

Black-fronted Dotterel

Elseyornis melanops

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult Black-fronted Dotterel (photo: Ann Lindsey). Note the bird's black frons and nape, and the maroon wing patch.

Description

This distinctive Australian endemic shorebird [Fun Fact it has recently self-introduced into New Zealand] has a widespread distribution although it prefers inland freshwater wetlands. It sometimes uses brackish waterbodies but rarely is found on tidal flats. It prefers not to forage in water which is deeper than a few millimetres.

Males and females look alike and there are no sub-species. Birds have a decidedly horizontal stance, with longish legs and tail. The upperparts mostly are grey-brown, but with a maroon stripe along the scapulars, and the underparts mostly are white but with a striking black V-shaped band on the breast. The eye orbital ring and upper two thirds of the bill are red, while the distal third of the bill is black. A thick black mask on the face joins a black frons and black nape, and the legs are pale yellow.

Juvenile birds have an all-black bill and no breastband, while immature birds have developed a partial breastband and the upper half of their bill has turned dull red. Juvenile and immature birds both have a pink or dull red orbital ring and lack the black nape and frons of adult birds. Full adult plumage is attained at about one year of age.

In flight birds display a white wing bar and white outer tail feathers (with a rufous rump, tipped dark). The flight undulates, because they pause their wing beats.

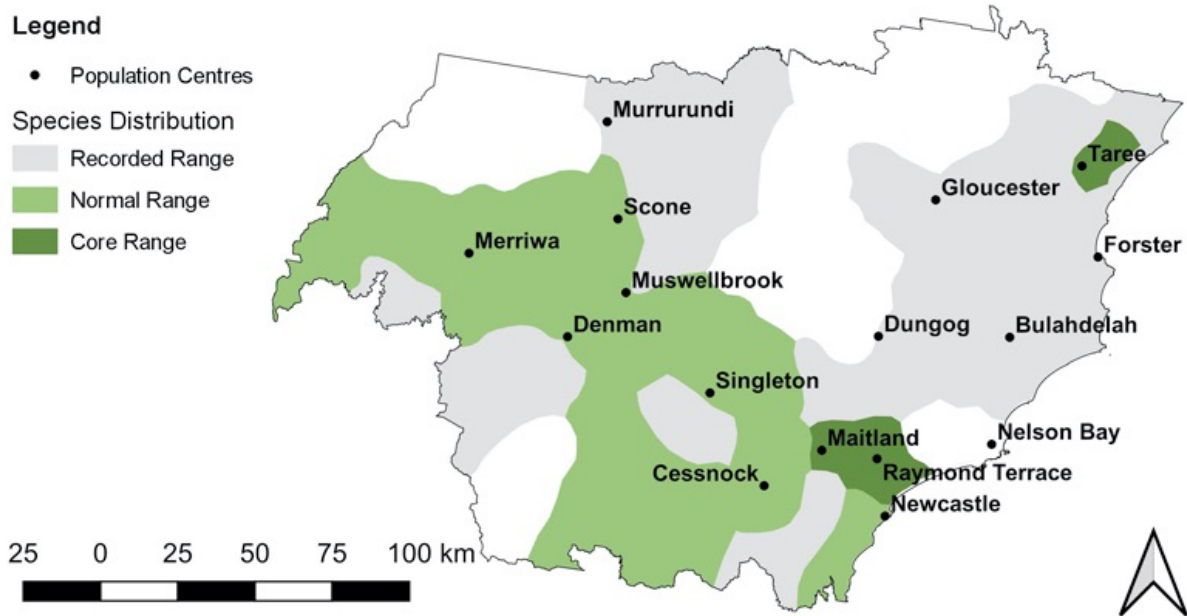


An immature Black-fronted Dotterel (photo: Alan Stuart). Note the pinkish eye orbital ring, rudimentary breast band, and dull-red upper bill.

