

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A Whimbrel at Glenrock – note the bird's strongly curved bill, and the dark crown and eye line which delineate a white supercilium. Also, its white rump (marginally discernible). (photo: Rob Palazzi).

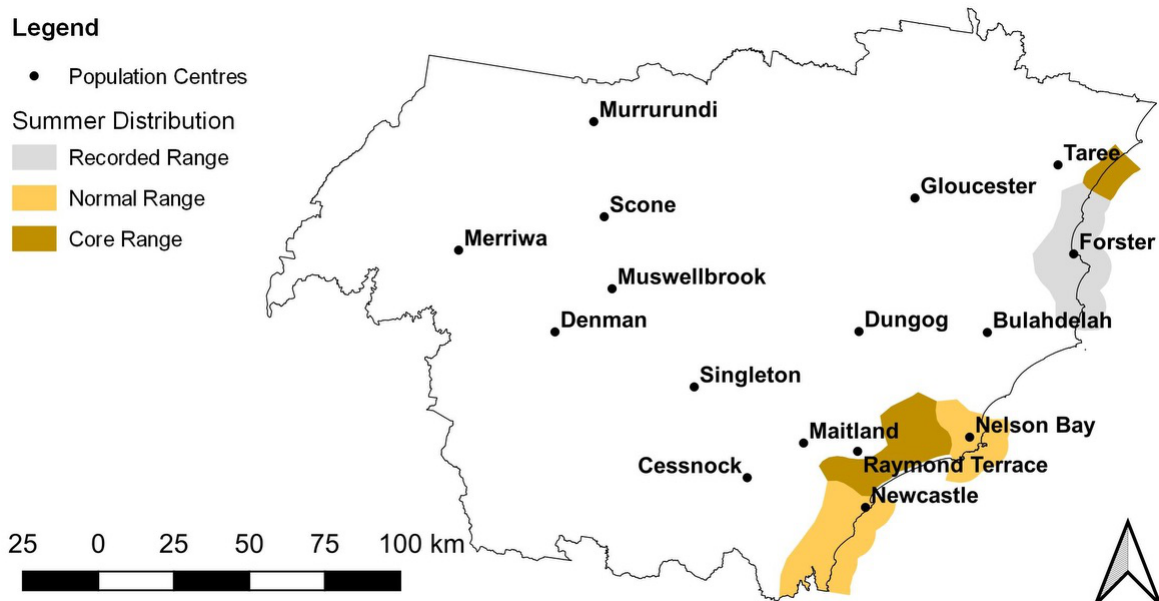
General Comments

Although by most measures the Whimbrel is a large shorebird, it is only about half the size of its close relative the Far Eastern Curlew. The latter is the main confusion species. Some of the key differences, apart from size, are the length of the bill, the presence/absence of a supercilium (eye stripe) and the colour of the rump. The Whimbrel's bill is 70-90mm long, compared with 140-170mm for the Far Eastern Curlew. It has a distinctly striped head – a dark crown and a dark line through the eye, framing a pale eye stripe. In flight the bird's white rump is an obvious feature (NB the Eurasian Curlew, an Australian vagrant, also has a white rump).

Whimbrels breed in the northern hemisphere, at inland moors in Siberia, Alaska, etc. All of the subspecies migrate southwards after the breeding season – typically, only one of the subspecies makes it to Australia.

Regional Status

In its non-breeding season (ie when it is visiting us) the Whimbrel is a coastal obligate species – it is seldom found away from estuaries. Although sometimes seen roosting on rocks, it prefers to roost in mangroves – thus in the Hunter Region it is mainly recorded in the Hunter and Port Stephens estuaries, less commonly in the Manning and Lake Macquarie estuaries. Birds usually arrive in October and depart in March. Sometimes young birds over-winter, although winter records have now become uncommon.



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

Another tale of decline

Like most other migratory shorebirds, the Whimbrel population in the Hunter Region is in serious decline. Because they prefer to roost in mangroves, they tend to be undercounted in routine surveys of high tide roost sites, which probably confuses the picture somewhat. For a long time the summer estimated counts in the Hunter Estuary were of around 200 birds – perhaps a conservative estimate. Stuart and Lindsey (in *Stilt* 2021) reported a maximum count of 185 birds from HBOC's surveys over 1999-2021. However, the summer average count for 2017-2021 was just 35 birds, and the average for 2021-2025 was 20 birds. The summer Port Stephens surveys are done by boat and thus all of the major areas of mangroves are surveyed. Most counts until around 2015 were of 200-250 birds. Since 2017 all of the counts have

been of less than 160 birds, and below 100 birds after 2021. Only 23 birds were recorded in the February 2025 survey.



Two Whimbrels in flight at Port Stephens – showing their white rumps (photo: Alan Stuart).

Sub-species

There are perhaps six subspecies (and definitely there at least four) although in some taxonomies the Alaskan Whimbrel subspecies *hudsonicus* is treated as a full species (which sometimes is named as the Hudsonian Whimbrel). Subspecies *hudsonicus* has a dark rump and is a rare visitor to Australia. The five other subspecies all breed in Eurasia. Four of them, *phaeopus*, *islandicus*, *rogachevae* and *alboaxillaris*, have not been recorded in Australia. Our bird is subspecies *variegatus*, the Eastern Siberian Whimbrel. The main differences amongst the subspecies (apart from their migration patterns) are in the colours of the rump, back and underwing (all of which can be either white or dark brown).

About the name

Whimbrel

It has been suggested that the name Whimbrel alludes to the bird's call, plus the French suffix “erel” meaning diminutive. Given that the bird's main call is a two-note whistle, the explanation seems somewhat lacking.

Numenius phaeopus

Numenius (new-moon birds) is from the Greek word *noumēnios* – a new or crescent moon – and refers to the deeply curved bill of birds of this genus. The species name *phaeopus* is from the Greek words *phaios* dusky and *pous* foot – the birds feet are dull grey (but so too for the Far Eastern Curlew).



Comparing a Whimbrel and a Far Eastern Curlew (photo: Steve Merrett)

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) • Menkhurst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

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