

NEWCASTLE COASTLINE BIRDING

The Newcastle coastline offers a variety of habitats ranging from sandy beaches, dunes, rock platforms and estuaries to the open ocean. Birds are often very specific to these habitats and it is convenient to discuss the coastal avian biodiversity within this framework. Newcastle's coastline is heavily used by humans and, sometimes, also by domestic pets such as dogs. Therefore, the number of bird species is much less than would be expected on more remote coasts. Nevertheless there are species that tolerate human disturbance to some degree or can find quieter areas away from the more heavily used areas. Some of these birds can be quite cryptic because of their camouflaged plumage or their small size. Others are conspicuous and congregate in large numbers for safety. A Newcastle street directory is essential to find the locations mentioned below.

BIRDS OF THE BEACHES AND SAND DUNES:

Silver Gulls are the most noticeable birds on the ocean beaches of Newcastle, sometimes many hundreds are present. They forage and roost on beaches, particularly where fresh streams or storm water outlets carry debris down to the sea. They have grown accustomed to human presence and have learned that handouts are often available from picnickers, particularly outside fast-food shops on the foreshore. A variety of terns



Silver Gull



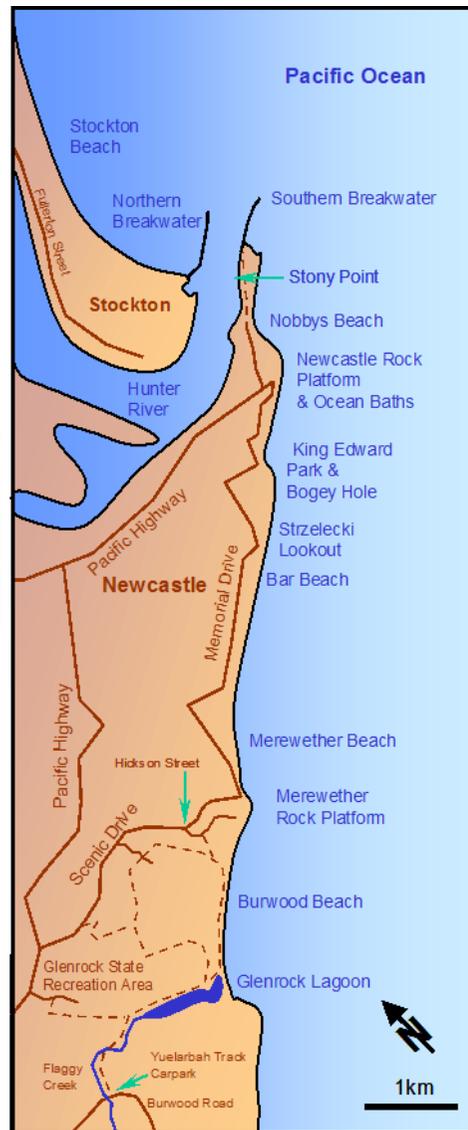
Crested Tern

with their sharp dagger-like beaks often roost with the gulls. Crested Terns, recognized by their yellow beaks, are the most common. Sometimes a few of the much larger Caspian Terns with bright red beaks can be seen. In summer, the small Common Terns can be recognized by their black beaks. Terns and gulls are of moderate size and are easily seen because of their conspicuous white plumage. However, there are smaller shorebirds with camouflaged plumage that are difficult to see and identify such as Red-necked Stints and Ruddy Turnstones. These birds may be seen on beaches, particularly after stormy weather has thrown up large quantities of seaweed and kelp. They like to forage around the decomposing seaweed looking for small invertebrates. The majority of shorebirds, or waders as they are also called, forage on intertidal mudflats in the Hunter Estuary mostly upstream of Stockton Bridge. However, a few sometimes move down to the coast. Bar-tailed Godwits, large migratory shorebirds, can sometimes be seen at Stockton Beach near the northern breakwater probing their long straight beaks into the sand along the tide line. More remote northern parts



Caspian Tern

of Stockton Beach may host the diminutive Red-capped Plover and the much larger, black and white Pied Oystercatcher. These two species actually nest on sandflats between the dunes immediately behind the beach. Their nests and eggs are particularly vulnerable to disturbance by people, dogs and



Red-capped Plover



Pacific Golden Plover

off-road vehicles. At high tide, when the intertidal mudflats in the estuary are covered, more than a hundred Pacific Golden Plovers sometimes rest behind the foredunes along Stockton Beach. They are difficult



Lesser Sand Plover

to see as their cryptic-patterned plumage blends into the sparsely vegetated sandflats. Even smaller and more difficult to see birds such as Lesser Sand Plovers also rest between the dunes. Grey-brown Sanderlings are specialized beach foragers that feed along the strand line. They can be seen in small groups running up and down the beach dodging the wave swash.

