

Common Greenshank

Tringa nebularia

#9 SEPTEMBER 2022



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A group of three Common Greenshanks: note the appearance of an upturned bill (due to the curved lower mandible), white underparts, streaked crown, and also the water depth (photo: Steve Merrett)

Description

This is an upright mid-sized shorebird, often seen feeding in ankle-deep to belly-deep fresh and brackish waters. Its distinctive flight call of *tchu-tchu-tchu* is one of the familiar sounds of such wetlands. In non-breeding plumage, it has white underparts and brownish-grey upperparts, and greenish to yellowish-green legs although the legs sometimes are submerged. The main potential ID confusion is with its close relative the Marsh Sandpiper (and with Lesser Yellowlegs, a vagrant to Australia). A key difference is the bill shape – the two latter species have fine needle-like bills whereas the Common Greenshank's bill is more robust and creates an impression of being upturned (mainly because of the shape of the lower mandible). Also, the Greenshank is a larger bird and it has a streaked crown.

Features of Common Greenshank in flight are its long trailing legs and white rump projecting along much of the bird's back. Note though that these features also apply for the Marsh Sandpiper (whereas the Lesser Yellowlegs has only a small white patch on its rump).

In breeding plumage Common Greenshanks develop bold dark markings on their scapulars and dark streaking on their breast and flanks. That plumage pattern is sometimes seen here in late autumn, just before birds depart for their breeding grounds. Juvenile birds when they first arrive have dark upperparts, but in about October they moult into their non-breeding plumage.



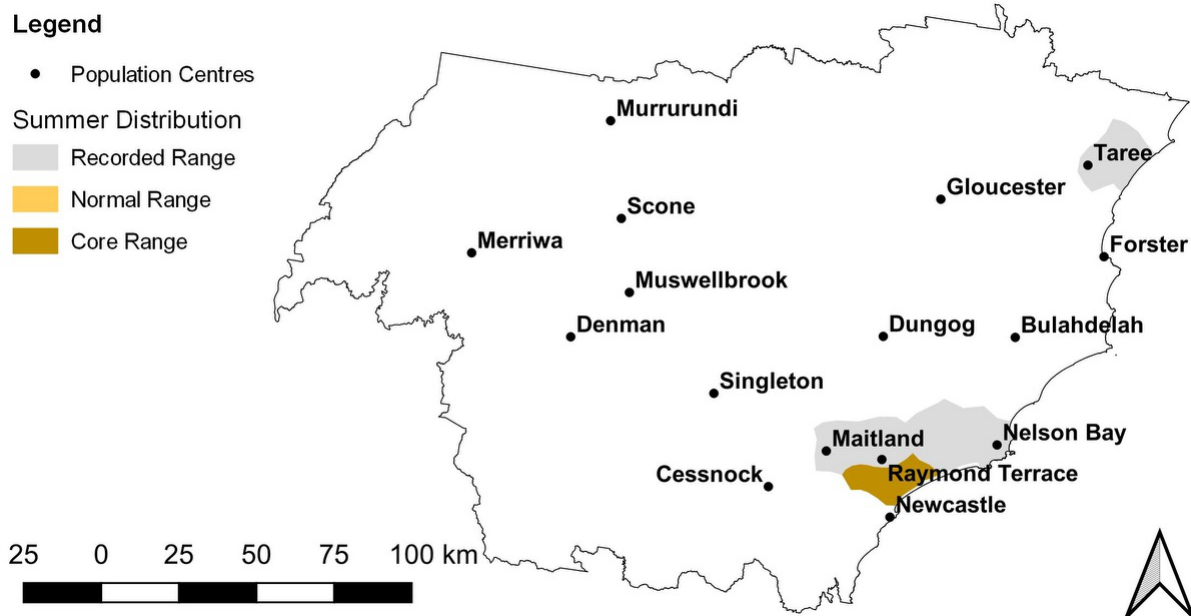
Two Common Greenshanks, with their greenish legs fully on view, plus there is a Curlew Sandpiper on the left (photo: Mick Roderick)

Regional Status

The Common Greenshank is a summer migrant although sometimes a small number of immature birds spend the winter in our region. Some of the adult birds will start to arrive back this month (September). The breeding grounds are in the northern hemisphere, spanning a large area from northern Scotland eastwards across northern Europe and east across the Palearctic.

