

Australasian Shoveler

Spatula rhynchotis

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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A male Australasian Shoveler showing its characteristic elongated head shape and white flanks (photo: Dawn Riggett)

These birds have a characteristic profile in the water – they float low, and have what appears to be a large, flat-topped head – an effect which is created because their large forehead slopes approximately parallel to their long broad bill. Although the bill is large, Australasian Shovelers are filter feeders and they spend a lot of time heads-down in the water.

Males are colourful, with a large black bill, blue-grey head, bright yellow eye, prominent white line between bill and eye, chestnut underparts and conspicuous white patch on their flanks. By contrast, females and immature birds are rather plain – having an overall brownish plumage although the feathers are tipped white. Young males can be differentiated from females as they have white flanks similar to adult males.

In flight, the large white underwing patches of a Shoveler are conspicuous. Similarly, roosting birds exhibit conspicuous bright orange legs.



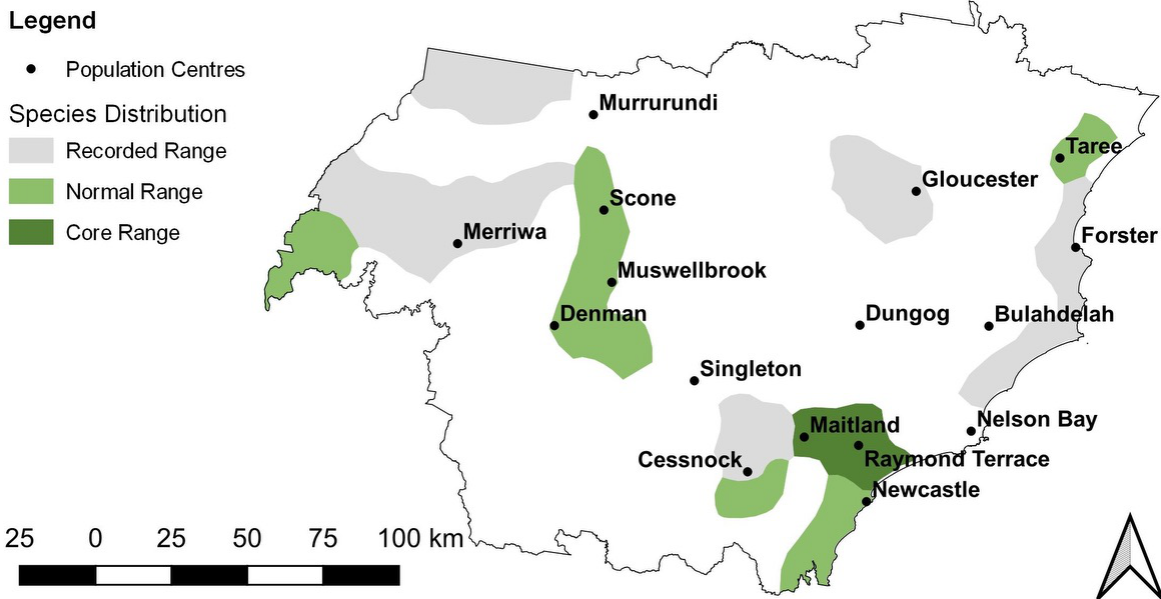
Australasian Shoveler – this is an immature male, not a female, as it has a rudimentary white patch on its flank (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Regional Status

Within our region, the Australasian Shoveler is mainly found in wetlands within the lower Hunter Valley, sometimes numbering in the hundreds of birds.

Lesser numbers are sometimes present at some favoured ponds near Taree and Ulan. Records in the upper Hunter Valley are mainly from Lake Liddell and some sewage treatment plants, most notably the one at Muswellbrook.

It is classified as a resident, and with frequent breeding records. However, the numbers in the region fluctuate dramatically (see below).



Distribution map for Australasian Shovelerl (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Comings and goings in the Hunter Estuary

Regular surveys of the Hunter Estuary since 1999 by HBOC members have revealed a complex pattern of appearance for the Australasian Shoveler (Stuart & Lindsey, *The Whistler* 2022). Birds were recorded in almost 60% of the surveys (up until mid- 2021), with a maximum count of 382 birds. However, in three periods of substantial inland rainfall during those years, most Shovelers disappeared from the estuary, presumably to breed inland, and there were hardly any local records. Conversely, local numbers were highest when there was inland drought.

In non La Nina years, the numbers in the estuary have risen each autumn and often peaked in winter. The differences to the spring and summer counts were statistically significant. However, since 2011 the winter numbers in the estuary have declined substantially, while the autumn numbers have slightly risen.

Overall, there has been considerable change in the patterns of occurrence of Australasian Shoveler in the estuary, arising from some combination of conditions locally and conditions elsewhere in Australia. Essentially though, it is present all year with strong autumn-winter influxes, and with local irruptions during times of inland drought (and vice versa).



A group of Australasian Shovelers in various feeding orientations (photo: Alan Stuart)

About the name

Australasian Shoveler

Worldwide there are four types of Shoveler; most are named geographically. Our species is well-established in both Australia and New Zealand. “Shoveler” (originally *Shoveller*, until the 20th Century) alludes to the very large bill possessed by all four species. An early name used by European settlers was “Stinker” – apparently because it is not a pleasant table bird. Incidentally, the Northern Shoveler also appears on the Hunter Region checklist but it is a very rare vagrant for us.

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For a long time, shovelers were classified into the genus *Anas*, along with many other species of filter-feeding duck. More recently, they were re-assigned into the new genus *Spatula*, which is the Latin word for spoon (or spatula) – in recognition of the large bill. The species name derives from the Latin word *rhunkhos*, also meaning bill. Clearly, taxonomists have noticed that the bird’s bill is large!



A pair of Australasian Shoveler (photo: Stephanie Owen)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

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