

Pied Stilt

Himantopus leucocephalus

#11 NOVEMBER 2025



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Pied Stilt with fully developed black hindneck and nape, and bright pink legs (photo: Leslie Wilson)

General Comments

Adult Pied Stilts have white head and underparts, and white upper parts except for black wings and an extensive black hindneck and lower nape. They have very long deep pink legs (almost red in the breeding season) and a long slender dark bill. Males and females appear similar but for females the areas of black plumage are somewhat duller. However worn plumage of males is similar to the black-brown of females. Both sexes incubate.

Juveniles have dark brown upper wings with black scalloping, and a faintly grey crown, and otherwise have all-white plumage. Their legs start as yellowish, which changes to pale pink. At approximately one year of age, although the timing varies, they moult into an immature plumage – most notably this includes a dark grey crown and ear coverts, creating the appearance of a dark cap. At around two years of age, they attain adult plumage.

Juveniles and immatures can sometimes have a grey hindneck and nape, but the extent of this apparently is quite variable and some of them have an all-white neck.

Birds utter a strident, persistent yapping sound whenever alarmed or excited – usually this is a reliable feature of their presence at a wetland. The main diet is aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates – molluscs, crustaceans, insects. They also occasionally eat seeds. They feed diurnally and nocturnally in all habitats, and in both the breeding and non-breeding seasons.



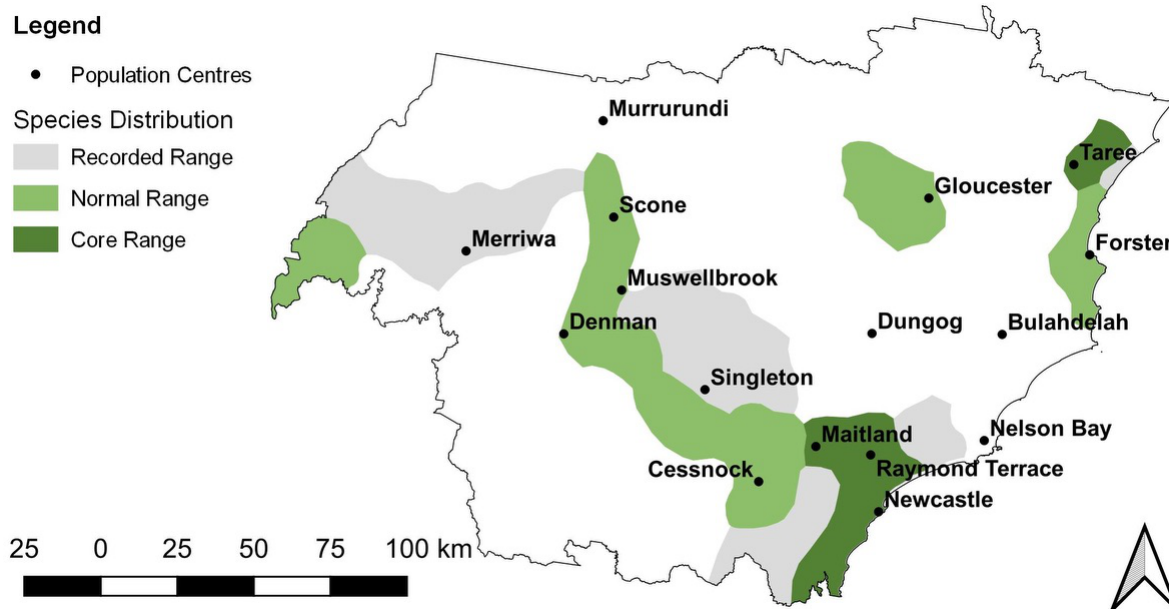
A juvenile Pied Stilt, with faint grey crown and white hindneck and dull pink legs (photo: Marg Clarke)

Regional Status

In the Hunter Region, Pied Stilts prefer freshwater and brackish waterbodies, including inland ones such as lakes and sewage treatment works. The regional stronghold is the wetlands of the lower Hunter Valley but they potentially may be recorded at any other suitable wetlands in the region. However, it is uncommon to find them at tidal wetlands, which is why they are not recorded often at the other estuaries of the region. In HBOC's monthly surveys of the Hunter Estuary, many hundreds of them are often recorded (but, with comings and goings – see below). The highest count of them was

1,576 birds, in December 2014, with an average of just over 1,000 birds present each month between January 2014 and April 2015.

There are regular and frequent breeding records from within the region, but the main breeding activity occurs further inland.



