

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Australian painted-snipe

Rostratula australis

Conservation status

Australia: Endangered

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Endangered

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976



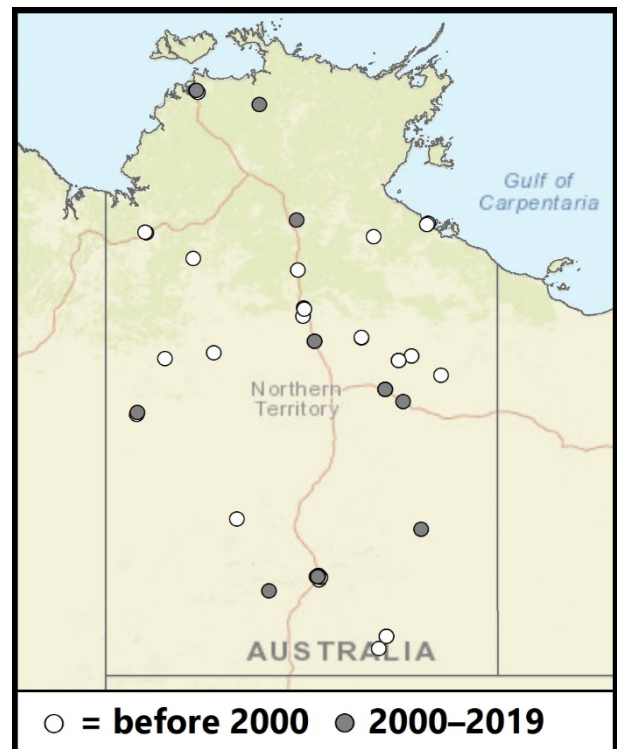
Credit: D. Portelli

Description

The Australian Painted-snipe is a medium-sized (24–30 cm long) snipe-like wading bird with a long, bulbous-tipped bill. The head is boldly marked with a facial mask and thin line down the crown, which are white in the female and buff in the male. The female has a chocolate-brown head, neck and upper breast, rufous hindneck, glossy olive-green back and wings that are finely barred black. The slightly smaller male has a greyish brown head with white streaks on the chin, throat and breast, and boldly patterned wings with prominent buff spots. Both sexes have a conspicuous white 'harness' from the breast to the mantle, which continues as a buff stripe down the sides of the back.

Distribution

The Australian Painted-snipe is endemic to Australia, where it is widely distributed; though the species is most frequently recorded in the Murray-Darling Basin. Records from last century are scattered across the Northern Territory (NT).



Caption: Known localities of the Australian Painted-snipe in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

Contemporary NT records have come from McMinns Lagoon near Darwin, Yellow Waters in Kakadu, the Sturt Plateau, the Barkly, the Tanami

Desert, and the Alice Springs waste stabilisation ponds.

Australian Painted-snipes were recorded breeding at Tarrabool Lake on the Barkly Tablelands in 1993.

NT conservation reserves where reported: Kakadu National Park.

Ecology and life-history

The species occurs in a wide variety of shallow freshwater (and occasionally brackish) wetlands, both permanent and ephemeral, including swamps, inundated claypans and waterlogged grasslands. Australian Painted-snipes are cryptic, preferring to sit quietly under grass, reeds or other dense cover during the day. They become more active at dawn, dusk and during the night, venturing out into the open to feed in shallow water or on mudflats. The diet primarily comprises insects, worms, molluscs, crustaceans, vegetation and seeds.

Movements are poorly understood, but the Australian Painted-snipe is likely to be at least partially migratory and nomadic. Breeding has been recorded in all months of the year, and may occur in response to wetland conditions rather than seasonally. The species is polyandrous. Generation length is estimated to be 8.6 years¹.

Threatening processes

Wetland drainage and the diversion of water for agriculture and reservoirs is the main threat in eastern and southern Australia. The decline of the species in the Kimberley has been attributed to habitat degradation by livestock, which trample and graze tussocks². As most NT swamplands suitable for this species occur on pastoral lands, this process may also be detrimentally affecting this species in the NT³. Invasive weeds and predation by introduced predators are also potential threats.

Anthropogenic climate change is a potential future threat to the Australian Painted-snipe. Reduced rainfall and runoff predicted for the Murray-Darling Basin, in combination with other

threats, may significantly reduce the conditions required for optimum breeding in this stronghold.

Conservation objectives and management

Conservation objectives for the Australian Painted-snipe in the NT include: ensuring a range of shallow ephemeral wetlands throughout the NT are managed to prevent habitat degradation by livestock; managing total grazing pressure at important breeding sites through exclusion fencing or other barriers (if appropriate); ensuring land owners/managers use an appropriate management regime and stocking density to prevent detrimental impacts on nesting within known habitats; developing and implementing a stock management plan for roadside verges and travelling stock routes containing suitable habitat; minimising adverse impacts from land use at known sites; managing changes to hydrology that may detrimentally alter water table levels, run-off, salinity, algal blooms, sedimentation or pollution; developing and implementing a suitable fire management strategy for known habitats; and raising awareness of the Australian Painted-snipe within the local community and the importance of reporting observations.

Targeted surveys and research investigating population size, distribution and the impacts of threats are needed to inform the conservation management of the Australian Painted-snipe.

References

- ¹ Johnstone, R.E., Storr, G.M., 1998. Handbook of Western Australia. Vol. 1. Non-passerines (Emu to Dollarbird). Western Australian Museum, Perth.
- ² Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., and Dutson, G., 2011. The action plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.
- ³ Jaensch, R.P., 2003. Recent records and breeding of Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* in the Mitchell Grass Downs and Sturt Plateau, Northern Territory. North. Territ. Nat. 17, 31-37.
- ⁴ Lane, B.A., and Rogers, D.I., 2000. The taxonomic and conservation status of the Australian Painted-snipe *Rostratula (benghalensis) australis*. Stilt 36, 26-34.
- ⁵ Threatened Species Scientific Committee, 2013. Commonwealth Listing Advice on *Rostratula australis* (Australian Painted-snipe). Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra.