

FACTSHEET: SHOREBIRDS

What is a shorebird?

Shorebirds, also known as waders, gather in intertidal areas or on the fringes of freshwater wetlands. They generally have long legs in relation to their body size, no webbing on their feet and they don't swim. The shape and size of their bill gives a clue to their preferred diet and habitat. For example, the long, probing bill of the eastern curlew is ideal for fishing out worms and crustaceans from deep mud, whereas the short, stubby bill of the ruddy turnstone can flip aside stones and shells on a rocky foreshore.



Shorebirds make up about 10 per cent of Australia's species of birds. Fifteen species of shorebird are resident in Australia and an additional 34 species are regular migrants. Most of the migrant species breed in northern China, Mongolia, Siberia and Alaska during June and July and then migrate to Australia for the non-breeding season. Each year, more than a million shorebirds migrate to and from Australia, and many more millions worldwide travel great distances between their breeding and non-breeding habitats. About 40,000 shorebirds of the 34 species migrate to Moreton Bay in Queensland each year.

Highways in the sky

The routes that shorebirds travel along on their annual migration are called flyways. A flyway is broadly defined as the migration route of a population, species, or group of species of birds, between a breeding area, through the staging sites and non-breeding area. Flyways are like invisible highways. How does a migrating shorebird know which way to go? Are there maps in the stars? Patterns on the land? Memories in their genes? Or are they guided by the sun and the moon or the Earth's magnetic field? Scientists say it is probably a combination of all of these but they are still unclear exactly how migratory shorebirds find their way.

Like weary travelers on a lengthy journey, shorebirds need rest stops along the way to refuel and have a break. Flyways are like chains with many links. Each link is an important wetland, such as an estuary or bay, where the birds can stopover to feed and regain their strength for the next leg of their migration. The message is clear, everything is interconnected — remove enough of these links and species may disappear altogether!

Moreton Bay is an important habitat in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway, which is one of eight flyways in the world. The East Asian–Australasian Shorebird Reserve Network is an international chain of wetlands recognised for their importance to shorebirds. The network ensures there are safe and convenient stopover points for shorebirds to rest and feed along their “endless summer” between the Arctic north and the warm south.

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Shorebirds' lives are driven by tides

At low tide, regardless of day or night, shorebirds feed constantly — pecking and probing for worms, insects and crustaceans. With highly variable and specialised bills they feed around intertidal flats, beaches, rocky headlands and along the fringes of freshwater wetlands.

As the incoming tide covers these feeding areas, they begin to congregate in large numbers at relatively safe and nearby roost sites. These roost sites provide areas where they can interact, preen, digest their food and rest while waiting for the ebbing tide to again expose their feeding areas. During particularly high spring tides, all the shorebirds of Moreton Bay crowd together on a limited number of higher elevation roost sites. Disturbance during this time is more damaging than usual.

What else is so special about shorebirds?

There are many special and fascinating things about shorebirds. Being able to fly is something many people dream of, and to be able to travel thousands of kilometres in flight is amazing.

When a flock of shorebirds takes flight on the next leg of its journey, watch how they circle overhead — some will form a beautiful “V” formation in the sky before heading off like a giant arrow.

Some shorebirds have beautiful or haunting calls. Listen for the eerie cry of the bush stone-curlew at night, or the signature call of the eastern curlew during its annual summer stopover.

Other special features of shorebirds include their sleek design, specialised bills for feeding and expert hunting skills. Near the end of summer, many species will moult and change into spectacular breeding plumage — announcing their suitability as potential partners.

In Australia there are Aboriginal stories about shorebirds and in some cases there is evidence of their traditional use. For the Aboriginal people of Moreton Bay the eastern curlew, known as the “sea curlew” — Gurrell — was a source of food during summer. The “land curlew” (bush stone-curlew), also known as the “messenger bird” — Bullingan — because of its eerie cries, brought a message from Aboriginal spirits to the people. When an Aboriginal person is about to depart this life, the messenger bird visits his home at night and gives three calls.

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