

# Birds of the Mid Coast shorelines



Alan Stuart  
Hunter Bird Observers Club



Hunter Bird  
Observers Club  
Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

# What we will cover tonight

- The main locations
- The main birds
- Birds breeding on Mid-Coast shorelines
- Migratory shorebirds – insights into their amazing journeys
- Threatened species
- How you can help



*Shorebirds ... vs .... birds of the shoreline*

**Photos: Me, Trevor Murray, Dan Herbert, Alwyn Simple, Lois Wooding, Steve Merrett, Neil Fraser.**

# Mid Coast shoreline birds

- Migratory waders (“shorebirds”) & terns
  - >30 species
- “Endemic” waders, gulls & terns
  - >25 species
- Other
  - Birds of prey
  - Cormorants, Pelicans
  - Ravens, etc
  - ... save these for another time

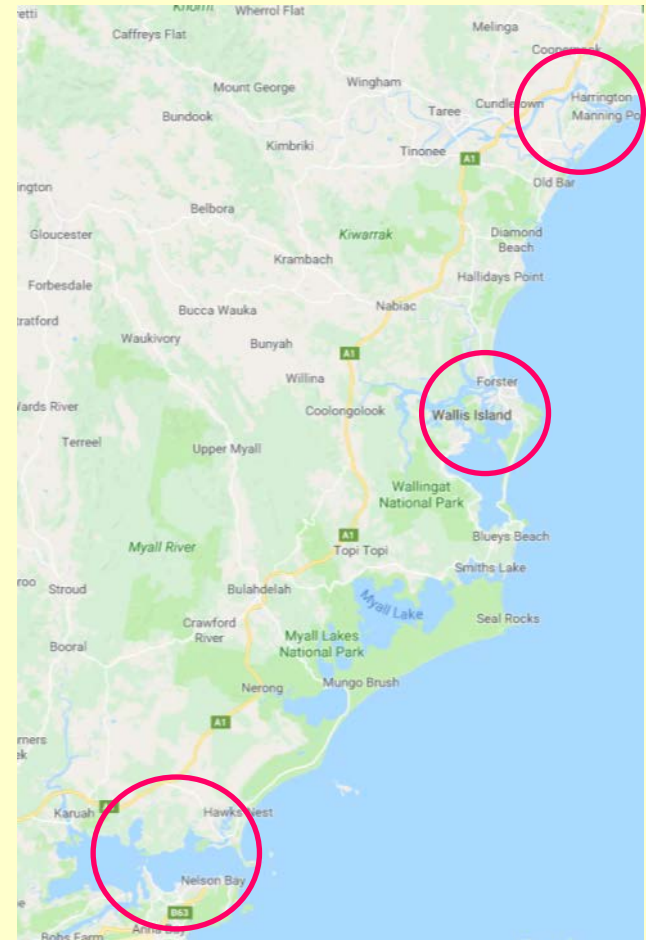


*Australian Pied Oystercatcher: NSW Endangered*



# The main locations

- Manning estuary (1,500+)
  - 30 species recorded since 2008
- Port Stephens (1,500+)
  - 33 species recorded since 2004
- Forster-Tuncurry (300-500)
  - 13 species recorded 2010-15
- The beaches
  - An estimated 8-12 species
- Plus, Myall Lake
  - Important for waterbirds and some birds of prey
  - Shorebirds mainly are recorded in “Myall Lakes Ramsar site”



# The main shorebirds

## Migratory Species

- Eastern Curlew
  - ~1% of world population (= 300+ birds) visit Port Stephens every summer; many immature (non breeding) birds remain over winter
  - Port Stephens has been **Internationally Significant** for Eastern Curlew ever since records are available (~100 years)
  - 35-45 birds in the Manning Estuary in summer. Rare around Forster/Tuncurry.
  - **Critically Endangered** under EPBC Act since 2015. Numbers in SE Australia have plummeted in recent years.



# The main shorebirds

## Migratory Species

- Bar-tailed Godwit
  - The most common shorebird in the Manning Estuary and Port Stephens
  - Port Stephens is **Nationally Significant**
    - 500-800 birds (0.2-0.3% of world population) present in summer.
    - 100-300 immature birds in winter
  - 150-200 birds in the Manning Estuary in summer and 20-30 birds around Forster/Tuncurry.
  - **Vulnerable** under EPBC Act since 2016. Numbers have declined substantially in recent years.



