Migratory Shorebirds of the Cairns Esplanade

Regular Migrants (25 species)

These 25 species are regular long-distance migrants to Australia. Some are seen every season on the Cairns Foreshore, some infrequently.

Pacific Golden Plover  Common Greenshank
Grey Plover  Marsh Sandpiper
Lesser Sand Plover  Ruddy Turnstone
Greater Sand Plover  Asian Dowitcher (Rare)
Latham’s Snipe (Rare)  Great Knot
Black-tailed Godwit  Red Knot
Bar-tailed Godwit  Sanderling
Whimbrel  Red-necked Stint
Eastern Curlew  Pectoral Sandpiper
Terek Sandpiper  Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper  Curlew Sandpiper
Grey-tailed Tattler  Broad-billed Sandpiper
Wandering Tattler (Rare)

Rare Migrants /Vagrants (10 species)

These species visit irregularly and some sightings are reviewed by national or state Rarities Committees.

Red-necked Avocet

Resident shorebirds (8 species)

Some Australian breeding resident waders are common on the Esplanade (eg Masked Lapwing) but others, like the Red-kneed Dotterel & Beach Stone-curlew, are only occasional visitors.

Bush Stone-curlew  Red-capped Plover
Beach Stone-curlew  Black-fronted Dotterel
Australian Pied Oystercatcher  Red-kneed Dotterel
Black-winged Stilt  Masked Lapwing

The East Asian-Australasian Flyway

Cairns Esplanade, part of Trinity Bay, is an important link in one of the world’s greatest bird migrations. Each year millions of shorebirds leave Alaska, Siberia, N China, Mongolia and Japan after breeding in the northern tundras and fly south to Australia for our summer. Their network of refuelling stops and final destinations is the “East Asian-Australasian Flyway”.

Trinity Inlet is the only food-rich site between Townsville and the tip of Cape York. At least 5000 long-distance migrants stay the whole summer. Tens of thousands more stop en route to southern Australia in August-December, and on their return to the northern breeding grounds in March-April. There can be 1200+ Whimbrels, more than 1% of the world population.

The smallest migrant ...

The Red-necked Stint weighs just 25-30 gm but before returning north to breed will build up its fat reserves to weigh around 40 gm, giving it a predicted flight range of 4000 km. It makes an annual round trip of up to 25,000 km to and from the breeding grounds.

The largest ...

The Eastern Curlew weighs 900 gm. It can fly 5500 km non-stop, averaging over 80 kph in a day, over 4½ days. The longest individual non-stop flight on record was 7000 km.

Identifying shorebirds

Shorebird identification can be difficult but careful observation of features such as size, bill length and shape, along with feeding behaviour will generally separate out the species. Bill length and shape governs the depth at which the birds feed in or on the surface of the mud, lessening competition for the food resource. Some are easier to identify in March-April when they start to develop their more colourful breeding plumage, prior to flying north.

See also —

Checklist No. 7
Cairns Esplanade Bird Species Checklist

New or unusual sightings? Contact us! →→

Images courtesy Australian Wader Study Group

Updated April 2013
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Based on original by K & I. Fisher (sootyowl@bigpond.com & www.birdwatchers.com.au/). Names and taxonomic order used for the list follow Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds by L Christidis and W E Boles (CSIRO, Melb., 2008).
The Cairns foreshore, with its Esplanade boardwalk and viewing platforms, is only minutes from the CBD.

The Esplanade is acclaimed worldwide as a migratory wader (shorebird) observation site. Nowhere else in the world can these birds be seen at such close range and in comfort, within a major city. Thousands of international birdwatchers visit each year and occasional rarities bring an influx of keen birders from across Australia.

A visit during August to March-April will find over 20 species of long distance migrants, plus resident shorebirds, probing in the mud for the valuable food resource. Some migrants stay all year, mainly first and second year birds. Best views along the Cairns mudflats are on an incoming tide in the evening.

Migratory shorebirds are threatened by degradation of key stopover sites. As a signatory to international shorebird conservation agreements Australia works closely with other countries along the Flyway to identify and reduce threats, including mudflat reclamation and pollution.

Within Trinity Bay waders are subjected to disturbance by hovercraft, jet-skis, helicopters, dogs and people. Along the Esplanade, BANQ and other groups have worked with the Regional Council to promote birdwatching and try and to minimise impacts of development on the shorebirds: so far, this seems to have been successful.

BANQ activities on the Cairns foreshore include wader surveys (with other groups) and the annual “Wave the Waders Goodbye” each March - details on our website.

Cairns Regional Council has recognised the importance of the shorebirds in signage and posters. Hopefully, we can ensure this unique and valuable foreshore environment is preserved for future generations of birds and people.