BIRDS OF THE ROCK PLATFORMS: Separated by sandy beaches, a system of coastal rock platforms extends from the mouth of the Hunter River to Burwood Beach, south of Merewether. Many of the birds that inhabit the intervening beaches also either roost or forage on the rock platforms. The most conspicuous birds are Silver Gulls and



White-fronted Tern

Crested Terns. In winter look for White-fronted Terns. At low tide, Red-necked Stints and Ruddy Turnstones often forage on a variety of exposed invertebrate life on the rock platform immediately seaward of Newcastle Ocean Baths. Their cryptic plumage against the

brown rocks make them very difficult to see. The all-black Sooty Oystercatcher is a much larger and more conspicuous bird that specializes in foraging on the rock platform. It is easily identified by its striking pink legs and a bright red beak that is used to prise limpets and other tasty morsels off the rocks. About half a dozen

Pelicans often stake out fishermen near the Cowrie hole waiting for fishy off-cuts, and in calm conditions they paddle around the seaward edge of the rocks. Although White-faced Herons are more likely to be seen on freshwater swamps and paddocks a few do forage on the rock platforms. But the Eastern Reef



Ruddy Turnstone

Egret is exclusively a shoreline heron. Usually only one or two of the grey-phase form of this bird can be seen along the entire rock platform from Nobbys Beach to Burwood Beach. The best place to observe foraging rock-platform birds is from Nobbys Beach south to Newcastle Ocean Baths. At low tide the area can be scanned from anywhere along the length of Shortland Esplanade. At high tide, when that area is awash, many birds congregate at high-tide roosts on the seaward side of Newcastle Ocean Baths and the adjacent Canoe Pool. From the poolside they can be observed from only a few metres away. This is also the easiest way to see Sooty Oystercatchers.



Reef Egret

BIRDS OF NEWCASTLE HARBOUR ENTRANCE:

Stony Point, at the inner end of the southern breakwater, provides a foraging and roosting area for Sooty Oystercatchers and a variety of terns. Cryptic Ruddy Turnstones also forage and roost around the shoreline boulders. Sometimes they also roost along a concrete ledge only a few metres below the walkway to the southern breakwater, unconcerned by the passing of hundreds of oblivious walkers! In summer, the walkway offers good views of White-winged Black Terns, Common



Common Tern

Terns and Little Terns that fly up the harbour or roost on navigation buoys. Pomarine and Arctic Jaegers can also be observed in the harbour or off the breakwater during summer.

BIRDS OF THE OPEN

OCEAN: Birds of the open-ocean, pelagic birds, are best observed from a boat, and further offshore, towards the edge of the continental shelf. However,



Australian Gannet—Phil Hans-



Wedge-tailed Shearwater—Phil Hansbro

especially during windy weather, a surprising number of seabirds approach the shore sufficiently close for identification with binoculars. Observation is usually best from promontories or high vantage points such as the seaward end of the southern breakwater; Newcastle



Yellow-nosed Albatross—Phil Hansbro

Ocean Baths; King Edward Park above the Bogey Hole; Strzelecki Lookout; car park above Bar Beach; and end of Hickson Street, Merewether. Birds to look out for are: Australian Gannet (common), Shearwaters (all-dark birds of several species, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters are the most common and often in large numbers, black and white birds are likely to be Fluttering Shearwaters) and Giant Petrel (sometimes seen sitting on the water close to shore). Albatross, such as Black-browed, Yellow-nosed and even Wandering Albatross have been seen from the locations mentioned above.

RAPTORS: White-bellied Sea Eagles regularly patrol the coast for fish, marine scraps and even unwary birds. They have been observed capturing the moderately large Sooty Oystercatchers off the rock platform! Hovering Nankeen Kestrels use the updrafts to patrol the coast looking for large insects, lizards and small rodents. A pair can often be seen near the lookout at Bogie Hole, King Edward Park.



White-bellied Sea Eagle

CORMORANTS: Four species of cormorants inhabit the Newcastle coastline. Two are mostly black (Little Black and Great Cormorants) and two are black and white (Little Pied and Pied Cormorants). They catch fish by swimming and diving, either in the open ocean or, in the larger rock pools. On land they perch on rock platform boulders, opening their wings and sunning themselves to dry their feathers and digest their latest fish feast. Great Cormorants usually roost



Great Cormorant

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For Newcastle Birding Routes No. 1-Ash Island, No. 2-Newcastle City and Lower Hunter Estuary, and No. 3-Newcastle Wetlands, contact the Hunter Bird Observers Club or download from the website.

Newcastle Birding Route No. 4



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NEWCASTLE COASTLINE BIRDING



Sooty Oystercatcher foraging on the Newcastle Rock Platform.

