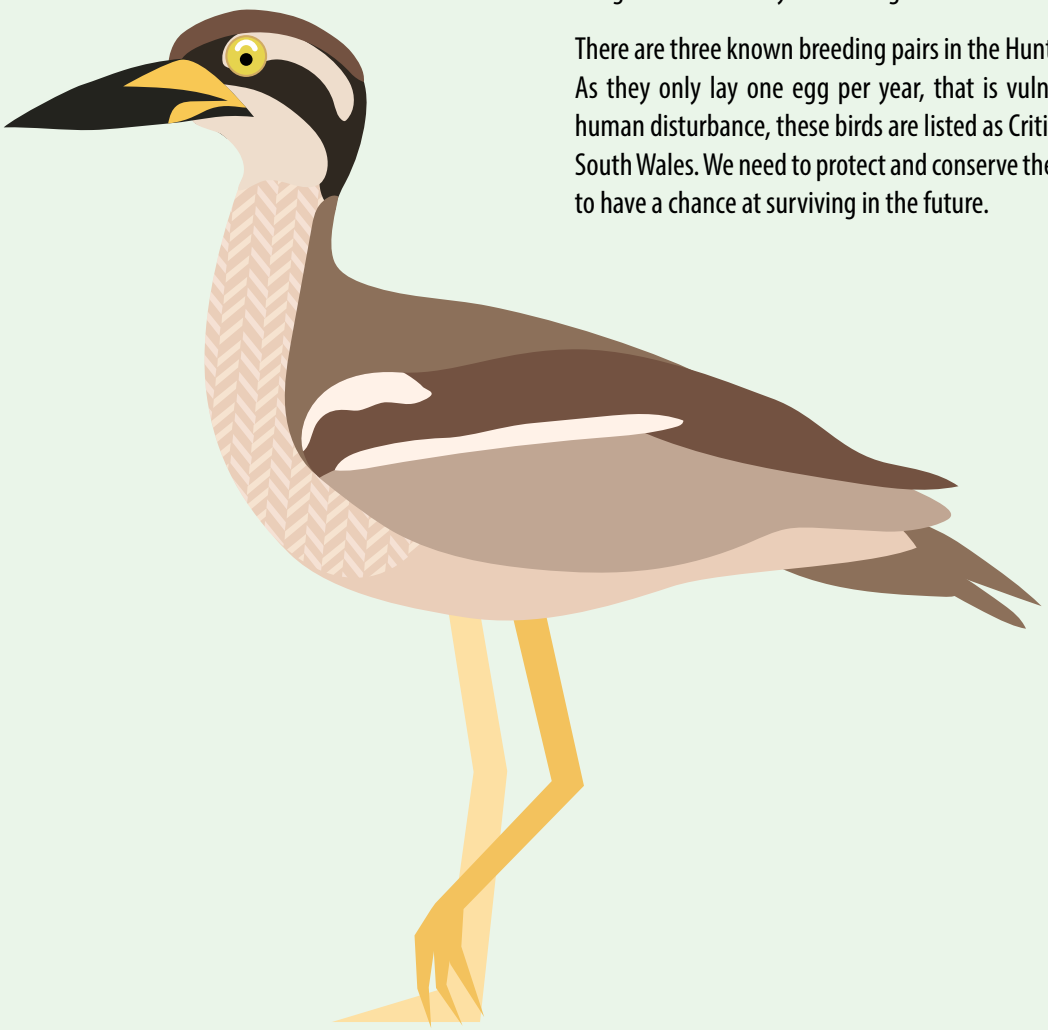
Threatened Fauna of the Hunter & Mid Coast

Beach stone-curlew

[Esacus magnirostris]

The beach stone-curlew is a large, non-migratory coastal shorebird found on open beaches, exposed reefs, mangroves, and tidal sand or mudflats. Due to their size and massive bill with yellow patches these birds are easily distinguishable from all other waders. In fact, their scientific name 'magnirostris' literally means 'big bill'.

