

Shorebirds, Gulls & Terns of Coastal SEQ



An Identification Guide

Trevor Ford

Map of Coastal SEQ



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R Inglis

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This booklet, which has evolved from the brochure “Pumicestone Passage Shorebird Challenge & Identification Guide”, may not be produced or transmitted in whole or part, in any form, without prior permission from the author.

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The Coastal SEQ map, inside front cover, identifies the four funding councils.

The flight identification guide, inside back cover, was devised by Trevor Ford.

The East Asian-Australasian Flyway map below was designed by Sarah Mitchell.



Migration Routes of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway

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Introduction

This booklet provides an introduction to the shorebirds, gulls and terns of coastal South East Queensland (SEQ), outlining their diverse requirements and some of the problems they face for survival. There is also an overview of several of the most important and easily-accessible sites where these birds may be seen. The main section of the booklet is an identification guide that describes the shorebirds, gulls and terns that are most likely to be encountered in the region. Hopefully, by raising general awareness of these truly remarkable birds, problems confronting them in the future will be met with positive responses and decisive action.

Shorebirds

Shorebirds, or waders, range in size from the tiny Red-necked Stint to the extremely large Eastern Curlew, and over fifty species occur regularly in Australia. They generally live in inter-tidal areas or freshwater wetlands, spending most of their time close to water, although some species, such as Masked Lapwing, prefer fields and grasslands.

About one-third of all Australian shorebirds are year-round residents, whereas the other two-thirds are visitors. Most of these visitors are long-distance migrants from their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere, their return journey being an impressive 20,000-30,000 km (the East Asian-Australasian Flyway map on page two shows the general migration routes). Recent studies have revealed that some species can fly non-stop for several days, travelling over 11,000 km. While most of these migrant shorebirds are summer visitors from the north, Double-banded Plover is a winter visitor from New Zealand.

Although some migrant shorebirds show evidence of breeding plumage on their spring arrival and some develop full breeding plumage before their autumn departure, they are mostly in non-breeding plumage during their stay. When breeding, brightly coloured underparts feature in courtship and mottled upperparts provide camouflage during nesting.

Resident shorebirds breed locally, nesting in wetlands, grasslands and along coastal shorelines, or move inland to take advantage of ephemeral wetlands. Migrants that breed in the Arctic arrive there as the snow melts, the emergent insect life providing an abundant food source for self-feeding chicks. After breeding, adults depart, while young birds generally remain to increase their body fat. They leave before the onset of winter, arriving in Australia a month or so after the adults, and some will not return north for two years or more. It is not fully understood how shorebirds navigate but recognition of landscape, sun, moon and stars, the earth's magnetic field and perhaps genetic factors may all play a part.

Gulls

Gulls are robust and gregarious seabirds, commonly seen along the shoreline. They have taken advantage of human activities and are noisy and increasingly abundant scavengers. Three species of gull are year-round residents in Australia.

Terns

Terns are typically slender and graceful birds, with many having a strong association with the sea. Most species feed by hovering and then either plunge-diving or picking food items from the surface of the water. Twenty species of tern occur

regularly in Australia, although several of these occur only on offshore islands. Fourteen species are year-round residents, four species are summer visitors and two further species have both resident and migrant populations. Our summer visitors are long-distance migrants from Asia, some coming from as far away as Siberia.

Resident terns breed on undisturbed coastlines, offshore islands or islands of inland lakes. As with shorebirds, migrant terns may show evidence of breeding plumage on their arrival and may develop full breeding plumage before their departure, but they are mostly in non-breeding plumage during their stay. Variations in plumage may include the amount of black in the cap and the colour of the bill, although White-winged Black Terns have a spectacularly different breeding plumage.

Requirements

Shorebirds feed at low tide, day and night, exploring inter-tidal mudflats, beaches, rocky shorelines and freshwater wetlands for insects, worms and small crustaceans. Bill shape and size are highly variable and are influenced by 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 or mud. It is therefore essential to maintain healthy populations of their prey species at all substrate levels. As the incoming tide covers these feeding areas, shorebirds congregate at roost sites in large numbers. Roost sites are crucial areas where they can rest, preen and digest their food during the high tide, and must be as close to the feeding grounds as possible. Before migrating north, shorebirds must feed vigorously and increase their body weight by about 70%, accumulating fat

and increasing the size of their muscles, essential for gaining sufficient energy and strength for their long journey.

Gulls and terns are mainly diurnal, feeding during the day and resting at night. Ocean-going species may return from their fishing trips in need of rest, so undisturbed areas are required during all tides and at all times of day. For terns, estuaries and sandbanks are just as important as their offshore feeding grounds.

Survival

There are many problems threatening the survival of shorebirds and terns, including habitat destruction, pollution and disturbance. Gulls, however, have profited greatly from human activities.

