

U3A Port Fairy

Science Naturally!

Shorebirds of Port Fairy

Philip Du Guesclin 3 November 2020

There are 214 species of shorebirds/waders worldwide. Most are migratory. Migration can vary from trans-equatorial (breed in one hemisphere, “summer holidays’ in another) to post-breeding dispersal. The Double-banded Plover is unique in that it breeds in NZ and migrates West to southern Australia. A total of 23 shorebird species have been recorded in the Port Fairy area, more could well be found as with widespread migration, vagrants can pop up almost anywhere. Nine of the 23 species are Australian “residents”. Identification of the migratory species here can be challenging as they are usually in non-breeding plumage; some individuals may be moulting out of breeding plumage. Juveniles may have different plumage. Other factors such as size, shape and behaviour can assist in identification. We will examine some of the species that can occur here.



PIED OYSTERCATCHER



SOOTY OYSTERCATCHER.

There are two Oystercatcher species in Australia, the Sooty is endemic to Australia, the Pied also occurs in NZ. Pied Oystercatchers prefer sandy beaches and estuaries whereas the Sooty is more likely to be found on rocky beaches. They do associate with each other and have interbred.

World wide there are 11 Oystercatcher species.



HOODED PLOVER

Endemic to Australia, the Hooded Plover usually inhabits sandy ocean beaches with mounds of kelp. In adults the dark head and white nape (back of neck) are diagnostic for identification. The South-west is the stronghold of the species in Victoria, the total Vic population being about 500 birds. During breeding they are very vulnerable to disturbance (people, dogs, horses). The nests are shallow scrapes in the sand above the high tide line.



RED-CAPPED PLOVER

Also called Red-capped Dotterel. It is endemic to Australasia, also occurring in NZ and Timor. The sexes are similar, the cap of the female being paler. A small bird (150mm). In Western Victoria it is more likely to be found on inland wetlands than on the coast where it prefers flat beaches.



BLACK-WINGED STILT

A distinctive pied wader with long spindly pink legs and a black nape. Similar species are the Banded Stilt (white nape, chestnut breast band) and Red-necked Avocet (chestnut head and neck, grey legs, upturned bill). The latter two are unlikely to be found here. The most likely place to see these birds is the Sandy Cove Saltmarsh Reserve. They have been recorded breeding here on low small islands but appear to be unsuccessful due to the nests getting flooded.



RUDDY TURNSTONE

A solidly built wader with distinctive colouring. They are summer migrants to Victoria from breeding grounds around the Arctic Ocean. Some non-breeding birds can remain overwinter. Usually found on rocky coastal areas or sandy beaches with seaweed. Often can be found on Griffiths Island near the lighthouse or the retaining walls of the Moyne River.



COMMON SANDPIPER

This bird breeds in Northern Eurasia. Small numbers migrate to Victoria and are usually found singly or in small numbers. It can be identified by its distinctive bobbing walk. Note the white patch between the breast band and wing. I observed one bird on several occasions on the training walls of the Moyne River during September.



COMMON GREENSHANK



MARSH SANDPIPER

Both these migratory species can be found around Port Fairy, but you are more likely to encounter the Greenshank, so named by its long green legs. It is larger than the sandpiper (30+ cm compared to 20+ cm) and has a slightly upturned bill. The calls are similar – a plaintive “teu”.

I usually see Greenshanks on the Moyne River between the road bridge and foot bridge.



SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER

One of the more common visitors, the Sharp-tailed sandpiper breeds in Siberia. It derives its name from the pointed tail feathers. It is about 20 cm in size and frequently can be found with other wader species and in large numbers. Good places to observe them are the Puddeney grounds at Griffiths Island and the mud flats along the Moyne River. The juveniles are more brightly coloured than adults.



LATHAM'S SNIPE

Also called Japanese Snipe. About 28 cm in size with a distinctive long bill. It breeds only in Japan and winters almost exclusively in Australia. It usually frequents freshwater wetlands. They tend to prefer dense cover during the day. If flushed they utter a harsh squawk and fly in a zig-zag motion before dropping into cover again. The Powling Street wetland is a favoured site but they can be found in a number of other sites where there is fresh water.



BAR-TAILED GODWIT

These birds breed in Alaska and Siberia. They are large waders (about 40 cm, the females are larger). The long bill is pink at the base and dark at the tip. The white rump and barred black and white tail assist in recognition. They are occasional visitors to this area and have been seen on the East Beach to Killarney and the Belfast Lough.



RED-NECKED STINT

This small wader (15 cm) is so named for its breeding plumage (picture at right) which is not usually seen in non-breeding quarters (pic at left). It is the most abundant wader that visits Victoria, with flocks of thousands occurring. They can be found in a variety of habitats from tidal mudflats to shallow lakes of varying salinity. On the coast they can be found with other waders. They can be observed at Griffiths Island and Rutledge's Cutting.



SANDERLING

Sanderlings breed inside the Arctic circle and disperse to most parts of the world in the non-breeding season. It is about 20 cm in size and can be identified by its behaviour as well as its plumage. The birds actively feed in groups along the tide line, hurrying up and down with the ebb and flow of the wavelets. The white body plumage can assist in identification. They are rarely found far from the coast.



CURLEW SANDPIPER

This bird is named for its long down-curved bill (like a Curlew). It breeds in Siberia where its plumage is a brick red colour (bird at right). The non-breeding plumage of the bird on the left is plain grey to brown in colour, which is how we see them. It is a similar size to the Sanderling and can be found foraging with other waders in sand and mud flats.