



HOW TO BE SURE ABOUT SHOREBIRDS

Many birdwatchers can feel intimidated by the challenges of shorebird identification.

Golo Maurer, BirdLife Australia's Shorebirds 2020 Project Manager, sets out to explain that there is really nothing to fear...

The charges brought against shorebirds by the wider birding community are clear: 36 counts of excessive grey-brownness; gross negligence with regard to distinctive features; and a refusal to cooperate with the investigation by being 'all the way out there on the mud'. The sentence that is then applied is most draconian—life in the too-hard basket.

While the shorebirds themselves probably don't mind being regarded as such a basket case, I feel, as the Shorebirds 2020 Project Manager, that it is my duty to try and give them a fair go.

Why bother with shorebirds?

Some birders simply don't bother with this amazing group of birds because they are deemed too difficult to identify. With a total of 78 species recorded in Australia (18 breeding species, 36 annual migrants and 24 vagrants), that is almost ten per cent of the field guide that such people are missing out on.

Aside from the satisfaction that comes from mastering the challenge of identifying shorebirds, there is another great reason to decipher their mysteries—your ID skills

and counts can make a real difference for shorebird conservation.

Regular readers of *Australian Birdlife* will know of the dire situation faced by Australian shorebirds whose habitats are under massive pressure. Migratory shorebirds are daily losing more of their crucial rest-stops en route to Siberia due to rapid reclamation of mudflats in the Yellow Sea. In Australia, migratory and resident species are affected by the recreational pressures on our coastal fringe, which leaves an ever-diminishing number of safe areas for shorebirds to feed, roost and breed. Shorebird conservation in Australia and abroad relies on count data collected by volunteers in our Shorebirds 2020 and Beach-nesting Birds programs. It is directly from such data that we have been able to irrefutably document the decline in shorebird numbers over the last 30 years.

There are, of course, considerable (and tax free) fringe benefits to shore-birding including: increased vitamin D levels due to many beautiful hours spent on the beach in shorts and T-shirt; knowledge of a great transferable skill (many of our migratory species occur almost everywhere else on the



Left: A mixed flock of small shorebirds. Photo by Glenn Ehmke

Above: A shorebird training workshop at Melbourne's Cheetham Wetlands. Photo by Dean Ingwersen

planet); and the kudos earned from other birders by being able to successfully crack those avian nuts sitting out on the mudflats.

Why is shorebird ID not that hard? Even non-birders have the skills needed

The number one complaint I get about shorebirds is that they are small, grey and all look very similar. The irony is that we all are pretty good at identifying things that are small and grey and look very similar. In fact, I bet you can do it with your eyes closed. Just put your hand in your wallet or purse. If you are luckier than me you might even find a gold-coin vagrant in there or one of the colourful 'big bills' which are the easiest to ID, be it in your wallet or on the mud!

You can listen to music while you watch

Unlike most of the little bushbirds, shorebirds can be identified without reference to enigmatic calls and their often bizarre phonetic descriptions in field guides. The one exception in Australia is tattlers; the 'ti-ti-ti' of the Wandering Tattler is unambiguously different from the Grey-tailed's 'pyuee pyuee' in just about any language.

Clear views

While BirdLife Australia's shorebirds program is called Shorebirds 2020, perfect vision is not required, as shorebirds usually present in clear view on their roosts, sometimes sitting still for hours. Plenty of time to get the scope out and count every feather if you like.

You can gang-up

Finally—and this is what makes shorebirds great for budding bird-watchers—you can gang-up on them. While they patiently sit at their roosts they do not mind being watched by one or many, as long as no one unleashes their dog or monster-truck on them. So there is always plenty of time to compare notes with your fellow shorebird watchers.

How to be sure about shorebirds then?

Here are a few things I have found useful during my shorebird exploits. They may not work for everyone but are certainly worth considering.

Pick a few core species you can rely on.

Just as with coins, it is colour, shape, size, and for the difficult ones, pattern, that helps us

identify shorebirds. The trick for me is to assess these attributes relative to a few core species. I have got an eye for Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Red-capped Plovers and Bar-tailed Godwits because they are distinctive and widespread and regularly encountered, but of course the comparison principle applies to any species that you are most familiar with.

