

Red-capped Plover

Charadrius ruficapillus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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A male Red-capped Plover – note the black breast tabs, narrow loral stripe, chestnut/red crown and hindneck. Photo Steve Merrett

Description

This is the smallest of the Australian endemic shorebirds. It is slightly larger than the migratory Red-necked Stint, a species with which it often associates as they have some shared habitat preferences. Adult males have white underparts and paler brown upperparts, and a distinctive chestnut/red crown and hindneck, with dark breast tabs and a narrow black loral stripe. In adult females the breast tabs are paler and the loral stripe is paler and broadens behind the eye. In general, the females have a duller crown and neck than the males but there is a considerable overlap and it is unsafe to sex a bird based on its crown/neck colouration. The loral stripe is a much more reliable guide.

Young birds, known as runners, are downy and cannot fly. They develop juvenile plumage a few weeks after hatching and then begin to moult into immature plumage at around the time of fledging. Adult plumage is acquired at approximately twelve months of age. Juveniles lack any black and rufous

head markings although they often have a slight cinnamon tinge at the back of the neck. The feathers on their upperparts have buff fringes and dark sub-terminal lines. Those dark lines disappear in the immature bird's plumage.

In flight, all birds exhibit broad white sides on their tail and a white wing-bar. No sub-species are recognised although birds in northern Australia are slightly smaller on average than the southern birds.

Red-capped Plovers seldom wade in water. They are found on beaches, tidal flats, salt marsh, freshwater mudflats and even sometimes in close-cropped pasture. They feed in a characteristic run-stop-peck manner (as do many other species of their genus), locating their prey by sight. When not breeding they are gregarious, including with other shorebird species, and they can occur in large flocks.



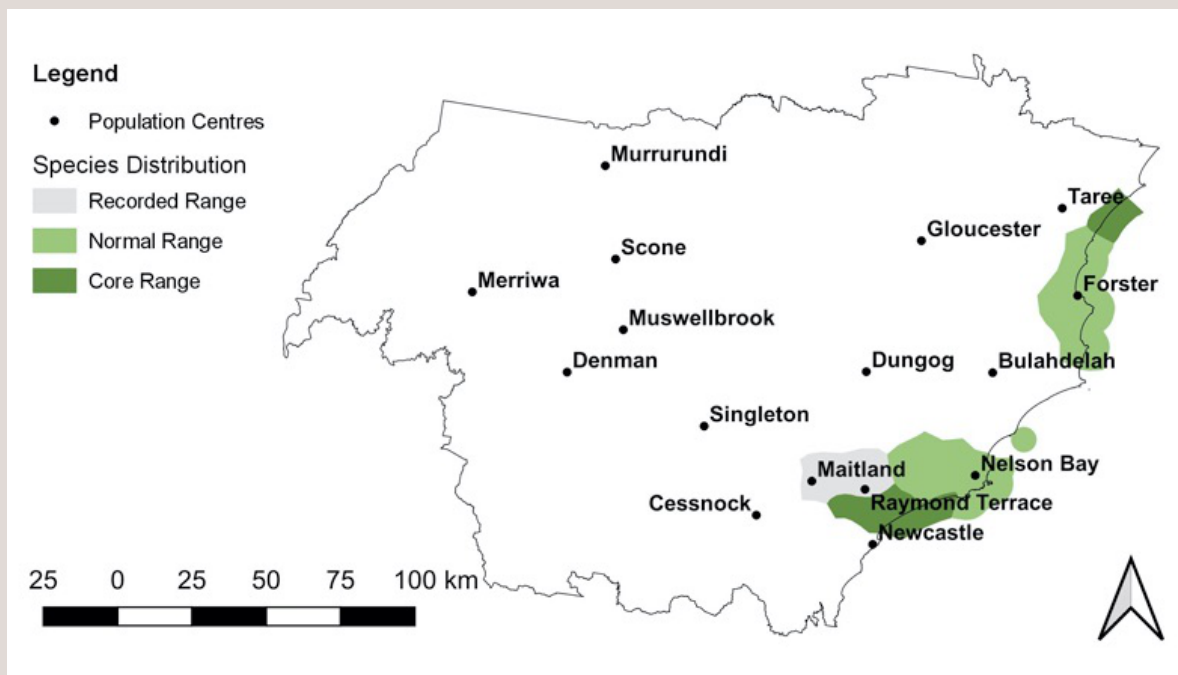
A female Red-capped Plover – note the pale breast tabs and the pale lorai stripe (and which is broadening behind the eye). Photo Steve Merrett

Regional Status

The Red-capped Plover is classified as a breeding resident of the Hunter Region although the extent of any movements into and out of the region in response to inland rainfall patterns is unclear. There have been many

breeding records, primarily from sites along our central and northern beaches but Stockton Sandspit and Ash Island have also contributed (less so nowadays at the Sandspit because the beach along Newcastle Bight is being better-managed for shorebirds and they seem to prefer to breed there).

Although there are occasional records within our region from inland waters (e.g. at Lake Liddell) the majority of them are from beaches and estuaries. The distribution map also highlights the regular records from wetlands around Maitland, such as at Chisholm and Oakhampton (e.g. paddocks near Walka Water Works).



Distribution map for Red-capped Plover (map prepared by Dan Williams)

It's all very distracting!

Red-capped Plovers breed in simple pairs, usually singly but occasionally in larger groups of pairs. Their nest is a simple scrape or depression, either unlined or lined very basically (e.g. with a few shells) and they almost invariably lay two eggs. They are well-known for their distraction displays, in which they feign injury in order to distract a potential predator from the nest site. The distraction techniques include simulating a broken wing / wings (raising and waving one wing or spreading both wings and dragging them on the ground) and pretending a serious injury (by lying on one side, fluttering both wings and squeaking).

A common technique, when flushed from the nest, is a “rodent-run” – the bird

zig-zagging away from the nest with back hunched and tail depressed and dragging on the ground. Another is the “crouch-run” followed by “erect-return” – the flushed bird (usually it is the female) runs away erratically with head lowered, then she and her mate run back towards the threat, holding their bodies erect and displaying their conspicuous white fronts.



Immature Red-capped Plover: note the rufous/cinnamon hindneck. Photo Ray Burton

About the name

Red-capped Plover

“Red-capped” is descriptive (for male birds). Although “plover” is used for many small to medium-sized shorebirds, its origin is less clear. A plausible theory is that it derives from the Latin word *pluvia*, for rain. There is no obvious behavioural link with rain but that might not have stopped people from developing that name. Plovers were often called rain birds in French usage (*plouvier*) and in early English usage.

Charadrius ruficapillus

The species name is fairly straightforward, deriving from the Latin words *rufus* (red or reddish) and *capillus* (hair on the head): thus, “red-haired”. As to the genus name – it’s a mess! The Greeks had a bird they called *kharadrios*, a mysterious mountain gully-dwelling nocturnal bird with some legendary characteristics – it was a glutton, it could cure jaundice (because it had yellow plumage!), etc. Get the picture? And then, somewhere along the line, the term began to be used for small shorebirds. Who knows why!



An immature Red-capped Plover (a runner) Photo Tom Kendall

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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