

Shorebird migration

Migratory Shorebirds

Migratory shorebirds include such species as plovers, sandpipers, stints, curlews and snipes. They are among the most impressive migratory species on Earth. In response to their urge to nest and to avoid adverse weather conditions, they undertake an annual migration of thousands of kilometres. They fly from their breeding grounds in the high Arctic to their non-breeding grounds far to the south in the coastal and inland wetlands of Australia and New Zealand.

Migratory shorebirds must eat large amounts of food to prepare for these long flights, often more than doubling their body weight in preparation for their migration. Along the way they rely on wetlands where they stop to feed intensively to build up enough energy to fuel the next leg of their journey.



Photo credit: Mark Bisher

Mudflats of the Yellow Sea

The mudflats of the Yellow Sea are important stopover sites for many migratory shorebirds on their north and southward migration. These coastal mudflat habitats provide rich foraging and resting areas, enabling the birds to gain enough strength for the next stage of their journey.



Photo credit: Viki Grammer

Kamchatka Russia—Part of the breeding areas for migratory shorebirds

This is typical of the habitat where migratory shorebirds like to build their nests and raise their chicks. During the northern hemisphere spring (April–June) in these high arctic regions, a variety of insect larvae hatch and this provides an abundance of food for the shorebird chicks to grow quickly and prepare to migrate.



Photo credit: Chris Tazew (Bairi Australia)

Port Phillip Bay—Cheetham Wetlands

The Western shores of Port Phillip Bay are an important area for shorebirds in Victoria. The Cheetham Wetlands are less than 20km from the central business district of Melbourne.



Photo credit: Chris Miron



Photo credit: Chris Sanderson

North-western Australia—Roebuck Bay and Eighty Mile Beach

North western Australia has two of the most important areas in Australia for migratory shorebirds, Eighty Mile Beach and Roebuck Bay. Together they support well over half a million migratory shorebirds, with internationally important numbers of 20 species regularly recorded there.



Photo credit: Irm Shaw

Shorebirds roosting on rocks



East Asian-Australasian Flyway

The geographical routes that shorebirds take are known as 'flyways'. There are 8 major shorebird flyways around the world. Australia is at the southern end of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway which stretches from the Russian Far-East and Alaska, southwards through East Asia and South-east Asia to Australia and New Zealand and encompasses 22 countries. There are over 5 million migratory shorebirds of 55 species in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Of these, 36 species and more than 2 million migratory shorebirds come to Australia each year.



Photo credit: Chris Miron

A flock of migratory shorebirds in breeding and non-breeding plumage

Migratory shorebirds have a non-breeding and breeding plumage. In Australia, their non-breeding plumage generally ranges from white and grey to light browns, however in preparation for their breeding season, they moult into colourful feathers of rusty red and dark brown and black. These colours afford the birds a degree of camouflage and protection from predators on the high arctic tundra, where they breed.



Photo credit: Chris Miron

Eastern Curlew

The Eastern Curlew is the largest of the migratory shorebirds that visits Australia. They can weigh up to 900 grams. The Great Sandy Strait in Queensland is considered one of the most important sites in Australia for this species, often supporting several thousand birds.



Photo credit: Phil Shaw

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

There are 34 sites of international importance for Sharp-tailed Sandpipers in Australia. This species is often found in large numbers at freshwater inland wetlands.



Photo credit: Jan van de Kam

Bar-tailed Godwit

The Bar-tailed Godwit is renowned for its ability to undertake very long flights during migration. One study of these amazing birds has shown that many fly non-stop from Alaska to Eastern Australia and New Zealand, a distance of up to 11,000 kilometres.



Photo credit: Jan van de Kam

Red-necked Stint

The Red-necked Stint is the smallest and most abundant species of migratory shorebird that visits Australia. They weigh only 25 grams and have a strong tendency to return to the same site year after year.



Photo credit: Chris Miron

Double-banded Plover

This shorebird is unique in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. It is the only migratory shorebird that does not migrate north to breed. This species breeds in New Zealand and migrates to Australia, arriving around February and departing around September.

International Cooperation

The conservation of migratory shorebirds can only be effective with the cooperation of all countries in a species' migration path. Recognising this, Australia is involved with several international agreements aimed at conserving migratory shorebirds and their habitats. Along with Japan and Wetlands International, Australia has been leading conservation efforts for migratory shorebirds in the flyway since 1995 and together we are developing a regional Partnership for the protection and sustainable use of sites of international importance for migratory waterbirds throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.



Australian Government
Department of the Environment and Heritage

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Site Network

An international network of migratory shorebird sites aims to ensure the survival of migratory shorebird species by protecting their wetland habitats throughout the flyway. The network, which began in 1996, highlights the importance of wetland areas for migratory shorebirds and promotes activities to protect and sustainably manage the chain of internationally important sites necessary to support the survival of shorebirds during all stages of their life.