'Sharpies' are usually the brownest of the sandpipers, so they are easy to spot. They are also of medium size, bigger than Red-necked Stints but smaller than knots, which really helps with size comparisons between the smaller species out on the mudflat.

With Red-capped Plovers, the bright cap (when present) makes them relatively easy to identify and gives you a good benchmark for comparing with other plovers in general. They are also the smallest of the lot, with the finest bill and a rusty hue on their grey-brown backs—a handy contrast to the greyer backs of Double-banded Plovers and the sand-plovers.

Bar-tailed Godwits can be a useful species to know well both at close range and at a long distance. They are much browner than

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Clockwise, from left to right:

Bar-tailed Godwit in flight.
Photo by Dean Ingwersen

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is a regularly encountered shorebird.
Photo by Dean Ingwersen

Bar-tailed Godwit is a good species to compare with larger shorebirds.
Photo by Chris Tzaros

Red-capped Plover male.
Photo by Dean Ingwersen

Red-capped Plover female.
Photo by Dean Ingwersen

Greenshanks and have a coarser back than the more uniform Black-tailed Godwits. At long range they can provide a good size comparison to Whimbrels and Eastern Curlews.

By comparing birds to each other you are also taking into account the effects of different lighting conditions. For example, at sunset every grey bird might look a little more brown but comparatively the browner birds will still look browner.

It's all in the air

A lot of birders make the mistake of taking their binos off the birds when they take flight. In fact, in those few seconds you can get a good look at a bird and confirm hours of painful guesswork. For instance, take a couple of sandpipers a fair way off in bad light. If you try to pick them apart at such a distance you will may be torn between Curlew Sandpiper and Sharpie. An obliging Swamp Harrier flies past and the sandpiper reveals its pure white upper-tail coverts—Curlew Sandpiper! Case closed.

Shorebirds walk the walk

Maybe more than for any other group of birds, knowing shorebirds' behaviour is an important part of getting the ID right. The oil-pump movement of Curlew Sandpipers is a very different feeding behaviour to the 'surfing' of Sanderlings as they run up and down the beach following the waves' path. The pick-and-run feeding style of plovers will set them apart from other shorebirds even over great distance. While they will

occasionally turn up as loners, many species such as Red-necked Stint or Red Knot prefer the company of others of their kind. A Common Sandpiper, however, prefers to seek out the solitude of its own patch of shoreline. Knowing this means that you can almost automatically rule out this species when you encounter a heaving thousand-bird flock feeding on a mudflat.

Vagrants—managing expectations

The shorebird section of the average Australian bird guide looks quite intimidating, with at least 24 vagrant species cluttering up the pages. In my opinion, it is important to get a firm grip on these species... and then rip out these pages from your book! They are distracting ballast, but boy it keeps you scanning those shorebird flocks with excitement!

Of course, excising all the vagrants from your field guide is an extreme example of managing expectations. Habitat and geographic location, however, can also help with the identification of the more common shorebirds. A stint feeding in a big flock out in the open on the mud is rarely going to have 'long toes', but it definitely pays to have a second look at a bird hiding in vegetation in a freshwater swamp, as this is just the location and behaviour typical of Long-toed Stint. Similarly, a lapwing in South West WA is almost certainly a Banded Lapwing, since Masked Lapwings seem to have forgotten to colonise this part of Australia.



The truth

For the real wisdom on shorebirds, however, I have to quote one of our most experienced volunteer counters, “There is no substitute for time in the field.” Even the most accomplished shorebird observers were once unable to tell their snipe from their godwits. Persistence does pay off and the more you experience these fascinating birds, the more you will learn. It may be hard initially, but the good thing is that watching your shorebird skills grow while looking at a Curlew Sandpiper blushing into its breeding plumage, as it feverishly works away at the mud, is the kind of hardship that I am sure we all wouldn’t mind bearing.

The Plug

Now that you are probably champing at the bit to get out there and give shorebirds another chance, we at Shorebirds 2020 thought we better try to make it a little easier for you. Our website www.birdlife.org.au/projects/shorebirds-2020 is full of tools to help you with your shorebird ID skills. You can download a shorebird ID app for iPhone or android, play a shorebird ID or counting game or order a poster or booklet from shorebirds@birdlife.org.au. Most importantly, you can find out about the shorebird count areas closest to you and the counts and counters you can join in the annual Shorebirds 2020 surveys.

