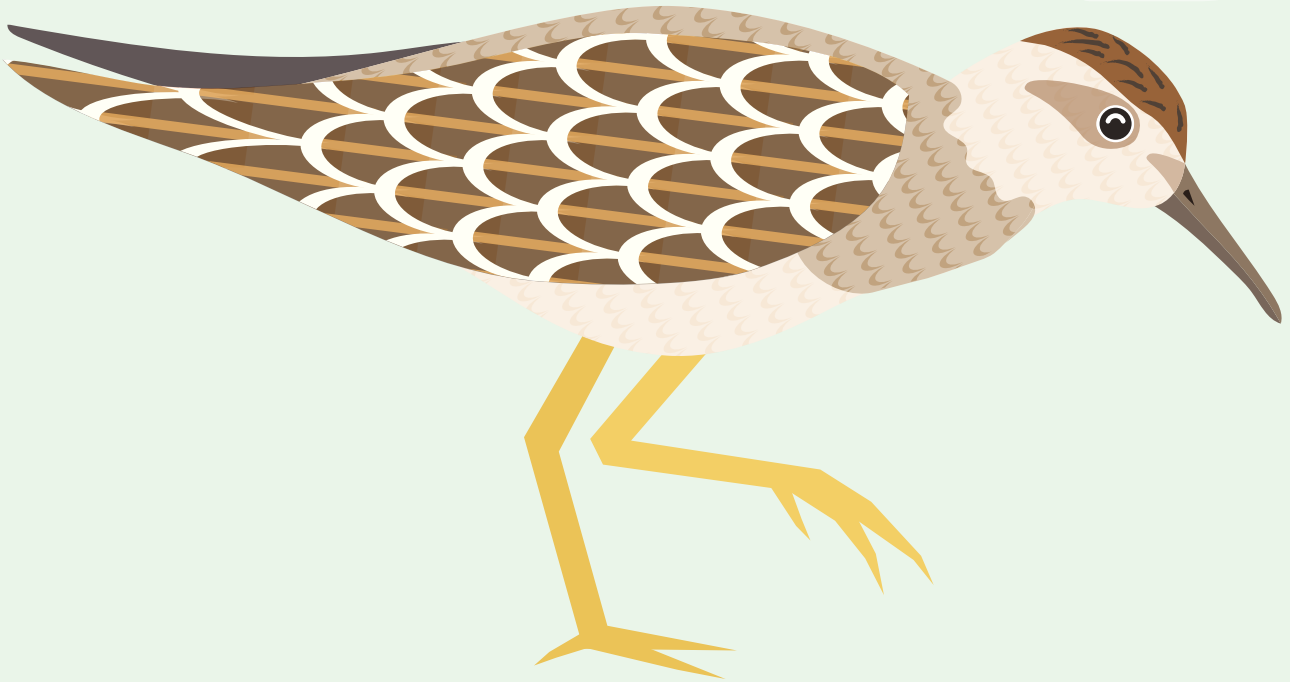




Threatened Fauna of the Hunter & Mid Coast



Sharp-tailed sandpiper *[Calidris acuminata]*

Sharp-tailed sandpipers are medium-sized waders that make an incredible journey from Russia to southern Australia and back again each year. Their breeding grounds are in Russia, where they raise their chicks before feeding and making an 11,000 km journey to Australia to gorge themselves on food found in our wetlands, mangroves, mudflats and beaches. This journey, and the countries that they stop to refuel at along the way, is called the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

Affectionately known as 'Sharpies', their name comes from their streamlined body shape and sharp-looking feathers that make for great camouflage amongst vegetation in wetlands and on mudflats.



The East Asian-Australasian Flyway

A long flight for migratory birds

Sharp-tailed sandpipers, as well as other international migratory shorebirds that visit Australia, are part of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Most of them migrate from breeding grounds in North-east Asia and Alaska to non-breeding grounds in Australia and New Zealand, covering the journey of over 11,000 km twice per year, every year. Once in Australia, they feed on the abundance of food in our coastal wetlands and mudflats. In times when there is significant inland floods, these shorebirds will venture inland to gorge themselves on the abundance of food.

