

Pumicestone Passage Shorebird Challenge & Identification Guide



Image: P Wallbridge



Image: R. Rowland

1. Identify our shorebirds
2. Discover where they live
3. Understand their needs
4. Help them to survive

Pumicestone Passage

Pumicestone Passage is a beautiful stretch of water, known nationally and internationally for its environmental significance. This narrow, shallow estuary, with its meandering system of mangrove-fringed channels, sandbanks and islands, separates Bribie Island from the adjacent mainland and is open to the sea at both northern and southern ends. It commences approximately 50 km north of Brisbane, Queensland, and extends more than 30 km, from the south-western tip of Bribie Island to Caloundra in the north.



Pumicestone Passage

Image: T Ford

The passage is recognised as one of the most important bird and marine habitats on the east coast of Australia and is part of the Moreton Bay Marine Park. There are many different habitat types within and adjoining the passage, including sandbanks, mudflats, mangroves, saltmarshes and seagrass beds.

Shorebirds

Shorebirds describes a varied group of wading birds distributed virtually worldwide. There are 55 species that occur regularly in Australia, many of them long-distance migrants, and they range in size from the tiny Red-necked Stint to the very large Eastern Curlew. They generally live in inter-tidal areas or freshwater wetlands, spending most of their time close to water, although some species, such as Masked Lapwings, prefer fields and grasslands.

Approximately one million shorebirds are resident in Australia, with about another two million migrating each year between Australia and their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. This is an impressive 20,000-25,000 km round trip and it has recently been discovered that some birds fly for several days without stopping, covering up to 11,000 km. The sight of shorebirds migrating in their characteristic 'V' flight formation is a magnificent spectacle.

Pumicestone Passage is home to about 1,500 resident shorebirds of 11 species, and nearly 20,000 migratory shorebirds of 24 species. About 15% of our migratory shorebirds stay for the whole year, being youngsters too young to breed or adults too old to breed or not strong enough to make the journey. Most migratory shorebirds that choose Pumicestone Passage as their non-breeding grounds are summer visitors and come from breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. The exception is the Double-banded Plover, a winter visitor from New Zealand.



Shorebirds in flight

Image: T Collins

Many shorebirds develop spectacular and colourful plumages prior to breeding. Although in non-breeding plumage for most of their stay in Pumicestone Passage, some migrants may still show evidence of breeding plumage on their spring arrival and some may develop full breeding plumage before their autumn departure. Brightly coloured underparts feature in courtship while mottled upperparts provide camouflage during nesting. In species where females perform most of the parental duties, they are often duller than the males, but males can be duller in species where this role is reversed.

Resident shorebirds breed locally, nesting in wetlands, grasslands and along coastal shorelines, or move inland to take advantage of the ephemeral wetlands of the interior.

Many shorebirds have wonderful and evocative calls. Those of an Eastern Curlew during the day or a Bush Stone-curlew at dusk are well-known, as is the sound of an Australian Pied Oystercatcher as it flies overhead at night. Another familiar sound is the alarm call of the Masked Lapwing.

Shorebirds that migrate to the Arctic to breed, nest in a wide range of habitats. Breeding takes place when the snows melt and insect life becomes abundant, providing a food source for self-feeding chicks. When the breeding cycle is complete, the adults and young will begin their long journey south. Young birds normally remain longer on the breeding grounds, increasing their body fat then leaving before the onset of the Arctic winter, arriving in Australia a month or two after the adults. Some will remain here for the next two to four years before joining adults on the return journey north.

It is still unclear exactly how shorebirds find their way, but it is thought to be a combination of recognition of stars and land features, guidance by the moon and sun, the earth's magnetic field and perhaps genetic factors.

Challenge 1 - Identify our shorebirds

There are five main points to consider when identifying shorebirds:

- **Size and shape** – check the overall size and shape, and compare with any birds nearby.
- **Colour** – check the overall colour, upperparts and underparts, plus any noticeable features.
- **Bill** – check the length, shape and colour, and if it is two-toned.
- **Legs** – check the length and colour. Beware of partly concealed or muddy legs.
- **Behaviour** – note what the bird is doing, how it is feeding, and the habitat it is in.