There are three known breeding pairs in the Hunter and Mid Coast region. As they only lay one egg per year, that is vulnerable to predation and human disturbance, these birds are listed as Critically Endangered in New South Wales. We need to protect and conserve these birds if they are going to have a chance at surviving in the future.



NSW GOVERNMENT Local Land Services

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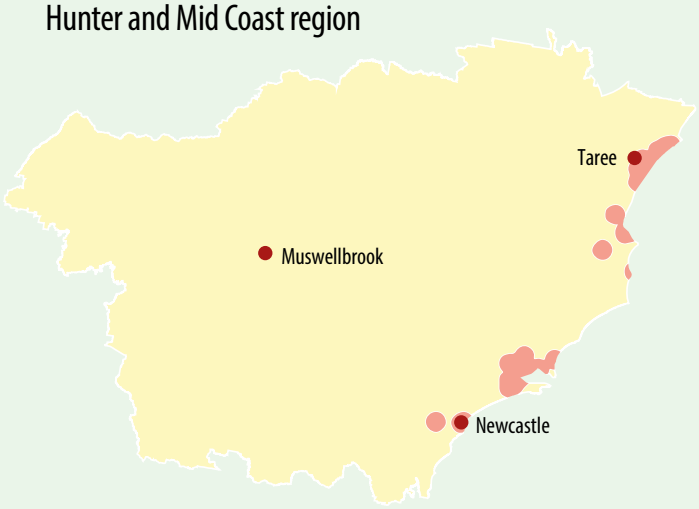
NSW distribution of the beach stone-curlew

Hunter and Mid Coast region



What's happening in the Hunter and Mid Coast region?

There are very few individual beach stone-curlews that inhabit NSW shores, although their numbers have been slowly growing.

In the Hunter and Mid Coast region, there have been three breeding pairs located across the Manning and Port Stephens estuaries in recent years. The Manning Estuary pair were first recorded in 1998. The first pair in the Port Stephens Estuary were spotted in 2011, while a second breeding pair was spotted in the esturay in 2018 and again in 2020. A pair was seen on Broughton Island, north-east of Port Stephens, in 2020 but at this stage it is only presumed they make regular visits as no nest or eggs have been found, only footprints.

Please contact BirdLife Australia or the Hunter Bird Observers Club if you spot beach stone-curlews in the region.

Disappearing from Australian shores

Across Australia, beach stone-curlews can be found along the coastline from Point Cloates in Western Australia, across northern and north-eastern Australia, and south to north-eastern New South Wales. Occasional wanderers have been seen as far south as eastern Victoria. In New South Wales, the species regularly occurs in the Hunter region, but this is the normal limit of the species' range.

Beach stone-curlew population is declining worldwide largely due to human disturbance of their habitat and predation. They have disappeared from most of south-eastern Australia, with only a small number of individuals left in New South Wales. They are listed as Critically Endangered in New South Wales and Vulnerable in Queensland. They are not under threat in the Northern Territory or Western Australia, possibly due to the minimal coastal disturbance by humans.

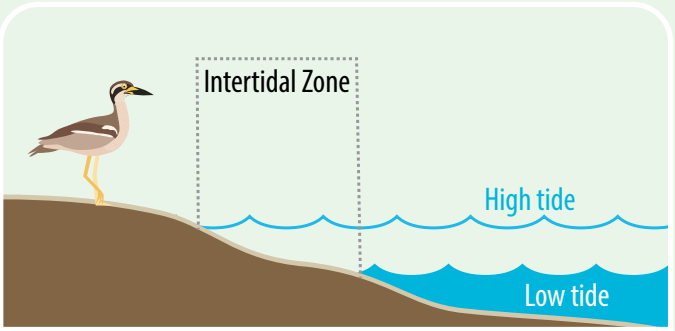
One factor affecting their population is their slow reproduction rate; laying only one egg per year. Although they can lay a second egg if the first one is lost or removed, this slow rate takes its toll on population growth. Additionally, like many other shorebirds, they lay their camouflaged egg in a shallow scrape on the ground. This makes them vulnerable to predators, such as dogs, foxes, cats, pigs, other birds, as well as human impacts from vehicles and foot traffic. Their nests are also at risk of being inundated by high tides, storms and other flooding events.

