

Population trends for Bar-tailed Godwit in the Hunter Region

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The subspecies *baueri* of the Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* is a regular spring/summer migrant to the Hunter Region, with some immature birds remaining during the austral winter while the adults return to their northern hemisphere breeding grounds (Williams 2025). Although there usually are some birds recorded at all of the region's estuaries, the two main locations for Bar-tailed Godwit in the Hunter Region are Port Stephens and the Hunter Estuary (Williams 2025). Those two sites usually host 85-90% of the visiting Bar-tailed Godwits, with the Manning and Lake Macquarie estuaries holding the bulk of the rest of the population. In this analysis, I have focussed on analysing the counts from the main two sites in the region.

Subspecies *baueri* (often named as the Nunivak Bar-tailed Godwit) is classified as Vulnerable under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and as Endangered under the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, in both cases because of its declining population. The population was estimated to have declined by more than 30% based on nearly three decades of data (Rogers *et al.* 2023). Those population declines were found to be mirrored in the data from long-term monitoring programs at Port Stephens and in the Hunter Estuary (Stuart 2020; Stuart & Lindsey 2021). However, in 2025 when I looked at more recent data from the Hunter Estuary shorebird surveys, there were indications that the rate of decline had eased and that possibly the numbers had stabilised. That tentative conclusion was based on a comparison of the maximum summer counts for 2017-2021 and 2021-2025 (Stuart 2025). In this report, I look more closely at the Hunter Estuary data from winter (defined here as May to August) and summer (defined here as November to February) surveys from 2016 onwards, and the analogous data for Port Stephens.

Port Stephens is only surveyed twice-yearly – once in summer (February) and once in winter (July or early August), and there were no winter surveys in

2017, 2021, 2022 or 2024. Mainly, they are done by boat but some sites not visible by boat are visited on foot. The Hunter Estuary surveys are done monthly, involving seven teams including one in a boat.

Figure 1 shows the monthly counts for Bar-tailed Godwits in November-February periods for the Hunter Estuary since 2016, while **Figure 2** has the analogous May-August counts. The combined summer and winter counts for Port Stephens are presented in **Figure 3**.

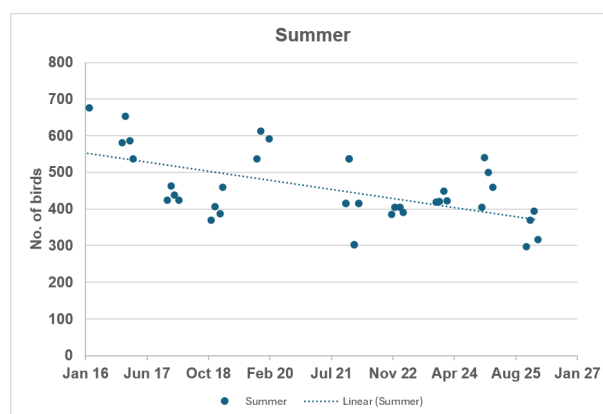


Figure 1. Summer (Nov-Feb) counts of Bar-tailed Godwits in the Hunter Estuary between 2016 and 2026, with linear trend line.

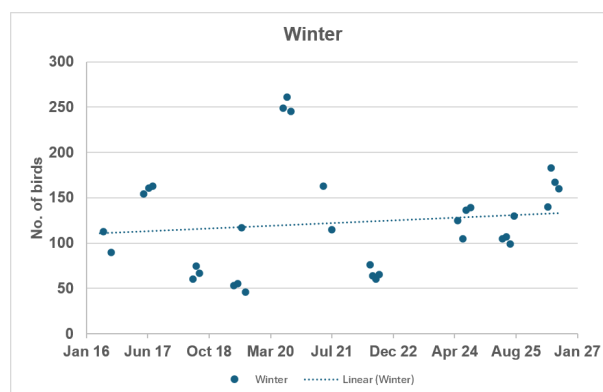


Figure 2. Winter (May-August) counts of Bar-tailed Godwits in the Hunter Estuary between 2016 and 2026, with linear trend line.

The summer population of Bar-tailed Godwits in the Hunter Estuary continues to be in decline, at an average of around 3% annually since 2016. In the 2024/25 season, the numbers recovered to around 500 birds (peak count 541), hence my previous tentative conclusion of stability (Stuart 2025). However, the average November-February count for 2025/26 was only 345 birds (with the peak count being 399). The situation for Port Stephens in summer is similar – an average decline of around 1.5% annually (**Figure 3**). However, there were counts of over 500 birds in the 2016, 2020 and 2026 surveys.

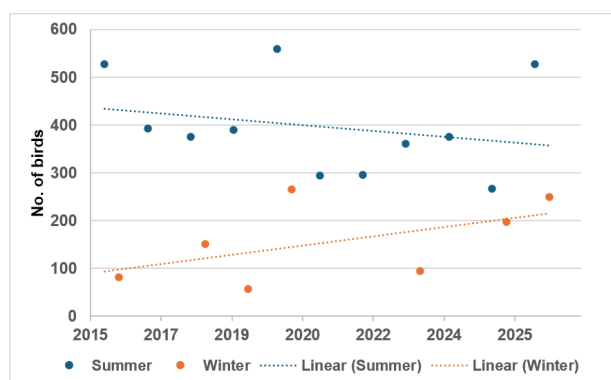


Figure 3. Summer (February) and winter (July/August) counts of Bar-tailed Godwits in Port Stephens between 2020 and 2026, with linear trend lines.

The situation in winter seems different. In the Hunter Estuary, numbers have fluctuated since 2016, peaking with around 250 birds being present in 2020. The numbers then plummeted, to around 60-65 birds in 2022, but since then they have been rising steadily. The average count in 2026 was 163 birds, with a peak count of 183 birds. The trend line for Port Stephens winter surveys (**Figure 3**) indicates a rising population although that is

exaggerated by the high count in 2026 (249 birds). In 2020 there were 265 birds in the winter survey, but the next winter survey (carried out in 2023) found only 94 birds. Winter numbers record immature birds and thus are an indication of breeding success. Hence, it is not surprising that they fluctuate. Nevertheless, because shorebirds exhibit site fidelity, the recent winter counts in the Hunter Estuary offer hopes that the population might eventually stabilise.

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