Most of the local records are from the Hunter Estuary but occasionally there are small numbers of birds in the Port Stephens and Manning Estuaries or at

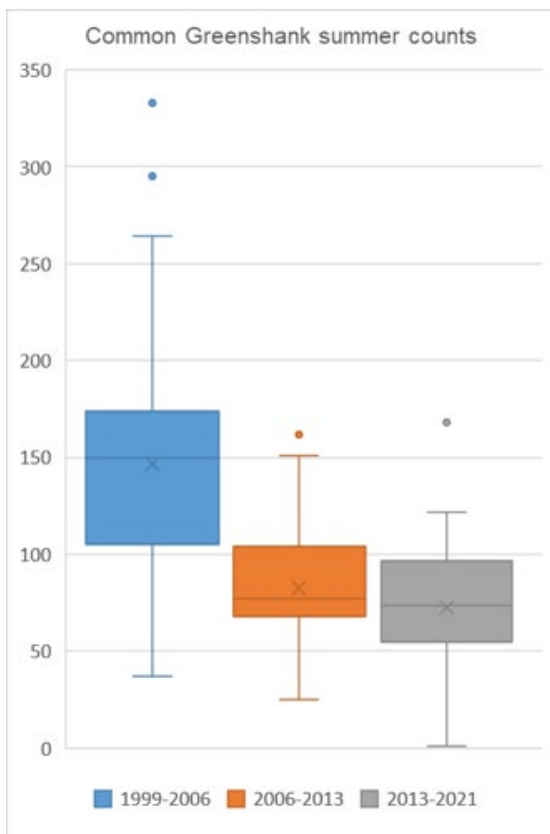
some of the wetlands around Maitland.



Distribution map for Common Greenshank (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Population changes in the Hunter Estuary

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the reported summer counts for Common Greenshank in the Hunter Estuary were usually of 200-300 birds. Notably though, a small number of Australasian Wader Study Group surveys in the 1980s yielded an average of 560 birds. The HBOC monthly surveys since early 1999 show a decrease, from peak counts of 200-300+ birds in the early years down to peaks of around 80 birds each year over 2020-22. The graph below indicates the population changes that occurred over 1999-2021.



Ranges of summer counts of Common Greenshank from HBOC monthly surveys, for three time periods (from Stuart & Lindsey *Stilt* 2021). (photo: Ann Lindsey).

Most migratory shorebird species populations are in decline throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, mainly because of factors outside of Australia – particularly the development pressures along the Chinese and Korean shorelines. However, in recent years, the numbers in the Hunter Estuary have been stable or only slightly in decline. The Common Greenshank is a species that has benefitted from tidal wetland restoration projects in the estuary, particularly those at Tomago and Hexham.

About the name

Common Greenshank

The world's two species of Greenshank are so-named for their greenish legs. The Nordmann's Greenshank has a more limited range and it is rare (there are only 500-1,000 individuals) whereas the population of Common Greenshank is estimated to be 110,000 birds. So, it is relatively much more common!

Tringa nebularia

The genus name is based upon the Greek *trungas* meaning water-bird.

Around 2,500 years ago Aristotle used the term when he described a thrush-sized wader of some sort (probably it was a sandpiper). The first modern usage was in 1600 for the Green Sandpiper, which became named as *Tringa ochropus*. The species name is from the Latin *nebula*, meaning mist. Possibly this relates to the grey non-breeding plumage, or possibly to the bird's marsh habitat preference. It's a bit of a mist-ery, one might say! However, there is a clear connection between *nebula*/mist and the Old Norwegian name for our bird: *Skoddefoll*, mist-fowl.



A juvenile Common Greenshank – note the very dark upperparts (photo: Alwyn Simple)

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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