

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

BAR-TAILED GODWIT

Limosa lapponica

Conservation status

Australia: Critically Endangered

Northern Territory: Vulnerable



Description

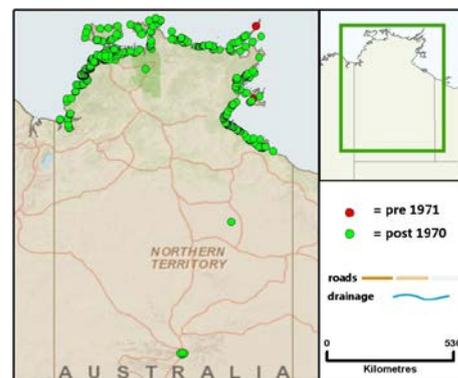
The Bar-tailed Godwit is a large shorebird with a very long straight bill that is pink at the base and darker towards the tip. The legs are long and dark. In non-breeding plumage (typical of Australian visitors) it has a streaked brown forehead, crown and nape, a dark line from the base of the bill through 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, and strong grey-brown barring on the tail.

Distribution

Bar-tailed Godwits from two separate northern hemisphere breeding grounds overwinter in Australia and represent two separate subspecies (Garnett et al. 2011). *Limosa l. menzbieri* breeds in northern Russia and overwinters in South-East Asia and northern Australia. *Limosa l. baueri* breeds in north-east Siberia (Russia) and north-west Alaska (USA) and overwinters in eastern Australia and New Zealand. Birds of both subspecies probably migrate to the Northern Territory (NT) and no attempt will be made here to distinguish between the two.

In the NT they have been reported all along the coastline (including all major islands), and

were one of the more frequently recorded and



Known locations of the Bar-tailed Godwit

abundant species of shorebird in surveys by Chatto (2003). In these surveys in the 1990s, counts of more than 1 000 Bar-tailed Godwits in a flock were not uncommon (Chatto 2003). There are also records from Alice Springs, presumably of transitory birds.

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

Ecology

After the breeding in the northern summer on the arctic tundras of Siberia and Alaska,

Bar-tailed Godwits migrate southwards along the East Asian-Australasian flyway to overwinter in Asia and Australasia. During this non-breeding season (the austral summer) birds in the NT are usually in flocks, rarely far from the coast. They forage on intertidal mudflats or in shallow water, feeding on worms, molluscs and crustaceans (Geering *et al.* 2007).

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). For the subspecies migrating to Australia, Garnett *et al.* (2011) considered that there has been a recent decline of >50 per cent (based on many years of counts at key sites across Australia: e.g. Rogers *et al.* 2010). Globally, other populations have not shown such declines and BirdLife International (2010) considered its global status as least concern.

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 criteria A2ac+3c+4c):

1. observed reduction of the migratory population visiting Australia of >50 per cent over the last three generations (c. 27 years) and expected to continue in the future;
2. causes of reduction have not ceased and may not be reversible; and
3. decline in habitat quality of northern hemisphere breeding grounds.

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** (A2ac+3c+4c) in the NT. This is also the status given both subspecies of Bar-tailed Godwit that visit Australia by Garnett *et al.* (2011) but in May 2016 the Australian Government listed *L. l. menzbieri* as Critically Endangered and *L. l. baueri* as Vulnerable.

Threatening processes

The main acute causes of population decline for birds migrating to Australia are habitat loss, pollution and human disturbance at migratory stop-over grounds (mudflats in the Yellow Sea area: Barter 2002; Moores *et al.* 2008; Hassell 2010). 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 endeavours to promote conservation of shorebirds along the East Asian-Australasian flyway.

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