# The main shorebirds

## Migratory Species

- Pacific Golden Plover
  - 100-150 in the Manning Estuary in summer
    - A few immature birds sometimes over-winter
  - Uncommon in Port Stephens
  - Rare around Forster/Tuncurry



*Pacific Golden Plover*



# The main shorebirds

## Migratory Species

- Whimbrel
  - Port Stephens is **Nationally Significant**
    - 200-300 birds (0.2-0.3% of world population) each summer
  - 10-20 birds in the Manning Estuary sometimes in summer.
- Grey-tailed Tattler
  - Port Stephens is **Nationally Significant**
    - 100-125 birds (0.2-0.3% of world population) each summer,
    - Most important site in NSW for them
  - Uncommon elsewhere



Whimbrel



Grey-tailed Tattler



# The main shorebirds

## Migratory Species

- Double-banded Plover
  - Spend Feb-Sep in parts of the Mid Coast
    - Breed in the South Island of New Zealand
    - All the other migratory shorebirds come from northern Russia (esp. Siberia)
  - 50-100 birds regularly visit Old Bar (the lagoon and along Old Bar beach)
  - 10-20 birds visit Harrington and similar numbers sometimes in Port Stephens (concentrated around Winda Woppa / Corrie Island)
  - Beach surveys??



*Double-banded Plover: a NZ migrant in winter*

# Drab brown birds??



Lesser Sand Plovers



Bar-tailed Godwits



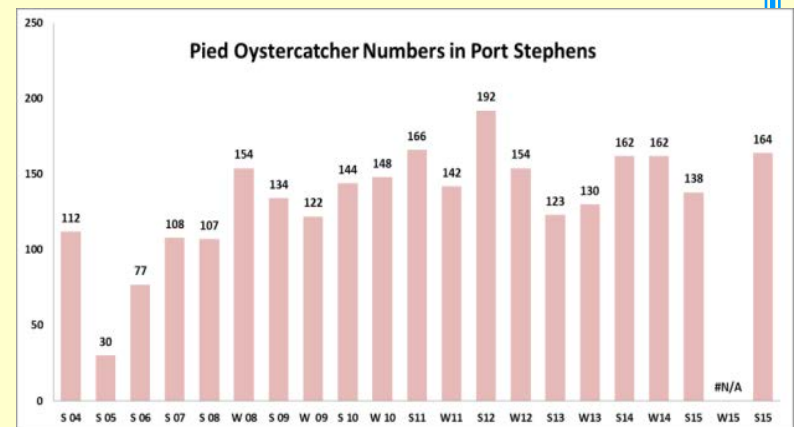
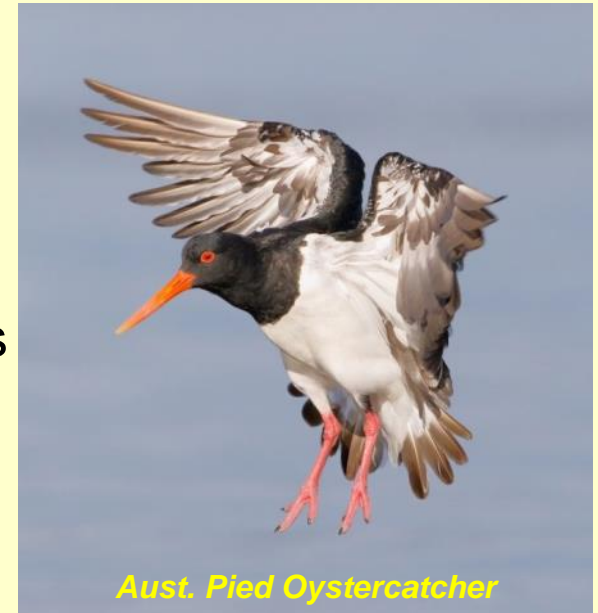
Grey Plovers



# The main shorebirds

## Australian Endemic Species

- Australian Pied Oystercatcher
  - **Endangered** in NSW
  - Port Stephens is a haven for adult birds waiting for an opportunity to have a breeding territory elsewhere in NSW
    - Surveys by HBOC/NPWS since 2004 find ~150 birds in summer & winter (30-40% of the NSW population)
    - Only recently birds confirmed to breed within Port Stephens
  - Port Stephens **Internationally Significant** for Pied Oystercatcher
  - 1-1.5% of the total population is present





# The main shorebirds

## Australian Endemic Species

- Aust. Pied Oystercatcher
  - 6-8 pairs breed in the Manning Estuary (it was 15-20 pairs)
  - Occasional autumnal influxes of larger flocks (20-40 birds) to Harrington and Forster/Tuncurry
  - How many of them occur along beaches between Port Stephens and Old Bar??
    - Lack of data (surveys are very infrequent and/or only partial)
    - Numbers have been rising rapidly along Newcastle Bight