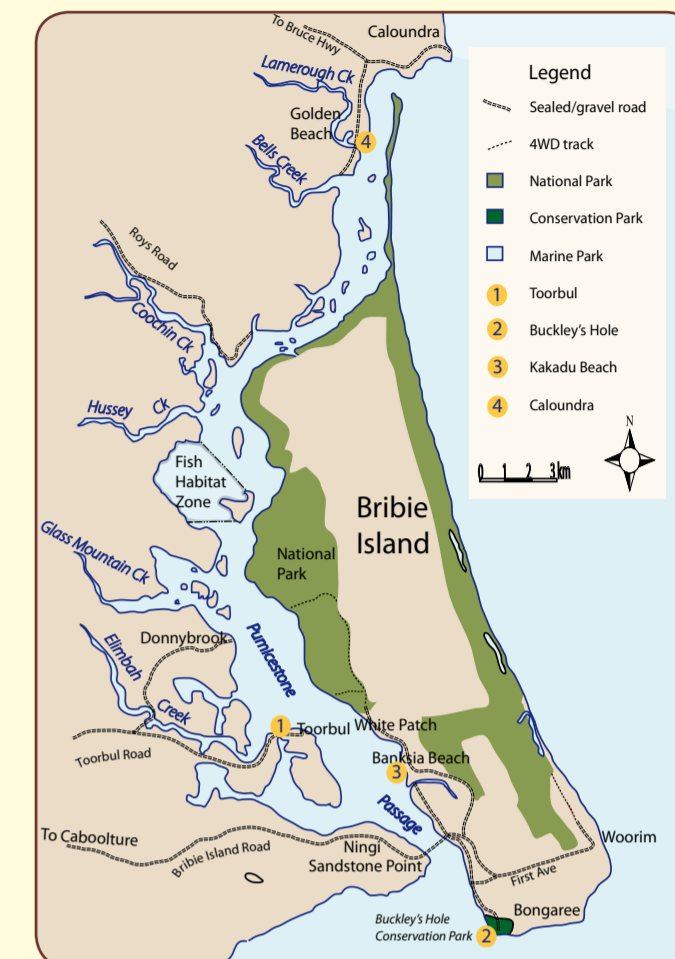


Bar-tailed Godwits

Image: R Inglis

Challenge 2 - Discover where they live

Shorebirds may be seen almost anywhere in Pumicestone Passage, especially where there is exposed sand or mud. There are some sites with easy access that often have an excellent selection of birds to be seen, and these are described in detail on the next page. Note that visiting other sites may be difficult, if not impossible, and some may only be accessible by boat. Tourist cruises can also provide opportunities to view shorebirds in Pumicestone Passage.



Legend

- Sealed/gravel road
- 4WD track
- National Park
- Conservation Park
- Marine Park

- 1 Toorbul
- 2 Buckley's Hole
- 3 Kakadu Beach
- 4 Caloundra

Scale 1 2 3 km

North

Large and colourful shorebirds, such as stilts and oystercatchers, are easy to identify, especially if you visit those sites marked on the map where you can get really close to them. But to identify smaller or less colourful species, and to enjoy them fully, binoculars are invaluable. A telescope is extremely useful for identifying shorebirds feeding or roosting on distant mudflats or sandbanks.

Keep your distance, especially if viewing from an exposed vantage point. Most shorebirds are easily disturbed and if you get too close you can easily flush them. If there is a hide to view from, such as at Kakadu Beach (see map), this will allow you to approach shorebirds closely, as well as providing you with some protection from the elements. Adapt your behaviour suitably when watching shorebirds, otherwise they may not stay long enough for you to identify them. Keep as quiet and as still as possible, and be careful to avoid any sudden movements. Wearing dull clothing is always advantageous.

Purchase a field guide. There are several excellent field guides to Australian birds, available at most bookshops, that describe all shorebirds likely to be seen and there are also specialist books dealing exclusively with shorebirds. Remember that at first you will not identify every shorebird you see, and that puzzling little fellow is much more likely to be a common species than a major rarity.

Site 1 – Toorbul.

The Toorbul shorebird roost comprises several separate roosts, all visible from the Esplanade, that regularly attract as large a selection of species as anywhere in the passage. The roost at the extreme southern end, which has recently been enhanced, has an information board nearby. Adjacent mudflats also provide a good selection of shorebirds, especially on a rising tide as they move closer.

Site 2 – Buckley's Hole Conservation Park.

