

Far Eastern Curlew

Numenius madagascariensis

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A female Far Eastern Curlew – it is standing on one leg as do many shorebirds when resting
(photo: Steve Merrett)

General Comments

This is the world's largest shorebird! All of the other curlew species are large too, but this is the biggest of them all. Its massive down-curved bill renders it unmistakable amongst the shorebirds of Australia. The bill of the closely-related Whimbrel (NB it's a substantially smaller species) is about twice the size of its head, whereas the Far Eastern Curlew's bill is 4-5 times the head size. The female's bill usually is longer than that of the males (maximum recorded lengths of 207 mm and 179 mm, respectively).

In non-breeding plumage they are long-legged brown birds with dark streaking especially on the flanks and wing coverts. Most of the birds in breeding plumage still look just like that, but some adult males become rufescent not long before they depart for their northern breeding grounds.

There are no recognised sub-species, and males and females appear similar. However, as well as the bill size difference mentioned above, the female is bulkier, weighing 10-15% more than the male on average (c 800 g compared with c 700 g; their weights in October). The Victorian Wader Study Group differentiates the sexes by bivariate analysis of length of wing and bill – the differences are significant.

Juveniles are similar to adults but they are paler and their bills are shorter (being 3-4 times the size of the head). They first attain adult non-breeding plumage in a complete moult starting in first austral Winter. The complete moult into first breeding plumage is in the third year. Birds seen in Australia in the period April-July generally are juveniles, too young to return to the breeding grounds.

World Curlew Day is 21 April – it is the average first laying date for Eurasian Curlews. Also, curlews have a patron saint – St Beuno, a holy man from the 7th Century. Beuno was so grateful to a curlew for rescuing his prayer book after it fell into the sea, that he blessed the bird and asked for all curlews to be protected.



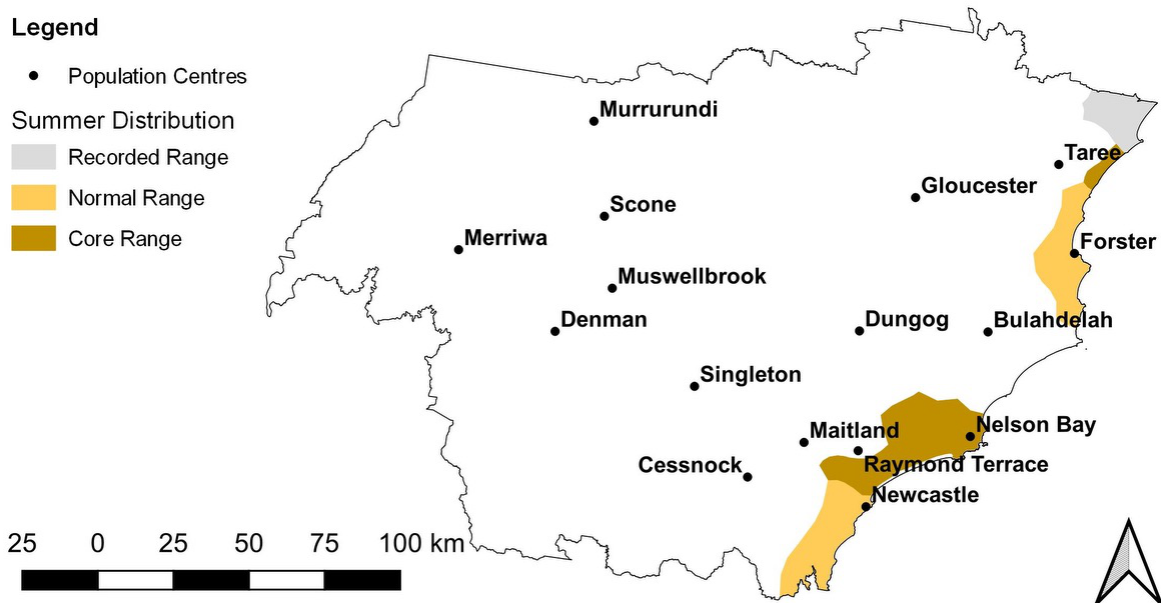
A group of three Far Eastern Curlews – the middle bird is a female (photo: Ray Burton)

Regional Status

Far Eastern Curlews are “coastal obligates” – they are only found at tidal

mudflats or at nearby roost sites. In our region, the Hunter Estuary and Port Stephens are the strongholds, each hosting 100 or so birds each summer. There also are a few dozen birds in the Manning Estuary and some around the Swansea area (the Lake Macquarie Estuary). In winter, when the adults have gone, small numbers of juveniles (ten birds or less) usually remain behind.