The destruction of wetlands is reducing shorebird and tern numbers globally. As ever-increasing demands are placed on land, important sites are lost forever. Wetlands within migration routes are crucial for birds to refuel, rest and regain strength during their journey, and Australia is a signatory to several international agreements promoting the conservation of such wetlands. Human activity within estuaries negatively impacts shorebirds and terns, and the current practice of damming estuaries in Asia will have disastrous consequences.

Harmful waste products discarded through stormwater outlets pollute waterways. This has both immediate and long-term detrimental effects on all species that depend on the water quality.

Most disturbance is caused by human activity and every time birds are forced to take flight they waste vital energy. Energy used by each alarm flight is about four times that used in steady flight and over twenty times that used when foraging for food. Depleted energy reserves can impact their migration and lessen their chances of breeding. In order to reduce disturbance:

- Do not approach shorebirds or terns when they are nesting, feeding or resting.
- Keep domestic animals under control and well away from shorebirds and terns.
- Vacate areas long before high tide where shorebirds need to roost.
- Avoid driving along beaches above the high-tide mark as this is where shorebirds nest.
- Avoid driving or operating any form of vehicle, boat or watercraft near shorebirds or terns.

Birding locations

Sunshine Coast

The estuaries of the Sunshine Coast are significant areas for terns. Terns follow shoals of fish for considerable distances and they are likely to choose a resting place close to their most recent feeding area. The estuary at **Noosa** is smaller than the others, and is therefore better for observing at close range the many terns that congregate. A telescope is available for use at Noosa Woods. To see large numbers of terns in summer, it is best to visit shortly before sunset and stay until very last light, watching them fly into the estuary through the mouth of the river. This strategy also applies to the estuary at **Maroochydore**, which also holds good numbers of terns, but

they are perhaps less easy to view. **Caloundra** attracts many shorebirds, gulls and terns, which gather on the sandbanks on a rising tide. These are best viewed from Golden Beach and a telescope is useful for identifying distant birds. Shorebirds that prefer rocky shorelines may be found along the headland between Kings Beach and Shelly Beach.

Pumicestone Passage

Pumicestone Passage is a narrow, shallow estuary that separates Bribie Island from the adjacent mainland and is recognised as one of the most important bird and marine habitats on the east coast of Australia. Shorebirds, gulls and terns may be seen almost anywhere there is exposed sand or mud, but especially when they gather at roost sites. The **Toorbul** shorebird roost regularly attracts a wide variety of species, and there is an information board nearby. **Kakadu Beach**, an artificial roost at Banksia Beach, is the result of an award-winning partnership between the local community and the estate developers. There are two hides and an information board. **Buckley's Hole Conservation Park**, at the southern end of Bribie Island, attracts many shorebirds and terns. Birds gather on the sandbank adjacent to the lagoon on a rising tide, moving to the southern end as the sandbank becomes inundated. A hide overlooks the lagoon, which also attracts shorebirds and terns. Tourist cruises in the passage provide further opportunities to observe birds at close quarters.

Moreton Bay

The Moreton Bay coastline supports many shorebirds, gulls and terns, which are often seen feeding on the mudflats. There are several important roost sites, including the **Deception Bay Conservation Park**, a critical king tide roost that provides a sanctuary for shorebirds on extremely high tides. Closer to

Brisbane, on **Fisherman Islands**, the Port of Brisbane Visitor Centre (open weekdays) will provide a key that gives access to hides overlooking a nearby artificial roost. This roost may also be viewed from the car park adjacent to the roost. Other sites on Fisherman Islands are of restricted access, but a hide at nearby **Lytton** overlooks wetlands where shorebirds roost. The renowned shorebird roost at Manly boat harbour is now also of restricted access. **Moreton** and **North Stradbroke Islands** hold many shorebirds, gulls and terns but access to roost sites is difficult, often involving the use of both boat and 4WD vehicle.

Gold Coast

Small numbers of shorebirds and terns feed along the rivers and creeks of the Gold Coast, such as Coomera River, Coombabah Creek and Currumbin Creek, but most prefer the less-disturbed offshore islands. Large concentrations of shorebirds and terns roost on a small, vegetated island just to the south of **Wave Break Island** (in The Broadwater). **Horseshoe Bay** and **The Pin**, at the northern tip of South Stradbroke Island, hold a wide variety of shorebird and tern species. There is an information sign showing the walking tracks that visitors must use in order to avoid disturbing the breeding colony of Little Terns on the shingle beds and the roosting shorebirds in the bay. Further south, the small sandspit to the north of **Currigee Inlet** has a similar variety of birds but in smaller numbers. A wide variety of shorebirds and terns may also be observed at **Coombabah Lake**, especially at low tide. There is a hide on the southern shore of the lake and a telescope is useful for identifying distant birds.

Species identification

There are six main points to consider.