The sandbanks of Buckley's Hole Conservation Park attract many shorebirds, especially the sandbank adjacent to the lagoon. As the tide rises, shorebirds gather, moving to the southern end as the sandbank becomes inundated. Unfortunately, this site is particularly prone to disturbance from dogs, vehicles, boats, jet skis and people walking or fishing. The lagoon itself holds roosting shorebirds when the water level is low, and is accessible from the Boulevard, Bongaree. There is a hide overlooking the lagoon.



Shorebirds roosting

Image: J Denning

Site 3 – Kakadu Beach.

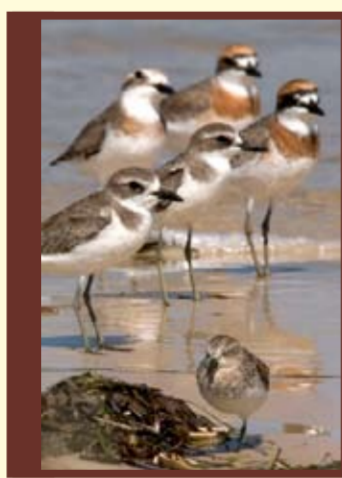
Kakadu Beach, an artificial roost at the southern end of Solander Esplanade, Banksia Beach, is the result of an award-winning partnership between the Queensland Wader Study Group, and developers of the Pacific Harbour Residential Estate. There are two hides, one at each end of the roost, and an information board at the northern end. At low tide, when few birds are present, shorebirds can sometimes be found feeding further north along the passage at Wright's Creek.

Site 4 – Caloundra.

Caloundra, at the northern end of Pumicestone Passage, attracts shorebirds that gather on the sandbanks on a rising tide. They are best viewed from the Esplanade at Golden Beach, and a telescope is essential to appreciate them fully. Shorebirds which prefer rocky shorelines, rather than mudflats and sandy beaches, may be found along the headland of Caloundra between Kings Beach and Shelley Beach.

Challenge 3 - Understand their needs

Shorebirds feed at low tide, regardless of whether it is day or night, exploring inter-tidal mudflats, beaches, rocky shorelines and along margins of freshwater wetlands for insects, worms and small crustaceans. Bill shape, size and length are highly variable and determine their diet. Surface feeders typically have large eyes, short bills and feed by running and pecking, whereas probing feeders have smaller eyes, longer bills with sensitive tips and feed by probing deep into sand, mud or water. It is therefore crucial to maintain healthy populations of their prey species at all substrate levels.



Greater Sand Plovers

Image: R Inglis

As the incoming tide covers these feeding areas, shorebirds congregate at roost sites, typically open areas such as beaches and claypans, often in large numbers. These sites provide areas where they can rest, preen and digest their food while waiting for the ebbing tide to expose their feeding areas once more. Undisturbed roost sites near to feeding grounds are essential, and these must be sufficiently exposed to enable birds to be forewarned of any imminent danger from predators or people. Disturbance can be particularly harmful during the highest tides, when shorebirds are forced to roost at the few sites that have not been inundated.

Prior to northern migration, shorebirds must feed vigorously and increase their body weight by about 70%, accumulating fat under the skin and increasing the size of their muscles. This additional weight is essential for them to gain sufficient energy and strength for the long journey ahead.

Challenge 4 - Help them to survive

There are many problems facing shorebirds in Pumicestone Passage, the most significant being habitat destruction, pollution and disturbance. It is crucial for their long-term survival that we make every effort to find solutions.

Wetlands are disappearing rapidly, both in Australia and worldwide, many being developed for farming, housing and other coastal projects. Excellent areas for shorebirds are often considered worthless and, as we place ever-increasing demands on land, valuable roost sites are being lost forever. However, it is not too late to preserve existing sites and to develop the potential of others.

Discarded pollutants, such as chemicals and household rubbish, end up in the passage through stormwater outlets. The clear message is that we should act responsibly when disposing of waste products, minimising any adverse effects.

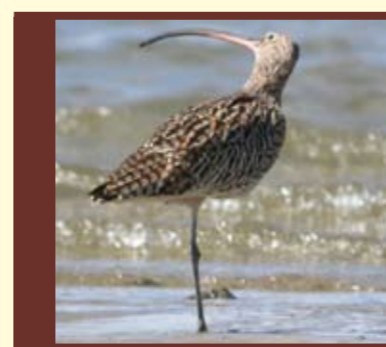


Agitated Red-capped Plover

Image: J Denning

Feral animals, such as foxes, dogs and cats, regularly kill shorebirds. Please report any sightings of feral animals to Queensland Parks and Wildlife.

