

# Bar-tailed Godwit

*Limosa lapponica*

#10 OCTOBER 2020



Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

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Male Bar-tailed Godwit in breeding plumage, with non-breeding plumaged male and breeding plumaged female in background (photo: Steve Merrett)

## Description

A large, long-legged and gregarious shorebird with dark grey legs, a pale to buff eyebrow and long, tapering bill. The bill is slightly upturned, pink at the base and with a blackish tip. In non-breeding plumage, males and females are similar – with streaked/mottled upperparts, finely streaked throat and neck and a pale to white belly. Females are readily differentiated in the field since their bill is c 25% longer (105-110mm, compared with 80-85mm for males). They also are heavier birds; however, that feature is less useful leading into the migration period (when non-migrating juveniles do not gain weight).

In breeding plumage, males have bright red or chestnut head and body and richly patterned black and buff underparts. Females do not acquire such colourful hues although their breast and upperpart feathers develop cinnamon to buff tinges. Juvenile and immature Bar-tailed Godwits resemble non-

breeding birds; it requires close inspection to differentiate them e.g. buff to cream edges to feathers. In flight, the Bar-tailed Godwit's pale and finely-barred tail is conspicuous, and the tail pattern is very different from that of the Black-tailed Godwit and the locally much rarer Hudsonian Godwit, allowing ready identification.



Bar-tailed Godwits in assorted plumages (photo: Rob Palazzi)



Non-breeding plumaged female Bar-tailed Godwit showing her finely-barred tail (photo: Rob Palazzi)

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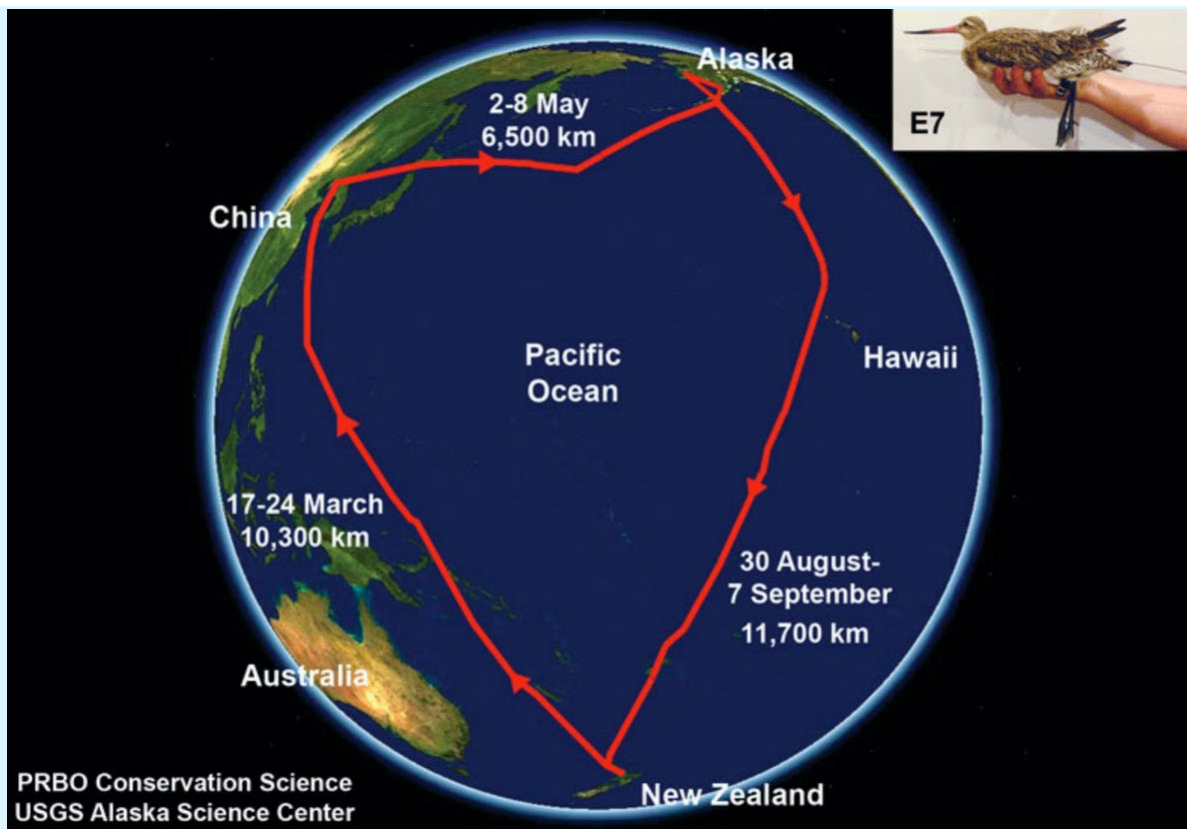
## Feeding specialisations

Bar-tailed Godwits feed mainly at tidal mudflats but will use other habitats, such as river margins, sewage ponds and flooded pastures. Their eyes are positioned high on their head and mainly are used to keep a look-out for predators and to watch what other godwits are doing. Their eyes are not used for foraging. To forage, they thrust their bills deep into the substrate, using pressure difference-detecting cells (known as Herbst corpuscles) in their bills to find prey items and then using the flexible upper part of their outer bill to turn their bill into what effectively is a pair of tweezers, thus allowing them to grab the detected prey. This bill flexibility is known as distal rynchokinesis; it occurs in many species but especially in shorebirds.

## The migratory story

Adult birds breed in the northern hemisphere and depart in March-April to start their long journey back to their breeding grounds. They fly non-stop for thousands of kilometres before landing at sites around the Yellow Sea to refresh, staying there for many weeks before resuming their journey. After breeding, they return to their preferred southern hemisphere destinations, displaying incredible site-faithfulness in all aspects of their journey.