- **Size and shape:** Note overall size and shape, comparing with any familiar birds nearby.
- **Colour:** Note colour above and below and whether there is any obvious pattern.
- **Bill:** Note length, shape and colour of bill and whether it is two-toned.
- **Legs:** Note length and colour of legs and whether they are muddy or partially concealed.
- **Behaviour:** Note the bird's actions, such as whether it walks or runs, how it feeds and how it flies.
- **Habitat:** Note the bird's favoured habitat types.

Migrant shorebirds and terns in SEQ are mostly seen in non-breeding plumage and differences between species can be subtle. There may also be visible differences between the sexes. For instance, the female may be larger, may have a longer bill or may be duller. There is often variation between non-breeding and breeding plumage, and young birds may be different again.

Identification guide

The following pages contain detailed accounts of the thirty-five species of shorebird, one species of gull and six species of tern that are seen regularly in SEQ, together with brief outlines of a number of scarcer species. There are also reviews of the distinguishing features of several similar species. For migrant shorebirds and terns, this guide focuses on their non-breeding plumage.

Bush Stone-curlew

Burhinus grallarius

Uncommon resident

Very large (55-58 cm)



Streaky grey-brown above and whitish with dark streaks below. Large yellow eyes. Short black bill and long pale legs. Broad pale bars on wings. Mainly nocturnal. Far-carrying wailing call regularly heard at night. More often heard than seen. Parks and grasslands.



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Beach Stone-curlew

Esacus magnirostris

Rare resident

Very large (54-56 cm)



Plain grey-brown above and greyish below. Large yellow eyes. Massive black bill with yellow patch at base and thick yellow-green legs. Dark bars on wings, bordered with white, and distinctive face pattern. Weak repeated 'kweep' alarm call. Harsh wailing call given at night. Sandy beaches and mudflats with mangroves.



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Australian Pied Oystercatcher

Haematopus longirostris



Very common resident
Large (48-50 cm)

Black and white with conspicuous red eyes. Bright orange-red bill and reddish-pink legs. Legs can appear brighter in strong sunlight. Shows white wingbars and rump in flight. Stocky appearance. Clear mellow piping call. All coastal areas.



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Australian Pied Oystercatchers are often active at night, when their distinctive call may be heard.

Sooty Oystercatcher

Haematopus fuliginosus



Uncommon resident

Large (46-49 cm)

Black with conspicuous red eyes. Bright orange-red bill and dull-pink legs. Legs can appear brighter in strong sunlight. Uniform sooty-black plumage in flight. Stocky appearance. Clear sharp piping call. Rocky shorelines and islets.



T Siggs

Note that distant Australian Pied Oystercatchers, when viewed from behind, can often appear to be all-black.

Black-winged Stilt

Himantopus himantopus



Very common resident

Large (33-37 cm)

Elegant, black and white, unmistakable. Long needle-like black bill and extremely long pink legs. Feet and legs extend well beyond end of tail in flight. Noisy persistent 'kek-kek-kek' alarm call. Lagoons, mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Black-winged Stilts, although very common, are seasonally dispersive and may be absent from favoured areas at times.

Red-necked Avocet

Recurvirostra novaehollandiae



Uncommon nomadic visitor

Large (43-46 cm)

Elegant, black and white, with chestnut head and neck. Long slender upturned black bill and long greyish-blue legs. Feet and legs extend well beyond end of tail in flight. Sweeps bill from side to side when feeding. Generally silent apart from nasal repeated 'aik'. Mainly lagoons, also mudflats and wetlands.



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Red-necked Avocets often congregate in tightly-knit flocks when feeding and roosting.

Pacific Golden Plover

Pluvialis fulva

Common summer visitor
Medium-sized (23-26 cm)



Mottled gold and dark brown above and creamy-buff below. Large dark eyes. Short black bill and relatively long black legs. Shows narrow inconspicuous white wingbars in flight. In breeding plumage has black face, throat and underparts. Plaintive whistled 'tiu-wee' or 'ti-wee' calls, more urgent when alarmed. Mudflats and sandy beaches, often roosting in saltmarshes and grasslands.



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Pacific Golden Plover
approaching full
breeding plumage.

Grey Plover

Pluvialis squatarola



Uncommon summer visitor
Medium-sized (28-30 cm)

Mottled grey and white above and pale grey below. Similar to but larger than Pacific Golden Plover, with big head, large black bill and relatively long black legs. Shows white wingbars, white rump and distinctive black armpits in flight. In breeding plumage has black face, throat and underparts. Plaintive whistled 'tlee-oo-wee' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Grey Plover showing remnants of breeding plumage.

Red-capped Plover

Charadrius ruficapillus

Very common resident
Very small (14-16 cm)



Grey-brown above and white below, with small black bill and slender black legs. Male has bright chestnut cap, small black patches on sides of upper breast and black eye-stripes. Female has chestnut-brown cap, small grey-brown patches on sides of upper breast and brown eye-stripes. Calls include single notes, trills and buzzes. Sandy beaches and mudflats.