Most disturbance is caused by human activity, and every time shorebirds are forced to take flight they waste vital energy. The energy used by every alarm flight is four times that used in steady flight and over twenty times that used when foraging for food. Wasting energy reserves may delay their migration, or even prevent them from completing the journey, severely impacting their breeding



Wary Eastern Curlew

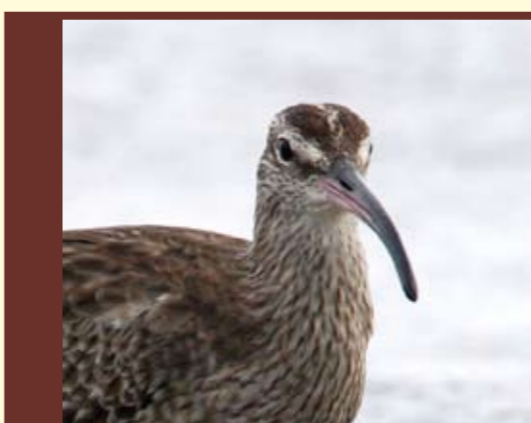
Image: L Cross

What can we all do to prevent disturbance to our shorebirds?

- Do not disturb shorebirds when they are resting, feeding or breeding, such as by walking through a roost site at high tide or choosing an inappropriate campsite.
- Keep domestic animals, dogs especially, under control and well away from shorebirds.
- If fishing from a sandbank, choose the opposite end to where birds are gathered. Move away if you are in an area that shorebirds need to occupy as the tide rises.
- Avoid driving along the beach at high tide, or above the high-tide mark, as this is where resident shorebirds build their nests, often in the sand.
- Avoid driving or operating any form of vehicle, boat or motorised watercraft, particularly jet skis, near shorebirds. Always drive away from, or around, a feeding or roosting flock.

As shorebirds are protected by law, these guidelines should be strictly observed. Pumicestone Passage is designated as a Conservation Zone within Moreton Bay Marine Park and significant fines apply for the disturbance of shorebirds.

Destruction of wetlands is reducing shorebird numbers globally, not just at their breeding and non-breeding grounds but in areas where they pause during their migration. These areas, called staging grounds, are crucial as it is here that shorebirds can refuel, rest and regain strength. Of particular concern is the destruction of such areas in Asia.



Whimbrel

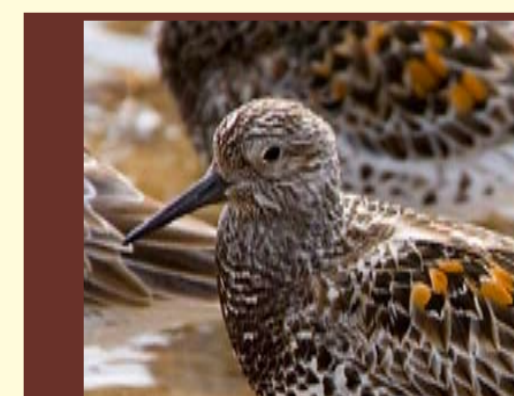
Image: N Bowman

The East Asian-Australasian Flyway is the broad corridor between the Arctic Circle and Australasia, covering shorebirds' breeding and non-breeding grounds and the chain of staging grounds. Australia is a signatory to three bilateral agreements for migratory bird conservation in this flyway, JAMBA (with Japan) and CAMBA (with China) and ROKAMBA (with the Republic of Korea). Two important multilateral agreements, the Ramsar Convention and the Bonn Convention, promote the conservation of wetlands and migratory species, so it would seem that governments are beginning to address the problems. But direct action must be taken soon. This chain of staging grounds is interconnected and if we continue removing the links at the current rate, many shorebird species face extinction.

Pumicestone Passage Shorebird Challenge

What can you do next to take on this challenge?

