

Shorebirds embark on spectacular journey

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Red Knots at Thompson Beach. Photo: Tony Flaherty

With the southern winter upon us, thousands of migratory shorebirds have left our shores to head north, flying tens of thousands of kilometres to their breeding grounds in Siberia, northern China and Alaska.

Very little is known about many of the shorebirds using Gulf St Vincent. Researchers are trying to unravel some of the mysteries of local habitat use, migration routes and northern arctic breeding areas. Over the last eight years Natural Resources Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges, with researchers and volunteers from Birdlife Australia and Birds SA, has been monitoring these shorebirds as part of a national Shorebird 2020 program.

Surveys identified large flocks of Red Knot and other shorebirds which attracted the interest of researchers from the Victorian Wader Study Group and Friends of Shorebirds South East. They have now been banding shorebirds at Thompson Beach since 2012. Some key aims are to identify the various sub-species of Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit and understand more about the migration of the Grey Plover. This research is supported by funding from the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board and the Australian Government.

Identified by their plumage

When the birds are here, they are in non-breeding plumage and sub-species cannot be identified. But by the time Red Knot reach the 'halfway' staging area in the Yellow Sea, their breeding plumage is distinct. Banded shorebirds are also marked with

small numbered, coloured leg 'flags'. This allows a network of bird sighters throughout the flyway, and a Global Flyway Network team working in the Yellow Sea, to identify where the birds have come from. For many shorebirds the sub-species can be identified and their breeding destinations in the Arctic, Siberia or Alaska determined.

One Bar-tailed Godwit, flagged AKK, was first banded at Thompson Beach in November 2012. AKK was photographed in the Yellow Sea by Adrian Boyle of the Global Flyway Network, 9 April 2013, at Nanpu in Bohai Bay. The bird was roosting in a salt pan at high tide. It was seen 10 times that season in China, up until late April. In October 2014, Godwit AKK was back at Thompson Beach and photographed by local bird watcher Peter Corcoran. Adrian reported seeing AKK again in China at Nanpu in Bohai Bay, 17 April 2015, in full breeding plumage and looking rather fat!



Bar-tailed Godwit (AKK in foreground) at Nanpu, China, April 2013. Photo: Adrian Boyle



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*Grey Plover with transmitter attached at Thompson Beach.
Photo: Tony Flaherty*



*AKK (centre) at Thompson Beach, October 2014, note the non-breeding plumage.
Photo: Peter Corcoran*

Satellite transmitters

The sub-species of Bar-tailed Godwits are harder to distinguish at the Chinese staging areas and it is hoped that satellite transmitters can help unravel where the Gulf St Vincent birds breed. Unusually, no godwit were caught this season.

Researchers were successful in attaching a tiny satellite transmitter to a Grey Plover in March 2015. The bird spent its time moving between the beach, tidal flats and the back lagoons of Thompson Beach. The plover departed for migration on 20 April 2015 as a low pressure system came through with good south-easterly winds. In its first 48 hour track it was 2,800 kilometres away off the Kimberley coast between Western Australia and Indonesia. However the track changed markedly over the sea north of Derby, and the bird seems to have run into an unusually late low pressure system. The transmitter has either failed, or the bird may not have survived the storm.



*Grey Plover at Thompson Beach.
Photo: Tony Flaherty*

Protecting shorebirds

These studies highlight how reliant some shorebirds are on the same sites in the migratory flyway. Banding and flagging studies show that many populations of shorebirds rely upon the Yellow Sea as a stopover on their northward migration. It appears that extensive loss of these intertidal habitats are causing significant global declines.

Protection of shorebird feeding habitats in our gulf is important to their survival. The establishment of the Adelaide International Bird Sanctuary and the Northern Gulf St Vincent Marine Park will play an important role in global conservation efforts.

Contact us

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