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J Denning

Red-capped Plover giving its distraction display. This may be seen if birds are disturbed when nesting.

Double-banded Plover

Charadrius bicinctus



Uncommon winter visitor from New Zealand
Very small (18-19 cm)

Grey-brown above and white below, often with two partial brownish breastbands. Short black bill and greyish legs. In breeding plumage has black (upper) and chestnut (lower) breastbands. Face often tinged with buff early in winter, becoming whiter later. Clear 'chip-chip-chip' call. Sandy beaches and mudflats.



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Double-banded Plover
in its attractive breeding
plumage.

Lesser Sand Plover

Charadrius mongolus



Common summer visitor

Small (19-21 cm)

Grey-brown above and white below, with grey-brown breast patches. Large eyes. Short stout black bill and dark grey legs, sometimes tinged greenish. Dark mask through eyes. In breeding plumage has black mask on face and chestnut on hindneck and across breast, running onto flanks. A thin black necklace is then often present between throat and breast. Soft trilling calls. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Greater Sand Plover

Charadrius leschenaultii

Common summer visitor
Medium-sized (22-25 cm)



Grey-brown above (less smooth than Lesser Sand Plover) and white below, with grey-brown breast patches. Large eyes. Very similar to Lesser Sand Plover but larger and paler, with larger head, longer thicker bill and longer legs (often paler). Flat forehead. In breeding plumage has black mask on face and chestnut on crown, hindneck and across breast, running onto flanks. Rarely has black necklace. Soft trilling calls. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Greater Sand Plover and Lesser Sand Plover

General: Greater is larger, more attenuated and less plump than Lesser, with flat forehead giving tapered look from head to tip of bill. Lesser has smaller rounded head with steeper forehead. Greater generally has more horizontal posture whereas Lesser more often stands upright.



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Plumage (non-breeding): Greater (above left) has paler upperparts than Lesser (above right), with pale fringes to feathers. This gives more contrast to the upperparts compared to the smooth dark brown upperparts of Lesser, with the folded wings of Greater often appearing paler than rest of upperparts. Greater also has cleaner white flanks than Lesser. Lesser often has darker smudges around and below eyes than Greater, contrasting more with rest of face.



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Lesser (left) nearing breeding plumage.

Greater (right) in full breeding plumage.



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Bill: Greater has longer, more tapering and pointed bill than Lesser, which is short and blunt. As a rule of thumb, if the length of the bill is the same as the distance between the base of the bill and the rear of the eye, it belongs to Lesser. If the length of the bill is greater than the distance between the base of the bill and the rear of the eye, it belongs to Greater.

Legs: Greater has longer and paler legs than Lesser, although the colour varies for both species. Greater has greyish-green to yellowish-pink legs and Lesser has blackish to olive-green legs.

Flight: Greater has conspicuous white wingbars that are more prominent on the outer wings and extensive white on tip and sides of tail. Lesser has less conspicuous white wingbars that are more prominent on the inner wings and less extensive white on tip and sides of tail. Longer legs of Greater extend beyond tail, whereas those of Lesser do not. Note that these features are of limited use in the field.

Call: Both species have soft repeated trilling calls. Lesser also has a shorter and firmer trill but this also is of limited use in the field.

Black-fronted Dotterel

Elseya melanops



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. Sharp repeated 'tik-ik' call. Wetlands and mudflats.



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Red-kneed Dotterel

Erythrogonys cinctus



Uncommon resident
Very small (17-19 cm)

Brownish above and white below, with black hood (giving 'Zorro' effect) and broad black breastband. Dull red bill with black tip. Reddish-pink legs above 'knee' and grey below. Distinctive chestnut flanks and white throat. High-pitched trilling call. Wetlands.



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Masked Lapwing

Vanellus miles

Very common resident
Large (35-37 cm)



Brown above and white below, with black crown, hindneck and sides of breast, yellow facial wattles and wing spurs. Yellow bill and eye, and pinkish legs. Aggressive and noisy when breeding, with loud grating staccato alarm calls. Parks, grasslands, wetlands and coastal areas.



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Similar species: **Banded Lapwing**
Vanellus tricolor is a rare visitor to coastal districts. Smaller than Masked Lapwing, with distinctive face pattern and black breastband.

Comb-crested Jacana

Irediparra gallinacea

Common resident in suitable habitat
Medium-sized (21-24 cm)



Brown above and white below, with broad black breastband and bright red comb on forehead. Female larger. Reddish bill with black tip and long grey-green legs. Extremely long toes for walking on floating vegetation. White face and neck with yellow border. Thin twittering or piping call. Vegetated freshwater wetlands.