- Visit some of the Pumicestone Passage shorebird sites and start enjoying shorebirds.
- See how many species you can identify, recording the species on the enclosed form, and answer the quiz questions. The information you provide helps us to monitor community awareness and shorebird numbers.
- Post the completed form to Moreton Bay Regional Council at the address provided or log on to Council's web site, www.moretonbay.qld.gov.au, and follow the links to tell us what you have discovered.
- Contact an environmental group to find out how you can discover more about shorebirds and what you can do to assist with conservation efforts. See back page for more details.



Great Knot in breeding plumage

Image: P Wallbridge

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Ferryman Cruises: Funding

Moreton Bay Regional Council: Project concept, coordination and funding. PO Box 5070, Strathpine, QLD 4500. Visit www.moretonbay.qld.gov.au.

The following environmental groups are involved with shorebirds and conservation:

BIEPA: Bribie Island Environmental Protection Association. Telephone the Secretary on (07) 3408 3082 (email: nbclarke@mail.cth.com.au) or write to BIEPA, PO Box 350, Bribie Island, QLD 4507. Visit the BIEPA web site at www.biepa.org.

QWSG: Queensland Wader Study Group. Contact the Treasurer at PO Box 958, Nightcliff, NT 0814. Visit the Birds Queensland web site at <http://birdsqueensland.org.au> and follow the link to QWSG.

Reference Work: Geering, A., Agnew, L., Harding, S., (2007), Shorebirds of Australia, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood VIC.

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Identification Guide

This guide describes the 35 shorebird species that occur regularly in the vicinity of Pumicestone Passage. The majority of these species are shown in non-breeding plumage, as this is how they are most often encountered, but some exhibit evidence of juvenile or breeding plumage. Sizes given are approximate and the descriptions are, of necessity, brief. Note that images are not to the same scale.

Shorebirds can present an identification challenge, even to the most experienced observer, and the following species pairs need particular care.



Greater (left) and Lesser (right) Sand Plovers

Note bill shape and size, general colour and overall head and body shape and size.

Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits

Note black and white in wings and tail of Black-tailed compared to more uniform Bar-tailed.



Image: C. Barnes

Grey-tailed and Wandering Tattlers

Grey-tailed are slightly smaller and slightly paler than Wandering. Some differences are described below but others are beyond the scope of this guide.

In Pumicestone Passage, Grey-tailed generally prefer mudflats and sandy beaches, whereas Wandering are found almost exclusively along the rocky headland of Caloundra.



Image: W. Jolly

Bush Stone-curlew

Uncommon resident. Very large (55-58 cm), grey-brown above and whitish with dark streaks below. Large yellow eyes. Short black bill and long pale legs. Far-carrying wailing call often given at night.

Parks and grasslands.



Image: C. Barnes

Beach Stone-curlew

Rare resident. Very large (54-56 cm), grey-brown above and greyish below. Large yellow eyes. Very large black bill, yellow at base, and thick yellow-green legs. Distinctive face pattern.

Sandy beaches with mangroves.



Image: R. Inglis

Masked Lapwing

Very common resident. Large (35-37 cm), brown above and white below, with black crown and sides of breast, yellow facial wattles and wing spurs. Yellow bill and eye and pinkish legs. Aggressive and noisy when breeding.

Parks, grasslands, wetlands and coastal areas.



Image: T. Siggs

Sooty Oystercatcher

Uncommon resident. Large (46-49 cm), black with conspicuous red eyes. Bright orange-red bill and dull-pink legs. Clear sharp piping call. Rocky shorelines.



Image: R. Inglis

Australian Pied Oystercatcher

Very common resident. Large (48-50 cm), black and white with conspicuous red eyes. Bright orange-red bill and reddish-pink legs. Clear mellow piping call. All coastal areas.



Image: R. Inglis

Black-winged Stilt

Very common resident. Large (33-37 cm), elegant, black and white, unmistakable. Long needle-like black bill and very long pink legs. Lagoons, mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: N. Bowman

Red-necked Avocet

Uncommon nomadic visitor. Large (43-46 cm), elegant, black and white, with chestnut head. Long slender upturned black bill and long legs. Lagoons, mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Pacific Golden Plover

Common summer visitor. Medium (23-26 cm), golden-brown above and creamy-buff below. Large dark eyes. Short black bill and relatively long black legs. In breeding plumage has black face, throat and underparts. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Grey Plover

Uncommon summer visitor. Medium (28-30 cm), mottled grey above and pale grey below. Larger than Pacific Golden Plover, with heavy black bill and relatively long black legs. In flight shows black armpits and white rump. In breeding plumage has black face, throat and underparts (photograph shows remnants). Mudflats and sandy beaches.

