

Grey Plover in Port Stephens

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Corrie Island in Port Stephens is a known site for migratory shorebirds in the Hunter Region (Stuart 2004a). In recent years Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* has been recorded on the island's tidal flats and nearby sandy beaches. Corrie Island (32° 40' 42"S, 152° 08' 16"E) is a low-lying, partly tidal landmass of sand and gravel at the mouth of the Myall River. Much of it is covered by mangrove forest. However, sandy beaches, tidal flats and sandspits on the southern side of the island provide foraging and roosting habitat for many species of shorebirds (Stuart 2004a). Corrie Island is part of the Myall Lakes Ramsar site (Office of Environment and Heritage 2014).

Records of Grey Plover in Port Stephens are shown in **Table 1**. The earliest record located was of a single bird at Taylors Beach in November 1980 (Stuart 2004a). There are six records of single birds at Corrie Island and the adjacent Winda Woppa sandspit from 2003-2022 (<https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/home>) and a record of three birds in January 2003 (Stuart 2004b). Single birds were at Soldiers Point in 2010 and Swan Bay in 2013.

Table 1. Grey Plover records from Port Stephens 1980-2022.

Date	Location	Number of birds
1/11/1980	Taylors Beach	1
6/01/2003	Myall river mouth	3
26/02/2006	Corrie Island	1
6/01/2010	Soldiers Point	1
15/11/2013	Swan Bay	1
16/12/2019	Winda Woppa sandspit	1
10/01/2020	Corrie Island south	1
19/01/2020	Corrie Island south	1
20/11/2021	Corrie Island east	1
20/09/2022	Corrie Island south	1

In the Hunter Region, the Grey Plover was considered to be accidental but more recently it has been reclassified as a rare summer migrant (Stuart 2004b; Williams 2020). It has been occasionally recorded as one or two birds in the Manning Estuary with 51 records spanning 1999-2021, and the Hunter Estuary with 35 records spanning 2001-2021. Most reports for the region have been from the period November to January (<https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/home>). Its conservation status in New South Wales is secure and it is listed globally by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as least concern (BirdLife International 2022). However, its numbers are declining; the Action Plan for Australian Birds 2020 lists it as vulnerable (Garnett & Baker 2021).

Grey Plover migrate to Australia along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway from their breeding grounds in eastern Siberia and Alaska (Minton & Serra 2001). It is a coastal species and forages on intertidal sand and mudflats. At high tide it usually roosts on beaches (Smith 1991). Birds arrive in Australia from mid-September through to December and depart March to mid-April. It is present around the entire Australian coastline but is least abundant on the east coast. Its numbers are concentrated at 17 northern, western and southern sites that hold over 90% of the estimated Australian population of 12,000 birds (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Minton & Serra 2001). There are no important sites in New South Wales. Grey Plover forage singly or in small flocks, but form large flocks at communal roosts, often with other waders such as Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*, Pied Stilt *Himantopus leucocephalus*, knots and godwits (Marchant & Higgins 1993). Banding studies indicate the species is faithful to non-breeding areas from year to year (Marchant & Higgins 1993).



Figure 1. Grey Plover in breeding plumage (left) and the same bird exhibiting black underwing axillaries (right), Corrie Island 20/09/2022. (Photos by Sharon Taylor).

The reasons for the relative scarcity of the species along the NSW coast, and the Hunter Region in particular, are not known. There are extensive areas of seemingly suitable habitat available. The extent of development along the east coast and associated human disturbance along beaches may be a factor. The bird's ecology, however, is not well understood. Why, for example, are almost all of the birds that share Australia's coastlines each year, female (Australian Wader Study Group 2016). In Port Stephens birds have been present for four consecutive years from 2019-2022 (**Table 1**). The reports span from September to February which suggests that birds are present over several months and are not on passage to southern sites. Grey Plover in non-breeding plumage looks similar to Pacific Golden Plover *P. fulva*, which have also been recorded in the area, and it is possible that birds may have been overlooked sometimes. The bird recorded in September 2022 was still in breeding plumage and was easily identified. See **Figure 1**.

Corrie Island is a relatively undisturbed location in Port Stephens with limited access and extensive areas of suitable shorebird habitat. Recent surveys of the southern part of the island have shown three threatened species breeding there successfully: Beach Stone-curlew *Esacus magnirostris*; Australian Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*; and Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* (Fraser & Stuart 2018). Most recently, Bush Stone-curlew *Burhinus grallarius* was recorded on the island (Katherine Howard pers. comm.). The likely regular presence of Grey Plover over summer, further highlights the importance of Corrie Island and Port Stephens for the conservation of migratory and endemic shorebirds.

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