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This young bird's enormous toes are clearly visible.

Bar-tailed Godwit

Limosa lapponica

Abundant summer visitor
Large (38-45 cm)



Brown-streaked above giving mottled appearance, paler below, with long slightly upturned pink and black bill and long dark-grey legs. Female bill longer. Shows whitish rump and lower back and barred tail in flight. In breeding plumage has brick-red face, neck and underparts. Generally silent but groups in flight chatter together with a 'kirruk' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Bar-tailed Godwits,
male and longer-billed
female, in breeding and
non-breeding plumage.

Black-tailed Godwit

Limosa limosa

Uncommon summer visitor
Large (36-43 cm)



Uniform grey-brown, paler below, with long straight pink and black bill and long dark-grey legs. Female bill slightly longer. Shows white wingbars and rump and black bar on tail in flight. White underwing distinctive when visible. In breeding plumage has rusty face, neck and breast. Generally silent apart from a soft 'kik' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Black-tailed Godwit
in breeding plumage.

Black-tailed Godwit and Bar-tailed Godwit



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General: Black-tailed (right) is smaller than Bar-tailed (left), often with gentle appearance and serene expression.

Plumage (non-breeding): Black-tailed has upperparts and neck uniformly matt grey-brown, not streaked as Bar-tailed. The white eyebrow in front of eye is often the most noticeable place of contrast in Black-tailed.

Bill: Black-tailed has shorter and straighter bill than Bar-tailed, with less variation in length between male and female.

Flight: Black-tailed has prominent white wingbars on upperwings, white underwings and white lower rump that contrasts with black on tail. Bar-tailed lacks white wingbars, has barred underwings, whitish rump and lower back and barred tail. Longer legs of Black-tailed extend further beyond tail than Bar-tailed.



C Barnes

Similar species: **Asian Dowitcher** *Limnodromus semipalmatus* is a rare summer visitor, with one or two occasionally found in godwit flocks. Smaller than either godwit, having long straight black bill with subtly swollen tip.



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Latham's Snipe

Gallinago hardwickii



Common summer visitor in suitable habitat
Medium-sized (29-31 cm)

Brown with pale stripes above and whitish below. Large eyes. Long straight greyish-brown to yellowish-brown bill, blackish near tip, and olive legs. Striped face. Explodes into erratic flight when flushed, with short harsh 'chak' call. Often more secretive than other shorebirds. Wetlands.



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A distinctive sewing-machine feeding action when probing deep into mud is characteristic of Latham's Snipe.

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

Very common summer visitor
Large (40-43 cm)



Uniformly brownish-streaked, paler below, with long downcurved dark bill, pinkish at base, and long legs. Striped head with pale central stripe on dark crown, whitish eyebrows and dark eye-stripes. Shows white rump and lower back in flight. Smaller than Eastern Curlew, with shorter bill and legs. Loud rapid tittering call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Whimbrel showing its distinctive pale central crown-stripe.

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Eastern Curlew

Numenius madagascariensis

Very common summer visitor
Very large (60-65 cm)



Uniformly brownish-streaked, paler below. Streaked head. Largest shorebird, with extremely long downcurved dark bill, pinkish at base, and long legs. Female bill longer. Shows barred pattern on rump and lower back in flight, not white. Wary and easily disturbed. Loud mournful 'curlee' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches. If their bills were turned around, the bill of an Eastern Curlew would reach down to its rump whereas the bill of a Whimbrel would only reach the middle of its back.



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This female Eastern Curlew has a typically longer bill than the male shown above.

Terek Sandpiper

Xenus cinereus



Common summer visitor
Medium-sized (22-24 cm)

Grey above and white below, with fairly long upturned black bill, orange at base, and short bright orange legs. Noticeably steep forehead. Shows white trailing edge on inner wing in flight. Fast and active when feeding, with horizontal posture and forward-tripping gait. The only smallish wader with upturned bill. Flute-like piping and trilling calls. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



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Common Sandpiper

Actitis hypoleucos



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. Prominent white wedge between folded wing and olive-brown upper breast. Shows white wingbars in flight, often gliding on downcurved wings. Frequently bobs head and rear end of body. Often solitary. Penetrating and descending 'twee-wee-wee' call. Wetlands, rocky shorelines, muddy margins, creeks and channels.



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Grey-tailed Tattler

Tringa brevipes

Common summer visitor
Medium-sized (24-27 cm)



Plain 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. Shows uniformly grey upperparts in flight. In breeding plumage, fine grey bars cover the breast and flanks. Flight call a rising disyllabic whistle. Mudflats, sandy beaches and rock platforms.



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Wandering Tattler

Tringa incana

Uncommon summer visitor
Medium-sized (26-29 cm)



Slate 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. Shows uniformly grey upperparts in flight. In breeding plumage, broad grey bars cover almost the entire underparts. Flight call a rippling trill. Rocky shorelines.