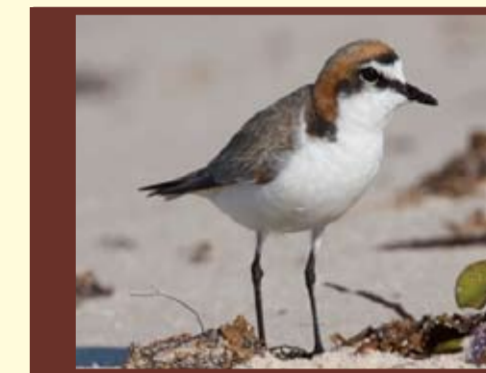


Image: R. Inglis

Red-capped Plover

Very common resident. Very small (14-16 cm), grey-brown above and white below, with chestnut cap and nape. Black bill and legs. Male more colourful than female. Sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Double-banded Plover

Uncommon winter visitor from New Zealand. Very small (18-19 cm), grey-brown above and white below, often with two partial brownish breastbands. Slender black bill and greyish legs. In breeding plumage has black (upper) and chestnut (lower) breastbands (photograph shows remnants). Sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Greater Sand Plover

Common summer visitor. Medium (22-25 cm), grey-brown above and white below. Large eyes. Very similar to Lesser Sand Plover but larger and paler, with larger head, longer and thicker bill and longer legs (often paler). In breeding plumage has black and chestnut markings on head and breast. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: C. Barnes

Lesser Sand Plover

Common summer visitor. Small (19-21 cm), grey-brown above and white below. Large eyes. Short black bill and dark grey legs, sometimes tinged greenish. In breeding plumage has black and chestnut markings on head and breast. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Red-kneed Dotterel

Uncommon resident. Very small (17-19 cm), brownish above and white below, with black cap and broad black breastband. Dull red bill with black tip. Grey legs below 'knee' and reddish-pink above. Wetlands.



Image: R. Inglis

Black-fronted Dotterel

Common resident. Very small (16-18 cm), brownish above and white below, with bold black V-shaped breastband and conspicuous red eye-rings. Red bill with black tip and pinkish legs. Wetlands and mudflats.

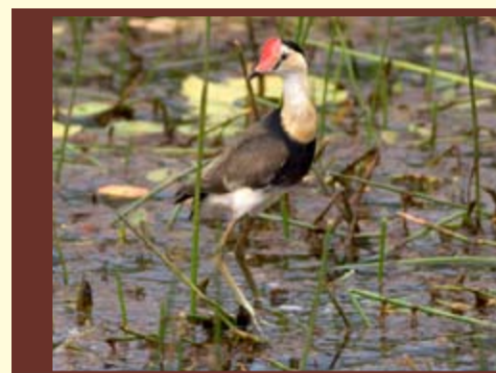


Image: R. Inglis

Comb-crested Jacana

Common resident in suitable habitat. Medium (21-24 cm), brown above and white below, with broad black breastband and red comb on forehead. Female larger. Reddish bill with black tip and long grey-green legs. Enormous toes. Wetlands.



Image: R. Inglis

Latham's Snipe

Common summer visitor in suitable habitat. Medium (29-31 cm), brown with pale stripes above and whitish below. Large eyes. Long straight greyish-brown bill, darker near tip, and olive legs. Zigzags in flight when flushed. Wetlands.



Image: C. Barnes

Black-tailed Godwit

Uncommon summer visitor. Large (36-43 cm), uniform grey-brown, paler below, with long straight pink and black bill and long legs. In flight shows white underwing, wingbars and rump and black tail. In breeding plumage has rusty face, neck and breast. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Bar-tailed Godwit

Very common summer visitor. Large (38-45 cm), brown-streaked above giving mottled appearance, paler below, with long, slightly upturned pink and black bill and long legs. Female bill longer. In flight shows white rump and lower back and barred tail. In breeding, plumage has brick-red face, neck and underparts. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Hoff

Whimbrel

Very common summer visitor. Large (40-43 cm), uniformly brownish-streaked, paler below, with long down-curved dark bill, pinkish at base, and long legs. Whitish eyebrows and central crown-stripe. In flight shows white lower back. Smaller than Eastern Curlew, with shorter bill and legs. Loud rapid tittering call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Eastern Curlew

