

# Red-necked Avocet

*Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*

#6 JUNE 2020



Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Red-necked Avocet (photo: Alwyn Simple)

## Description

A large shorebird, endemic to Australia; mainly black and white but with a rich chestnut head and neck, long blue-grey legs and an upturned black bill. Females have a noticeably more upturned bill and slightly less black on their primaries. Juvenile Red-necked Avocets have a generally duller appearance, being brown and white birds with a pale brown head and neck, mottled upperparts and less-dark iris. They moult into adult-like plumage at around one year old. No subspecies are recognised.

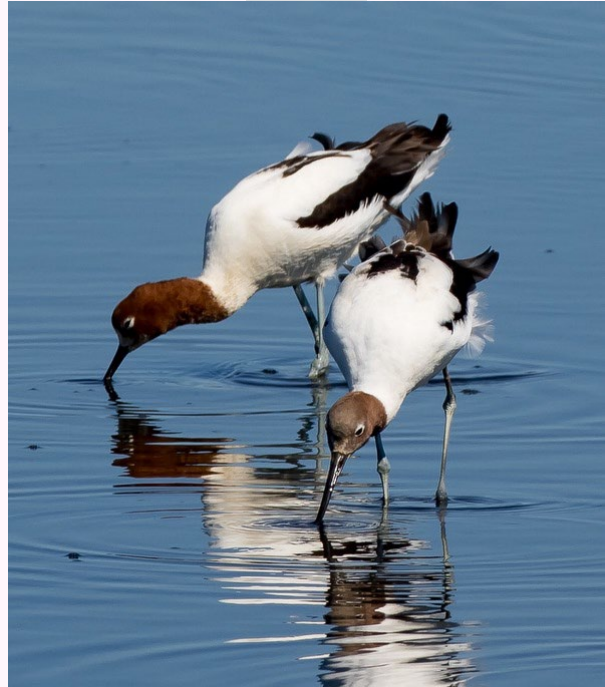
In flight, an individual bird is a spectacular sight, with its long legs trailing well beyond the tail, two diagnostic black bars on its back and a flickering effect arising from movement of the black-tipped wings and angled black bar on the upperwing. A flock of Red-necked Avocets in flight is even more spectacular, wheeling and turning in unison and creating a stunning shimmering effect.

Avocets usually feed in small to large parties, each bird sweeping its head from side to side under water as the group moves forward, locating prey such as fish, shrimps and insects. Although primarily a bird of inland salt lakes, where also they breed, they sometimes frequent estuaries plus brackish and freshwater swamps and lakes.

### About the bill

Why does the bill curve upwards?  
When Avocets have their heads immersed, the up-curved section of the bill becomes approximately parallel to the benthic surface. The birds' sweeping action stirs up small invertebrates in the muddy substrate, which they catch by touch, using their bill like a pair of tweezers.

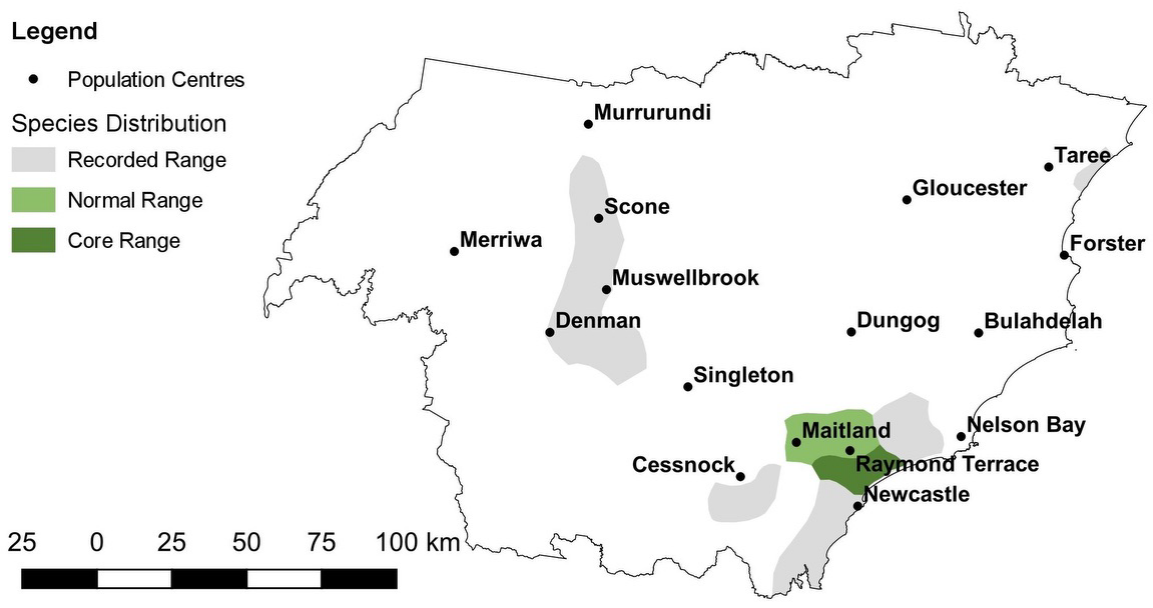
Adult (on left) and juvenile Red-necked Avocet feeding (photo: Marg Clarke)



### Regional Status

The Red-necked Avocet is a regular visitor to our region; there are no local breeding records. The Hunter Estuary is the major local site for them. Records from elsewhere in the region are uncommon, and mostly they only involve low numbers.

In modern times, it is common for there to be several thousand Avocets in the estuary for at least part of the year, with peak counts in some years of more than 7,000 birds. That is around 7% of the total population i.e. the Hunter Estuary is of substantial importance for this species. That was not always the case; before the mid-1980s Avocets were rare locally and the first known local records date from 1965 (five birds) and then 1972-1975 (peak count 19 birds).



Distribution map for Red-necked Avocet (map prepared by Dan Williams).



Red-necked Avocet roosting (photo: Chris Herbert). Note that there are some younger birds amongst the flock.

**Comings and goings**

In many years, most if not all Red-necked Avocets depart our region in summer or early autumn for several months, presumably to breed at inland lakes. The return usually starts about now, with numbers climbing back to thousands of birds over the June to August period. Perhaps this year the return will be delayed, because of good inland rain that fell this autumn.

Although the departure of birds is linked to inland rainfall, they only leave en masse if at least three months of above-median rain has fallen inland (Stilt 2017, p3-8).

## About the name

### Red-necked Avocet

Red-necked is descriptive. Avocet derives from the Italian *avocetta* (sometimes spelt *avocetta*) used for the Pied Stilt of Europe. The Italian origins are obscure although a nice theory relates their bird's smart looks being similar to those of a lawyer (Italian: *avvocato*) dressed in their robes.

### *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*

The genus name derives from the Latin words *recurvus* "bent backwards" and *rostrum* "bill". The species name is from the Modern Latin *Nova Hollandia* i.e. New Holland, an early name for Australia.

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