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Grey-tailed Tattler and Wandering Tattler

General: Grey-tailed are slightly smaller and slightly paler than Wandering and generally prefer mudflats and sandy beaches. Wandering are found almost exclusively along rocky shorelines, occasionally accompanied by Grey-tailed.



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Grey-tailed Tattler
in breeding plumage.

Plumage (non-breeding): Grey-tailed has upperparts paler grey than darker Wandering and grey flanks are often, but not always, concealed beneath folded wings. Wandering usually displays grey flanks. Wing tips of Grey-tailed extend only a little past tail but in Wandering usually extend further beyond tail. Grey-tailed eyebrows meet on forehead above bill and extend past eyes whereas smaller white eyebrows of Wandering do not meet on forehead and are indistinct behind eyes. The white on throat of Grey-tailed is more extensive than Wandering and merges, with streaking, onto upper breast. The white on throat of Wandering ends discretely on lower throat.



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Wandering Tattler
in breeding plumage.

Bill: Wandering has slightly heavier bill than Grey-tailed. Grey-tailed has shorter nasal grooves than Wandering that extend barely half the length of bill. Wandering has nasal grooves that extend well beyond middle of bill. Note that this feature is of limited use in the field.

Legs: Grey-tailed has scales on rear of legs between 'ankle' and 'knee' that form laddered and overlapping patterns. On Wandering these scales form net-like non-overlapping patterns from the bottom of the legs upwards, these patterns persisting for a variable distance up the legs before they, too, become laddered and overlapping. This feature is normally of use only if the bird is in the hand or if a detailed photograph is taken.

Flight: Grey-tailed has plain grey upperparts with slightly paler tail and faintly barred upper tail compared to uniformly slate grey upperparts of Wandering.

Call: Arguably, the most reliable way of separating these two species is by their distinctive flight calls. Grey-tailed gives a rising disyllabic whistle, whilst Wandering gives a plaintive rippling trill, reminiscent of Whimbrel.

Common Greenshank

Tringa nebularia

Common summer visitor

Large (30-34 cm)



Grey above and white below, with long slightly upturned dark bill, grey at base, and long greenish legs. Dark grey streaking on head. Shows white back and rump in flight. In breeding plumage has black streaking on head and upper breast. Loud ringing ‘tew-tew-tew’ call. Mudflats and various wetland habitats.



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“Shank” describes that part of the leg between the knee and the ankle, hence the name “Greenshank”.

Marsh Sandpiper

Tringa stagnatilis

Uncommon summer visitor
Medium-sized (22-25 cm)



Light grey above and white below, with long straight needle-like black bill and long greenish to yellowish legs. Shows white back and rump in flight. Like a miniature Common Greenshank. In breeding plumage has dark streaking on head and breast. Loud repeated 'tew' and 'chip' calls. Freshwater and brackish wetlands, occasionally along saltwater shorelines.



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Similar species: **Wood Sandpiper**
Tringa glareola is a rare summer visitor, with single birds occasionally found in freshwater wetlands. Smaller than Marsh Sandpiper, with mottled upperparts and shorter straight bill. In flight, dark back and wings contrast with white rump.



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Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper

General: Greenshank is noticeably larger than the more delicate Marsh Sandpiper and occurs in both freshwater and saltwater wetlands. Marsh Sandpiper mostly occurs in freshwater wetlands although may associate with Greenshank in brackish areas and along saltwater shorelines.

Plumage (non-breeding): Greenshank has contrasting dark and white appearance, more so than most other shorebirds, with slightly darker upperparts than Marsh Sandpiper and heavier streaking.

Bill: Greenshank (behind) has thick-based solid-looking bill, the reduction in thickness from middle to tip exaggerating the slightly upturned effect. Marsh Sandpiper (front) has fine straight bill that appears needle-like although there is occasionally a slight upwards kink near middle.



R Inglis

Legs: Greenish in Greenshank, often yellowish in Marsh Sandpiper.

Flight: Proportionately longer legs of Marsh Sandpiper extend further beyond tail than Greenshank.

Call: The loud ringing call of Greenshank is well-known but the sharper and thinner calls of Marsh Sandpiper are seldom heard locally.

Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

Common summer visitor
Medium-sized (22-24 cm)



Stocky, mottled dark greyish-brown above and white below, with dark breastband. Short wedge-shaped black bill and short orange legs. Shows distinctive brown and white pattern in flight. In breeding plumage has chestnut, black and white pattern. Habitually turns over stones and shells and flicks seaweed sideways when searching for food. Low-pitched rapid 'tuk-a-tuk-tuk' call. Mudflats, sandy beaches and rocky shorelines.



R Inglis



N Bowman

Ruddy Turnstone in breeding plumage, showing chestnut-orange upperparts and black and white markings on head and breast.

