms, molluscs and crustaceans. Bar-tailed Godwits are long-lived with an estimated generation length of 9.7 years<sup>1</sup>.

## Threatening processes

The main acute causes of decline for godwits migrating to Australia are habitat loss, pollution and human disturbance at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region<sup>3,4,6</sup>. Habitat degradation has also occurred gradually across most of the range of this subspecies.

The non-breeding grounds of the Bar-tailed Godwit, particularly those in eastern and southern Australia, are threatened by habitat degradation and loss, and by human disturbance<sup>1,4</sup>. Other significant threats include pollution and changes to hydrological processes<sup>1,4</sup>.

Anthropogenic climate change is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the Bar-tailed Godwit, particularly through loss of intertidal habitats due to sea-level rise<sup>4</sup>.

## Conservation objectives and management

In the NT, the primary conservation objective is to maintain a stable or increasing number of non-

breeding Bar-tailed Godwits by: retaining healthy intertidal mudflat habitats; improving protection of roosting sites; managing anthropogenic disturbance at important sites when godwits are present; and incorporating requirements for the Bar-tailed Godwit 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

- <sup>1</sup> Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., Dutson, G., 2011. The action plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.
- <sup>2</sup> 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.
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> Threatened Species Scientific Committee, 2016. Conservation advice *Limosa lapponica menzbieri* Bar-tailed Godwit (northern Siberian). Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- <sup>5</sup> 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.
- <sup>6</sup> 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.