The general life cycle of many international migratory shorebirds involves:

- breeding in northern hemisphere (May to August)
- migrate to the southern hemisphere (August to November)
- feeding and foraging in the southern hemisphere (August to April)
- migrate back north to breed (March to May).

Although the sharp-tailed sandpiper is not a threatened species, maintaining the habitat they need each year is very important. There are significant pressures on coastal habitats and protecting, conserving and managing these habitats for migratory species is a high priority. Governments throughout the Flyway zone are committed via international partnerships to preserve staging grounds, such as estuaries in China, that provide habitat for these birds to rest and refuel along their journey.

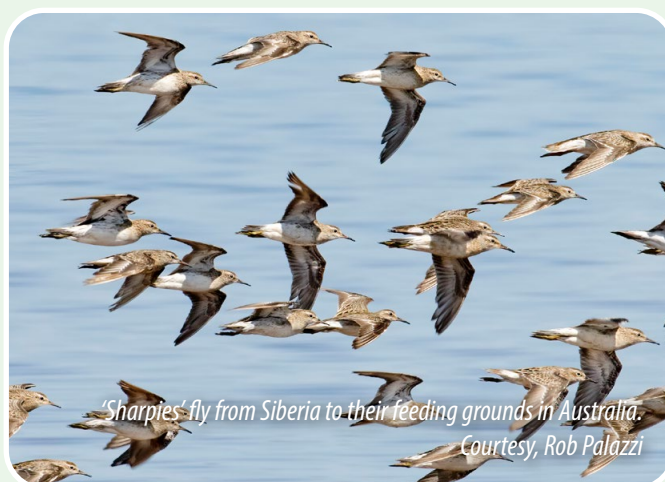
A sharp-tailed sandpiper's journey

Sharp-tailed sandpipers breed during the short North Siberian summer then migrate in large numbers to warmer climates in the Southern Hemisphere. Most of the population (about 90 per cent) eventually find their way to Australia.

Small numbers start arriving in north-west Australia during August. The numbers increase significantly during September as they move through north-east Queensland. From here, they continue to navigate south with the bulk ending up in south-east Australia.

Sharp-tailed sandpipers can be found in inland and coastal locations featuring saline or freshwater environments. They continue to move as areas become less hospitable — for example as temporary or flooded wetlands dry. The return migration generally starts in January with the majority departing by April. Significant distances are travelled during in both directions when migrating. Birds have been tracked covering over 11,000 km in their attempt to return to breeding grounds in Russia from locations in Victoria.

Large increases in population numbers of sharp-tailed sandpipers have been observed in the Hunter estuary from 2011 to 2020 due to restoration of coastal wetlands coupled with inland drought. From the 2011/12 season onwards, more than one per cent of the total population have been coming to the Hunter Estuary. The Hunter Estuary has been very important for the species' survival. However, they are very uncommon in the Manning Estuary and Port Stephens possibly due to lack of suitable habitat.



Habitat

The sharp-tailed sandpiper are found predominately around wetlands throughout Australia, with a preference for the grassy edges of shallow inland freshwater wetlands. During years of significant inland flooding less birds are found in southern regions as inland flood plains can provide all the nourishment they need, and may save thousands of kilometres on the return trip. They are also found around sewage farms, flooded fields, mudflats, mangroves, rocky shores and beaches.

They are not picky eaters, munching down aquatic insects, molluscs, crustaceans, worms and occasionally seeds.

As a migratory bird that must travel many thousands of kilometres from breeding to non-breeding grounds there are many threats. Prior to migration these birds must increase their body mass by up to 70 per cent, therefore habitat loss or modification poses the greatest risk. Each migration must include staging points where the birds can temporarily stop, feed and gain enough energy to continue their journey. Activities that threaten their ability to forage can directly lead to higher mortality rates.

Reclamation of land for development throughout eastern Asia is a significant concern. For example, 40 per cent of intertidal zones in the Yellow Sea have been reclaimed. Human expansion is the biggest threat and continues to increase in severity.