Great Knot

Calidris tenuirostris

Abundant summer visitor
Medium-sized (26-28 cm)



Heavy-chested, dumpy, grey-brown above and white with dark streaking below with dark heart-shaped spots on breast and flanks. Longish slightly downcurved tapering black bill, dark smudge in front of eye and greenish-grey legs. Shows narrow white wingbars and white above uppertail in flight. In breeding plumage develops black and chestnut on wings, and spots on underparts become black and more extensive. Generally silent. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis



P Walbridge

Great Knot in
breeding plumage.

Red Knot

Calidris canutus



Uncommon summer visitor
Medium-sized (23-25 cm)

Compact, 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, narrow dark line from bill to eye and greenish-grey legs. Shows narrow white wingbars and barred pattern above uppertail in flight. In breeding plumage has rusty underparts. Higher numbers recorded during spring migration. Generally silent. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis

Red Knot differs from Great Knot as follows: • Smaller and more compact • Paler and more uniformly grey-brown above • Less streaking on head and crown • Less heavily streaked below, giving paler appearance • Shorter, straighter bill • Darker lines from bill to eyes • More prominent white eyebrows.

Red-necked Stint

Calidris ruficollis



Abundant summer visitor
Very small (13-16 cm)

Grey-brown above and whitish below, with short straight black bill and black legs. Crown and nape streaked blackish-brown, with dark line from bill through eye. Shows narrow white wingbars in flight. In breeding plumage has rufous face, throat and breast. High-pitched weak 'cheet' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis



C Barnes

Red-necked Stint
in breeding plumage.

Red-necked Stints are Australia's smallest shorebirds and can weigh as little as 30 grams.

Sanderling

Calidris alba

Uncommon summer visitor

Small (20-21 cm)



Pale, silver-grey above and pure white below, with short black bill and legs. Pale face and prominent black patch on shoulder. Shows bold white wingbars in flight. In breeding plumage has chestnut on upperparts, face, neck and breast. Soft 'twick-twick' call. Often follows retreating waves. Sandy beaches.



N Bowman



N Bowman

The black shoulder patch is clearer on this individual.

Sanderlings can be told from other small shorebirds by their lack of hind toes. This feature requires good views to appreciate and is perhaps of little practical use.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

Calidris acuminata



Abundant summer visitor

Small (17-21 cm)

Brown above and whitish below, with streaked brown breast and rufous crown. Immature birds have apricot wash across breast. Short slightly downcurved black bill, paler at base, and olive-grey to olive-yellow legs. Fine streaking on undertail. Shows narrow white wingbars in flight. Repeated short twittering call. Wetlands, mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in colourful immature plumage.

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* and **Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*, rare summer visitors that occasionally appear in freshwater wetlands, are similar to Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.



R James

Pectoral Sandpiper is slightly larger than Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, with heavily streaked breast sharply demarcated from white belly, unmarked white undertail, white eyebrow more prominent in front of eye and bill often more two-toned.

Female Ruff is slightly larger again, with small head, long neck, dark bill and legs that can be a variety of colours. Shows white oval patches either side of tail in flight. Male Ruff is much larger, with generally more colour in bill.



I Silvester



W Jolly

Pectoral Sandpiper (left and behind) with Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (right and front), showing difference in size. Note bill length, shape and colour.

Curlew Sandpiper

Calidris ferruginea

Abundant summer visitor

Small (20-22 cm)



Slender, uniform grey-brown above and white below, with long evenly downcurved black bill and longish black legs. White eyebrow. Shows white rump and white wingbars in flight. In breeding plumage has rich chestnut underparts. Soft rippling 'chirrip' call. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Curlew Sandpiper
in breeding plumage.

Broad-billed Sandpiper

Limicola falcinellus



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. Compact rear end. Shows narrow white wingbars in flight. Often associates with stints and other small shorebirds. Short dry trilling 'chr-r-reet' and 'tzit' calls. Mudflats and sandy beaches.



R Inglis

Although both Red-necked Stints and Curlew Sandpipers can show signs of split white eyebrows and can have bills that tend to kink downwards towards the tip, good views of a genuine Broad-billed Sandpiper will show it to be a very distinctive bird.

Silver Gull

Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae

Abundant resident
Large (38-43 cm)



R Inglis

Pale silver-grey above and white below, with white eye, red bill and red legs. Black and white tips to wings more noticeable in flight. Noisy and gregarious, with variety of harsh and guttural 'korrr', 'karr-karr' and 'kee-arr' calls. Coastal areas, breeding inland.



R Inglis

Other gulls occur only rarely in the region, the most regular of these being **Kelp Gull** *Larus dominicanus*. This gull is larger than Silver Gull, with blackish wings (with small white windows near wingtips), white tail, yellowish legs and yellow bill with red spot on lower tip. The similar **Pacific Gull** *Larus pacificus* has black wings, black bar on white tail and massive yellow bill with red tip. Photographs of these two species may be found on page 61.