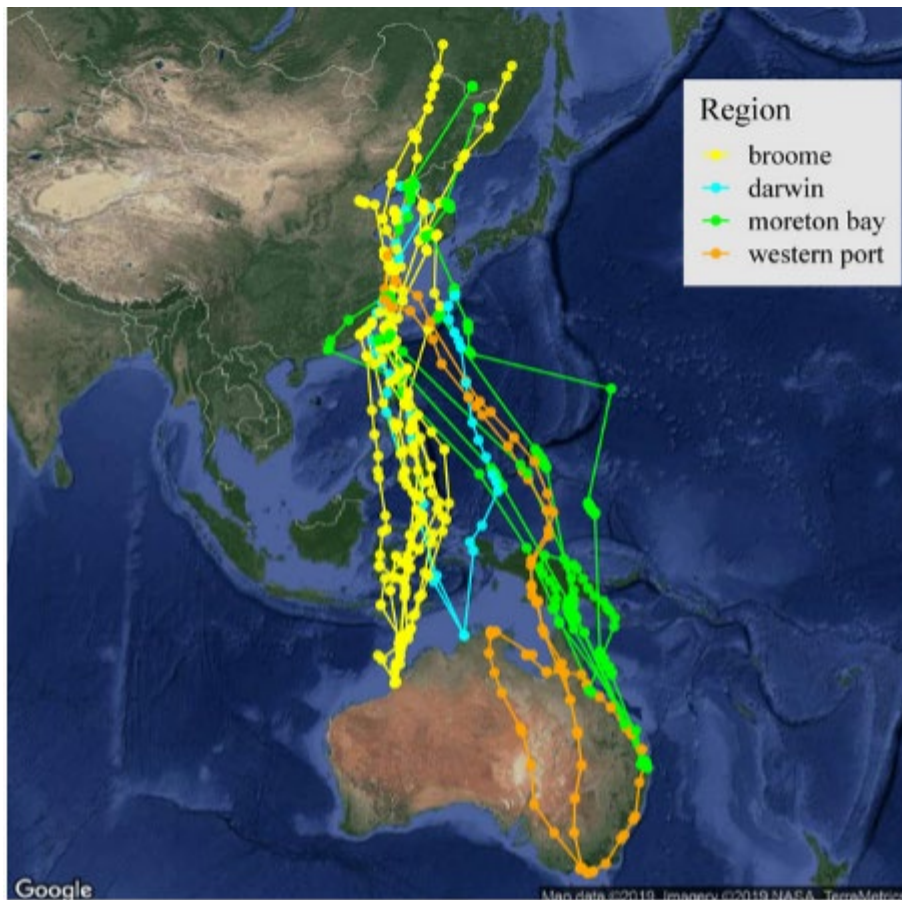
The numbers have crashed locally in the past few decades, and also in Australia generally. The Hunter Estuary and Port Stephens each used to host many hundreds of them and were rated as internationally significant sites (i.e. hosting more than 1% of the total population). Alas, that is no longer the case.



Distribution map for Far Eastern Curlews (map by Dan Williams).

Migration

Far Eastern Curlews breed in eastern Siberia – the known breeding grounds include the southern Maritime Territory and north-eastern Kamchatka (Dement'ev *et al.*). In the past few years, several birds in Australia have been fitted with trackers (either satellite trackers or geolocators) and the migration routes are becoming better understood. The map below shows the results from tracking studies during 2019-2024.



Routes taken by tracked migrating Far Eastern Curlews (source: <https://vwsg.org.au>)

Conservation

Far Eastern Curlew numbers have declined by 81% in Australia over the past three decades and the species is now classified as critically endangered under the Australian EPBC Act (and in many equivalent state legislations). The main acute cause of decline is habitat loss and degradation at migratory staging grounds in the Yellow Sea region of China and the Korean peninsula. However, habitat loss elsewhere, including in Australia, is also significant. Human disturbance is also an important factor – this is a wary bird that does not tolerate close approach (it has the largest flight initiation distance of any of the shorebirds). The ever-growing human population in the East Asian – Australasian Flyway does this species no favours. Adding to all of that there are also the effects from climate change and pollution (e.g. the significant problems at Fullerton Cove).

Recent studies suggest that the decline may have plateaued. Let's hope so, but the situation is tenuous for this species – as it also is for several other curlew species. The Eskimo Curlew and the Slender-billed Curlew are classified as critically endangered within their ranges – they probably are extinct as there have been no records of either species in more than 30 years.

They are victims of similar pressures to those to which the Far Eastern Curlew is subjected.

About the name

Far Eastern Curlew

The name “curlew” exists from at least 1377, when there is the first written record (in the famous poem *Piers Plowman*). The name is imitative of the [Eurasian Curlew's](#) call (that being the only common curlew species in England). There are nine known species in the genus, some of which are named for the geographic regions where they regularly occur. The geographic name chosen for our species might be somewhat Eurocentric – especially after it was changed recently from Eastern Curlew to Far Eastern Curlew – but apparently it is to do with the locations of the main breeding grounds.

Numenius madagascariensis

The genus name is from the Greek word *noumēnios*, a portmanteau word created from *neos* new and *mēnē*, moon; the “new moon” having a crescent shape ie the name refers indirectly to the shape of the bird’s bill. The species name arrived in error – the type specimen was collected in Makassar (in South Sulawesi) but an 18th century zoologist (named Mathuris Brisson) confused that location with Madagascar! The rules of taxonomic nomenclature mean that we are stuck with his error. The only curlew found regularly in Madagascar is the Eurasian Curlew.



A male Far Eastern Curlew in flight – note the bird's uniform plumage including on its rump – those are characteristic features (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

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 BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Fraser & Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Dement'ev et al. (1969). Birds of the Soviet Union.

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