Courtesy, Peter Merritt



*Breeding plumage (northern hemisphere).
Courtesy, TC. Chang (Flickr)*

Identification

Sharp-tailed sandpipers are a medium-sized wader that are defined by their 'sharp' looking feathers, chestnut cap on their heads, straight dark-grey to black bill and olive-coloured legs. Their belly is pale in colour with brown mottling that is consistent with their overall patterning – this is great camouflage to hide from predators!

Their appearance in Australia shows off their non-breeding plumage. When in Siberia, their breeding plumage is much more vivid. Their breast feathers are more chestnut in colour and their patterning more defined with chevron-shaped markings.

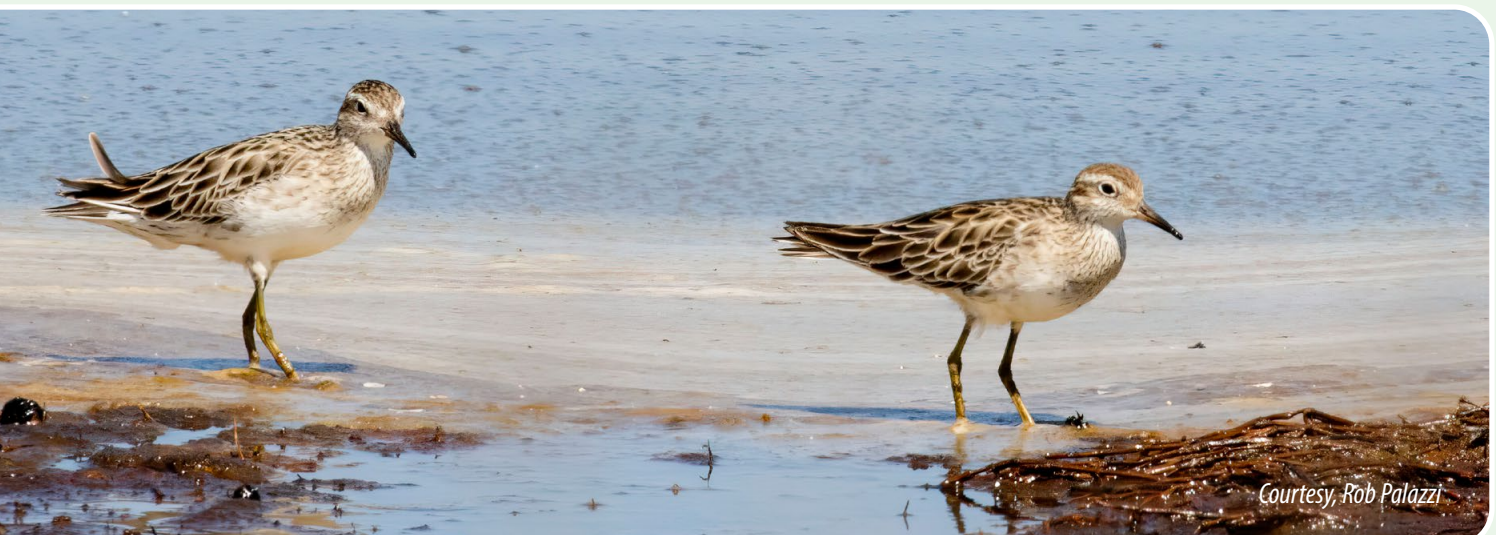
As a medium-sized birds, about 24 cm long and weighing about 65 grams, their migration journey puts a lot of strain on their small bodies. Upon arriving in Australian waters, they are much thinner than when they leave.

Their call is a mix of 'trreep' or 'pliep' rapid trills and soft, low squeaky sounds.

It is quite common to see sharp-tailed sandpipers in large flocks with other waders. Their markings and size makes them easily recognisable from most other small migratory waders.



Courtesy, Rob Palazzi



Courtesy, Rob Palazzi

You can help the sharp-tailed sandpiper



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 and should not be used near sharp-tailed sandpiper habitat areas.



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, such as fishing line, 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.



Courtesy, Steve Merrett



Courtesy, Peter Merritt

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