Beach stone-curlews lay a single egg directly on the sand making them vulnerable to a variety of threats such as human disturbance and predation. This egg is in the process of hatching (Port Stephens).

Habitat

Beach stone-curlews prefer to live in and around open, undisturbed beaches, islands, reefs, and estuarine intertidal sand and mudflats. Especially with estuaries or mangroves nearby. They will also frequent river mouths, offshore sandbars associated with coral atolls, reefs and rock platforms and coastal lagoons. It is very unusual to find them even a few metres inland from these habitats. Heavy human activity on beaches in certain areas has confined them to small offshore islands, such as those in the Hunter and Mid Coast region.

Their diet is dominated by crabs and other marine invertebrates that they find in the intertidal zone. They have a slow stalking approach, similar to a heron, when searching for prey around dawn, dusk and at night. When their prey has been spotted, and is close enough, they will quickly dash and attack with their strong, large bill. During the day beach stone-curlews tend to rest and are generally seen to be sedentary.




Courtesy, Tom Kendall


Courtesy, Trevor Murray

Identification

The beach stone-curlew is a very large, thick-set wader up to 57 cm tall and weighing up to 1 kilogram. They have a yellow eye with distinctive black and white patterning on the face, including a strong white eyebrow and throat. The rest of the upper body is grey-brown, with white stripes on the wing and shoulder. The breast and belly is paler grey-brown to white. It is hard to confuse beach stone-curlews with other waders on the beach.

Their bill is a striking feature as it is quite large and chunky. It is solid black and yellow at the base. The strength of the bill helps them forage for, and break-apart, crabs and other invertebrates in the intertidal zone.

A single egg, mottled and 65 x 45 mm, is laid in a shallow scrape on the ground. Both parents take turns incubating the egg for about 30 days. Chicks are covered in grey-brown down feathers with black strips. Juveniles are similar in appearance to the adults, except duller with less defined facial markings. They will stay with their parents for about 18 months to help raise the next chick.

Alarm calls are a quick 'chwip-chwip' sound to ward others away from their territory.

Beach stone-curlews are also called reef thick-knees due to the thick, knobbly knee joints on their strong yellow legs. Other names they go by include large-billed stone plover, shore plover and beach curlew.


Courtesy, Raymond Burton

You can help the beach stone-curlew

1. **Reduce disturbance** by keeping dogs on leashes and ensuring people, horses or vehicles aren't within 250 metres of feeding or roosting birds, drones are also a common disturbance for beach stone-curlews and should not be used nearby sensitive estuary areas or mudflats.
2. **Reduce disturbance** by ensuring boats aren't within 250 metres of feeding or roosting birds.
3. **Reduce disturbance** by ensuring any land development is greater than 500 metres from feeding or roosting birds.
4. **Keep rubbish from entering waterways** by adequately disposing of materials at designated locations.
5. **Undertake fox and cat control** nearby to any feeding or roosting sites.
6. **Ensure water runoff patterns are maintained** within estuaries and surrounding landscapes.
7. **Report any sightings** away from known sites to BirdLife Australia or the Hunter Bird Observers Club.

Courtesy, Alan Stuart

For more information contact

Hunter Local Land Services:
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Mid Coast to Tops Landcare Connections
Karuah & Great Lakes Landcare
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Manning Landcare
E: lyn@manninglandcare.org
Manning Coastcare
E: helen.manningcoastcare@gmail.com
W: www.midcoast2tops.org.au

Hunter Region Landcare Network Inc.
Lower and Mid Hunter
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W: hunterlandcare.org.au

Report all sightings to BirdLife Australia:
P: Freecall 1300 621 056
E: recordsofficer@hboc.org.au
E: info@birdlife.org.au
W: www.birdlife.org.au

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