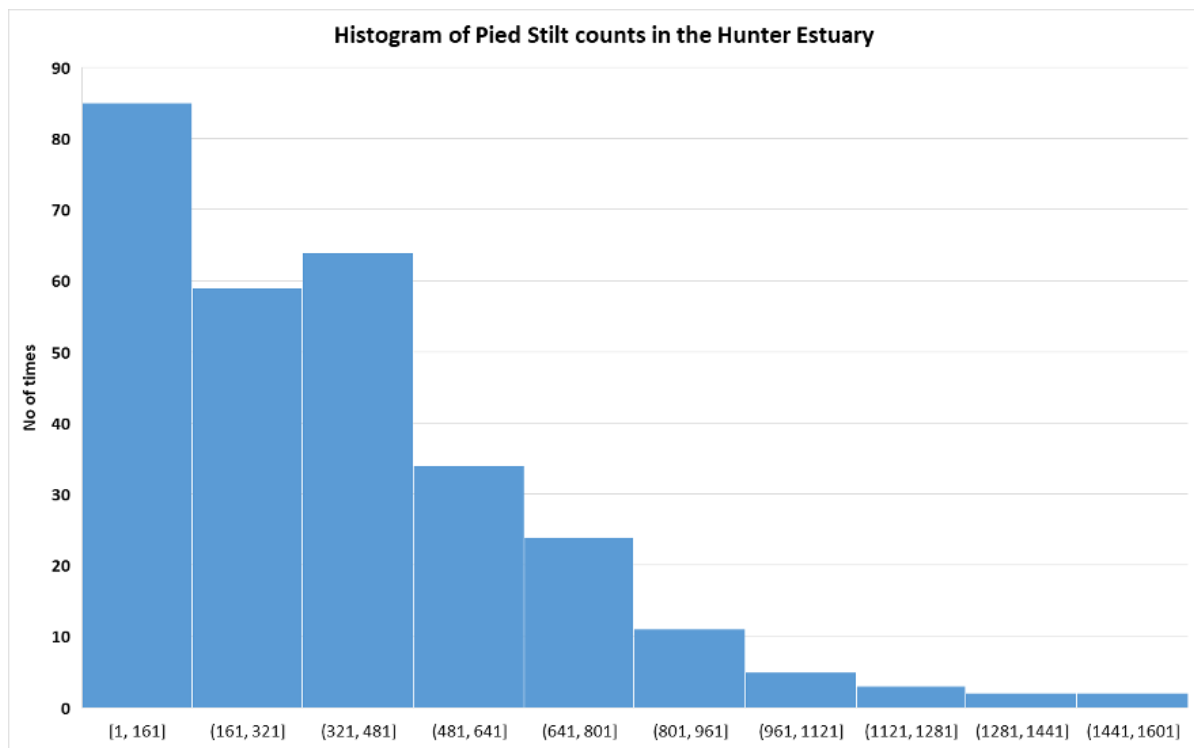
Distribution of the Pied Stilt in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Comings and goings

Pied Stilt numbers in the Hunter Estuary, and the overall region, fluctuate dramatically in response to the inland flood and drought cycle. When there has been good rains inland, they depart the region to breed at wetlands elsewhere. As those inland wetlands dry out, birds start returning to coastal sites. Often, there is a high proportion of young birds in the returning flocks.

The histogram below shows the Pied Stilt counts from HBOC's Hunter Estuary surveys since they commenced in April 1999. There have been 81 months with more than 480 of them present but there have also been 85 months with fewer than 160 birds.

Red-necked Avocet numbers in the Hunter Estuary also fluctuate dramatically, for similar reasons. However, there is no correlation between the counts for these two species – which suggest that they do not breed at the same inland waterbodies.



About the name Pied Stilt

There are five recognised species of stilt in the world and they all have very long legs – the longest legs, for their body size, of any of the waders. Figuratively, they are walking on stilts.

Black-and-white stilts of the genus *Himantopus* are found almost worldwide and there has been considerable uncertainty about how many different species of them exist, because the genetic divergence across the genus is low. Currently, three species are recognised, and their names reflect their black-and-whiteness: Black-winged, Black-necked, Pied. For a long time, our bird was considered a subspecies of the Black-winged Stilt (*H. himantopus*) but current taxonomic thinking places it as a separate species (whose range includes The Philippines, Indonesia, New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand).

Himantopus leucocephalus

The genus name comes from the Greek words *himanto*, spindle (originally this term was used for a leather thong; later it came to mean anything long and pliant), and *pous*, foot. The species name is from two more Greek words: *leukos*, white, and *kephalē*, head. In other words, it's a long-legged bird with a white head (if it's an adult).



An immature Pied Stilt, with dark grey crown and ear-coverts, dull pink legs, and rudimentary hindneck plumage developing (photo: Darryl Luck)

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 • Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds.
<https://hanzab.birdlife.org.au/species> • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlasers' 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 • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names.

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