Very common summer visitor. Very large (60-65 cm), uniformly brownish-streaked, paler below. Largest shorebird, with extremely long downcurved dark bill, pinkish at base, and long legs. Female bill longer. Does not show white lower back in flight. Wary and easily disturbed. Loud mournful 'curlee' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: A. Carlson

Terek Sandpiper

Common summer visitor. Medium (22-24 cm), grey above and white below, with fairly long upturned black bill, orange at base, and short orange legs. Horizontal feeding posture with forward-tripping gait. Only smallish shorebird with upturned bill. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: N. Bowman

Common Sandpiper

Uncommon summer visitor. Small (19-21 cm), olive-brown above and white below, with straight dark bill, greenish-brown at base, and olive-yellow legs. In flight shows white wingbars, often gliding on downcurved wings. Frequently bobs head and rear end of body. Wetlands and muddy margins.



Image: N. Bowman

Grey-tailed Tattler

Common summer visitor. Medium (24-27 cm), grey above and white below, with straight dark bill and yellow legs. White eyebrows meet above bill and extend behind eye. Grey flanks often concealed. In breeding plumage fine grey bars cover the breast and flanks. Flight call a rising disyllabic whistle. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Wandering Tattler

Uncommon summer visitor. Medium (26-29 cm), grey above and white below, with straight dark bill and yellow legs. Very similar to Grey-tailed Tattler. White eyebrows do not meet above bill and are indistinct behind eye. Grey flanks often visible. In breeding plumage broad grey bars cover almost the entire underparts. Flight call a rippling trill. Rocky shorelines.



Image: R. Inglis

Common Greenshank

Common summer visitor. Large (30-34 cm), grey above and white below, with long slightly upturned dark bill, greenish-grey at base, and long greenish legs. In flight shows white back and rump. In breeding plumage has dark streaking on head and breast. Loud ringing 'tew-tew-tew' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Marsh Sandpiper

Uncommon summer visitor. Medium (22-25 cm), grey above and white below, with long straight needle-like black bill and long olive-green legs. In flight shows white back and rump. Like a miniature Common Greenshank. In breeding plumage has dark streaking on head and breast. Wetlands.



Image: R. Inglis

Ruddy Turnstone

Common summer visitor. Medium (22-24 cm), stocky, mottled brown and white, with short pointed black bill and short orange legs. In breeding plumage is chestnut, black and white. Habitually turns stones and shells over when searching for food. Mudflats, sandy beaches and rocky shorelines.



Image: R. Inglis

Great Knot

Very common summer visitor. Medium (26-28 cm), dumpy, grey-brown above and white below with dark heart-shaped spots on breast and flanks. Straight tapering black bill. In breeding plumage develops black and chestnut on wings, and spots on underparts become black and more extensive. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Red Knot

Uncommon summer visitor. Medium (23-25 cm), dumpy, pale uniform grey-brown above and white below with greyish chevron-shaped streaking on breast and flanks. Smaller than similar Great Knot, with shortish black bill. In breeding plumage has rusty underparts. Higher numbers recorded during spring migration. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Sanderling

Uncommon summer visitor. Small (20-21 cm), grey above and white below, with short black bill and legs. Prominent black patch on shoulder. In breeding plumage has chestnut on upperparts, face, neck and breast. Often follows retreating waves. Sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Red-necked Stint

Very common summer visitor. Very small (13-16 cm), grey-brown above and whitish below, with short straight black bill and black legs. In breeding plumage has rufous face, throat and breast. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

Very common summer visitor. Small (17-21 cm), brown above and whitish below, with streaked brown breast and rufous crown. Short slightly downcurved black bill, paler at base, and olive-grey to olive-yellow legs. Wetlands, mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: R. Inglis

Curlew Sandpiper

Very common summer visitor. Small (20-22 cm), grey-brown above and white below, with evenly downcurved black bill and longish black legs. In flight shows white rump. In breeding plumage has rich chestnut underparts. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



Image: S. Blanchflower

Broad-billed Sandpiper

Rare summer visitor. Very small (16-18 cm), grey above and white below, often showing a split white eyebrow. Fairly long broad black bill with distinctive downward kink at tip and shortish olive-grey legs. Often associates with stints and sand plovers. Mudflats and sandy beaches.