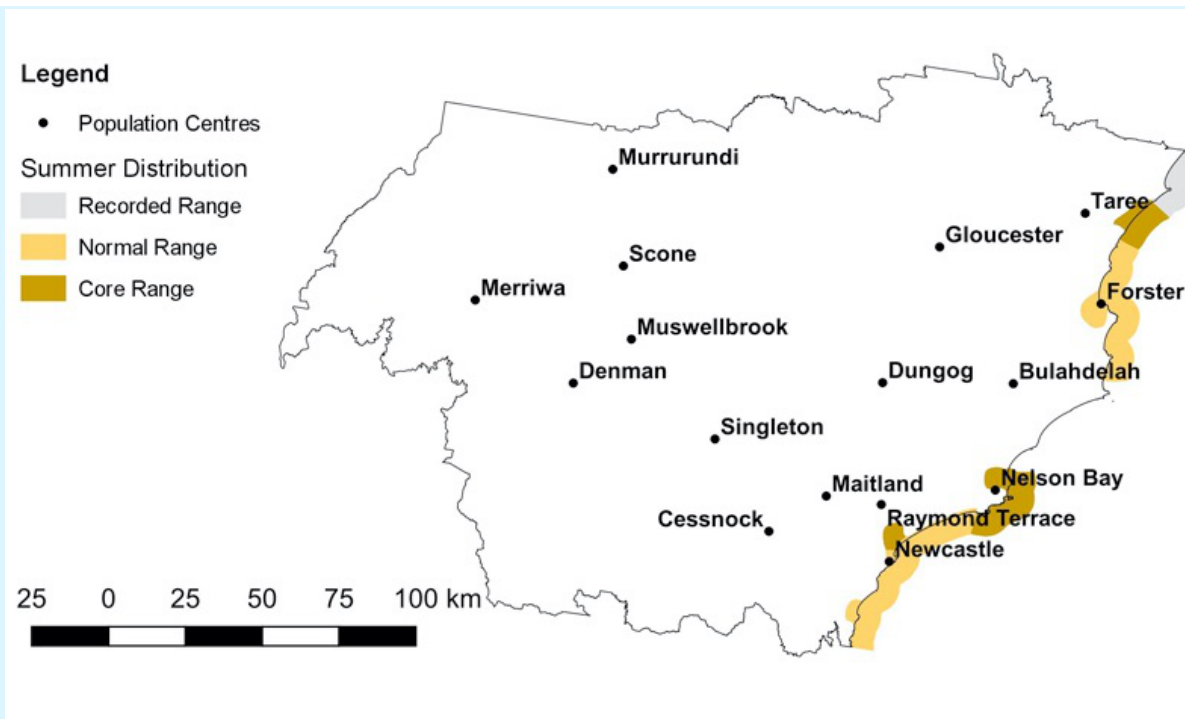
Bar-tailed Godwits do not begin to breed until at least two years of age, and sometimes not until their fourth year. Hence, the younger birds do not bother to migrate back to the breeding grounds although some of them undertake a partial migration, from sites in southern Australia to more northerly sites. The journeys that the adults undertake are amazing. Each year, an adult Bar-tailed Godwit flies some 20-25 thousand kilometres to and from its breeding and wintering grounds, done annually over a usual lifetime of at least a couple of decades. Most legs of their journey are completed non-stop, with birds (in mid-sized flocks) flying for a week or so non-stop and completing journeys of 5,000-8,000 km within those periods.



Migration route, including three major non-stop journeys, for a Bar-tailed Godwit tracked from New Zealand. (source: [wetlandinfo.des.qld.gov.au](http://wetlandinfo.des.qld.gov.au))

### Regional status

Bar-tailed Godwits are recorded year-round in the Hunter Region. However, in the winter months we mainly have young birds present (juveniles and immatures, i.e. non-breeders). From late September to early October, adult birds begin to arrive (see the timeline for an insight). The adults stay for 6-8 months before departing northwards again. The adults often are in partial breeding plumage when they first arrive back, and for a while before they depart. Our region's estuaries are where usually to find Bar-tailed Godwits, as the distribution map shows. The two main sites in summer are the Hunter and Port Stephens estuaries, with another 100-200 birds using the Manning Estuary and some 50-100 birds often found around the Swansea channel. We now record 500-800 birds at each of the main estuaries, making for a regional total of 1,000-1,500 birds. Although that remains an impressive tally, it is a far cry from c 20 years ago when there were well over 2,000 birds recorded each year in the Hunter Estuary alone. In the past two decades, the numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits visiting our region have declined by 70-80%.



Distribution map for Bar-tailed Godwit (map prepared by Dan Williams).



Timeline for Bar-tailed Godwit (prepared by Dan Williams).

## Sub-species

World-wide, three subspecies are recognised, two of which, *baueri* and *menzbieri*, regularly visit Australia. However, *menzbieri*, which is smaller than *baueri* and has a white upper rump, occurs rarely on the east coast of Australia and there are no confirmed records for our region. Birds of subspecies *baueri* breed in eastern Siberia and Alaska.

## About the name

### Bar-tailed Godwit

“Bar-tailed” is descriptive, but the origins of “godwit” are obscure. Some think it is onomatopoeic, i.e. describing the bird’s call; however, with the best-known calls being “kerk” and “kerk-kerk”, that theory seems tenuous.

### *Limosa Lapponica*

*Limosa* is from the Latin word *limosus* meaning muddy or slimy and alludes to the preferred tidal mudflat habitat of this genus. The species name *lapponica* derives from the Modern Latin name for Lapland, *Lapponia*, an area where the nominate subspecies *lapponica* regularly breeds.



Bar-tailed Godwits foraging in a flooded paddock (photo: Steve Merrett)

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