Crested Tern

Thalasseus bergii

Abundant resident
Large (44-48 cm)



R Inglis



R Inglis

Grey above and white below. White forehead and streaky black crown, becoming solid black towards rear and sides of head. Straw-yellow bill and black legs. In breeding plumage, white forehead separates bill from solid black crested cap. Rasping 'kirrik' call. Coastal areas, breeding on offshore islands.



T Siggs

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis* is an uncommon winter visitor. Smaller than Crested Tern, paler grey above, black cap that extends virtually to base of bill in breeding plumage and bright orange bill. Note that the bills of some Crested Terns may be orange-yellow.



R Inglis

Gull-billed Tern

Gelocheilidon nilotica

Common resident
Medium (35-38 cm)



R Inglis

Very pale silver-grey above and white below, with white head and black mask. Heavy black slightly-downcurved bill and black legs. In breeding plumage has black cap and black nape. Often flies with bill held vertically downwards when hunting. Nasal 'kar-ark' call. Coastal areas, breeding inland.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Gull-billed Tern
in breeding plumage.

Caspian Tern

Hydroprogne caspia

Common resident

Very large (48-55 cm)



R Inglis

Pale grey above and white below, with white forehead and streaky black cap. Large red bill and black legs. In breeding plumage has solid black cap with short crest. Rasping 'kraark' call. Coastal areas, breeding on offshore islands.



R Inglis



N Bowman

Caspian Tern
in breeding plumage.

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

Common summer visitor

Medium (32-38 cm)



R Inglis

Pale grey above and white below. White forehead and mottled black crown, becoming solid black towards rear of head, and dark shoulder bar. Black bill and black legs, although legs can sometimes be tinged reddish. In breeding plumage has black cap and black nape, and is washed grey below. Repeated 'kik-kik' call. Coastal areas.



R Inglis



Common Tern
in breeding plumage.

R Inglis

Little Tern

Sternula albifrons

Common summer visitor

Small (21-24 cm)



C Barnes

Pale grey above and white below. White forehead and streaky black crown, becoming solid black towards rear of head, and dark shoulder bar. Black bill and black legs. In breeding plumage has white forehead and solid black cap, with pointed white eyebrow. Pale yellow bill, usually with black tip, and short yellow legs. High-pitched 'kweek' call. Coastal areas.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Little Tern
in breeding plumage.

White-winged Black Tern

Chlidonias leucopterus

Uncommon summer visitor

Small (22-24 cm)



N Bowman

Pale grey above and white below, with black on crown extending down behind eye, giving 'helmeted' look. Black bill and black legs. In breeding plumage has black head and body with white wings, red bill and red legs. Buzzing 'kreek' and sharp 'krik' calls. Coastal areas.



R Inglis

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*

prefers inland wetlands but occasionally appears on the coast. Similar to White-winged Black Tern in non-breeding plumage, in breeding plumage has grey body and wings, black cap, white cheeks, red bill and red legs.



C Barnes

The following species may be encountered anywhere along the SEQ coastline. They are, however, uncommon and great care should be taken before making a positive identification.



R Inglis



R James

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* (left) and **Pacific Gull** *Larus pacificus* (right) are both rare visitors to SEQ (see page 54).

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* breeds on offshore islands to the north and appears only occasionally.

White-fronted Tern *Sterna striata* is an uncommon winter visitor, the birds that appear in SEQ most likely coming from the New Zealand breeding population.

Both of the above species are very similar to Common Tern, especially when in non-breeding plumage.

Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* breeds on offshore islands to the north and is a rare visitor. It is similar to Little Tern in non-breeding plumage.

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscata*, **Bridled Tern** *Onychoprion anaethetus*, **Common Noddy** *Anous stolidus* and **Black Noddy** *Anous minutus* breed on offshore islands to the north of the region and may be encountered in SEQ from time to time.

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Flight identification of migrant shorebirds

The twenty migratory shorebird species listed below are those most likely to be encountered in coastal SEQ.

Plain upperwing

Plain back, rump and uppertail

Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit,
Grey-tailed Tattler, Wandering Tattler

White back and rump

Whimbrel, Common Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper

Indistinct or narrow wingbar

Plain back, rump and uppertail

Pacific Golden Plover, Red Knot

White uppertail

Great Knot

White sides to rump and uppertail

Lesser Sand Plover, Greater Sand Plover,
Red-necked Stint, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

Prominent wingbar

Plain back, rump and uppertail

Terek Sandpiper (wingbar on rear edge),
Common Sandpiper (rump and tail edged white)

White rump

Curlew Sandpiper, Grey Plover

White rump and uppertail

Black-tailed Godwit (black bar on tail)

White back and uppertail

Ruddy Turnstone (black bar on tail)