Regional Status

The Black-fronted Dotterel is considered a breeding resident of the Hunter Region (and with frequent breeding records). However, in times of good inland rain many birds depart the region and local records become scarce. Most of the region's records are from the Hunter Valley and from around Lake Macquarie. It is uncommon in the northern parts of the region except at some of the small freshwater wetlands in the Manning Valley.

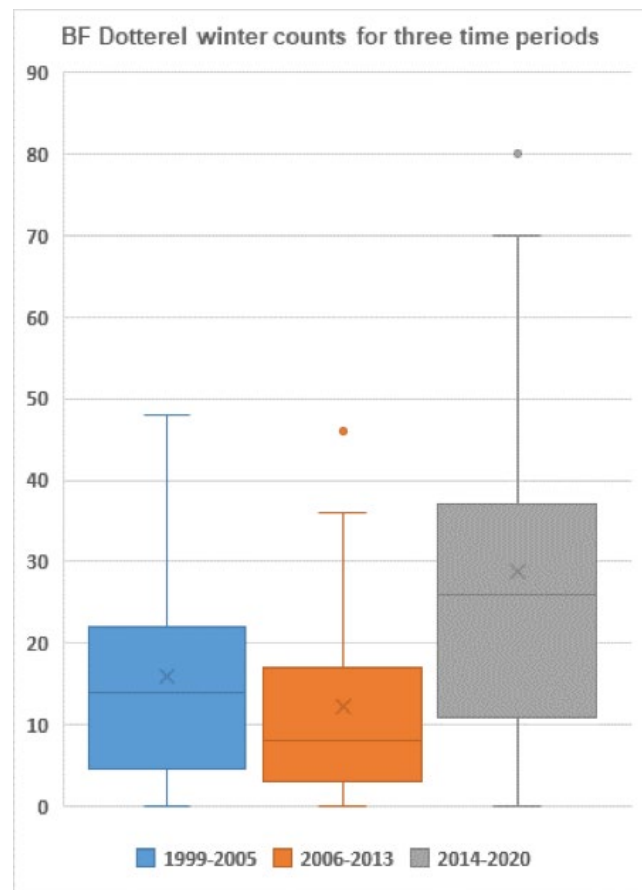
Average summer counts in the Hunter Estuary are of 4-5 birds but numbers begin to rise from around March/April (i.e. about now) and the average winter counts are much greater (see the section below *A local winner*).



Distribution map for Black-fronted Dotterel in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams).

A local winner

Several endemic shorebirds, and many waterbirds, have benefitted from rehabilitation projects in the Hunter Estuary, particularly those at Ash Island, Hexham Swamp and Tomago Wetland (see articles in the 2021 editions of the journals *Stilt* and *The Whistler* for details). The Black-fronted Dotterel is one such winner. Before the rehabilitation projects began to take effect, the average winter count in the estuary was 16 birds. In the most recent period analysed (2014-2020) the average winter count had risen to 29 birds and with some records of 70-80 birds present. The



higher counts coincided with the peak of the inland drought.

About the name

Black-fronted Dotterel

Black-fronted is descriptive. There are varying opinions about the origin of the word *dotterel*, which nowadays is used rather arbitrarily for some small plover-type shorebirds (with the rest of them being called plovers). A plausible explanation is from a combination of *dote* (a simpleton; dotty) and the French suffix *erel* which is a diminutive implying contempt. This explanation is based on the once-widespread European Dotterel being easily captured when nesting.

Elseyonis melanops

The genus is monospecific and means “Elsy’s bird”. Gould named it after Joseph Elsey, an English naturalist who was a member of a 1855-1856 expedition to northern Australia and who died the following year aged only 24. Gould was impressed by the quality of Elsey’s field notes. The species name means “black-faced” from the Greek words *melas* (black) and *ōps* (face or eye).



An adult Black-fronted Dotterel (photo: Steve Merrett) showing its black V-shaped breast band.

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. *Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club*



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