# The main shorebirds

## Australian Endemic Species

- Sooty Oystercatcher
  - Classified as **Vulnerable** in NSW
  - Nests on rocky headlands, off-shore islands
  - Numbers in Port Stephens have been rising in recent years
    - Now 35-50+ birds  
(0.3-0.5% of the total population)
  - Port Stephens is therefore **Nationally Significant** for the Sooty Oystercatcher
  - 2-5+ birds are sometimes in Manning Estuary and Forster/Tuncurry



*Pair of Sooty Oystercatchers*



*Sooty Oystercatcher about to land*

# The main shorebirds

## Australian Endemic Species

- Red-capped Plover

- Australia's smallest endemic shorebird
- A prolific breeder, but eggs/chicks suffer from predation & disturbance
- Now uncommon in Port Stephens
  - 10-20 birds in summer, mainly around Winda Woppa / Corrie Island
  - Small/medium sized shorebird numbers have declined in Port Stephens since the 1980s (50-60 birds were recorded then)
- 20-50 birds in the Manning Estuary and several breeding pairs
- Probably also present along most beaches between Port Stephens and Old Bar



*Red-capped Plover (Adult male)*

# The main shorebirds

## Australian Endemic Species

- Beach Stone-curlew

- Classified as **Critically Endangered** in NSW (officially: 13 birds)
- Nests in dunes/clearings behind beaches, raising 1 young each year
- Severely impacted by predation (e.g. foxes) & disturbance on beaches
- A pair established at Old Bar in late 1990s
  - Southernmost in Australia. Breeding success from 2002 onwards
- A new pair established at Soldiers Point / Dowardee Island in 2010
  - Have bred in each subsequent season, successfully raising a chick every year
  - This is now the southernmost breeding pair in NSW
- Nest with egg found on Corrie Island in October 2017
  - Another new pair?? Fate unknown.



**Beach Stone-Curlew family**

# The importance of the Mid Coast for shorebirds

NSW Estuary	Total	Migratory	Endemic
Hunter	2695	2284	411
Port Stephens	1811	1624	187
Richmond	953	941	12
Botany Bay	870	801	69
Clarence	786	772	14
Shoalhaven	772	736	36
Manning	722	670	52

- January 2010 data (the latest available full set)
- All other NSW estuaries had fewer than ~500 shorebirds



# Gulls & terns

## Migratory Species

- Little Tern
  - **Endangered** in NSW
    - There are many threats to their
    - breeding success
  - 400+ birds in the Manning Estuary in summer
    - 50-100+ pairs attempt to breed
    - Formerly there was a Manning Point colony
  - A new colony established at Winda Woppa in 2016
    - 200+ birds present in early 2018
    - Breeding colony is growing (now ~30 pairs)
  - Formerly bred near Forster



# Gulls & terns

## Migratory Species

- Common Tern
  - 400+ birds in the Manning Estuary in summer
  - Occasional in Port Stephens
  - Possibly present along the beaches between Port Stephens and Old Bar



*Common Tern*



*Regular summer scene at Harrington and Old Bar: Common Terns and Little Terns roosting*

# Gulls & terns

## Migratory Species

- White-fronted Tern
  - Small numbers in Manning Estuary June-August. Rare elsewhere
- Aleutian Tern
  - 15-18 birds have been at Old Bar since mid December.
  - First ever reports for Australia (but probably some were present in late 2016)
  - Is this the start of something .... or just an fluke?



*White-fronted Tern*



*Aleutian Terns at Old Bar*

# Gulls & terns

## Australian Endemic Species

- Silver Gull
  - Common, widespread
  - Numbers usually are not high – but they are everywhere
- Crested Tern
  - Common, widespread
  - Sometimes 500+ in Manning Estuary but numbers vary considerably
  - Sometimes 100-200 at Forster/Tuncurry and in Port Stephens





# Gulls & terns

## Australian Endemic Species

- Caspian Tern
  - Widespread, in small numbers
  - Immature birds often present
- Aust. Gull-billed Tern
  - In small numbers in the Manning Estuary
  - Uncommon elsewhere
  - Immature birds often present



# Breeding Mid Coast birds

- Australian Pied Oystercatcher
- Beach Stone-curlew
- Red-capped Plover
- Little Tern
- Crested Tern
- Silver Gull?



*Pied Oystercatcher nest at Winda Woppa*

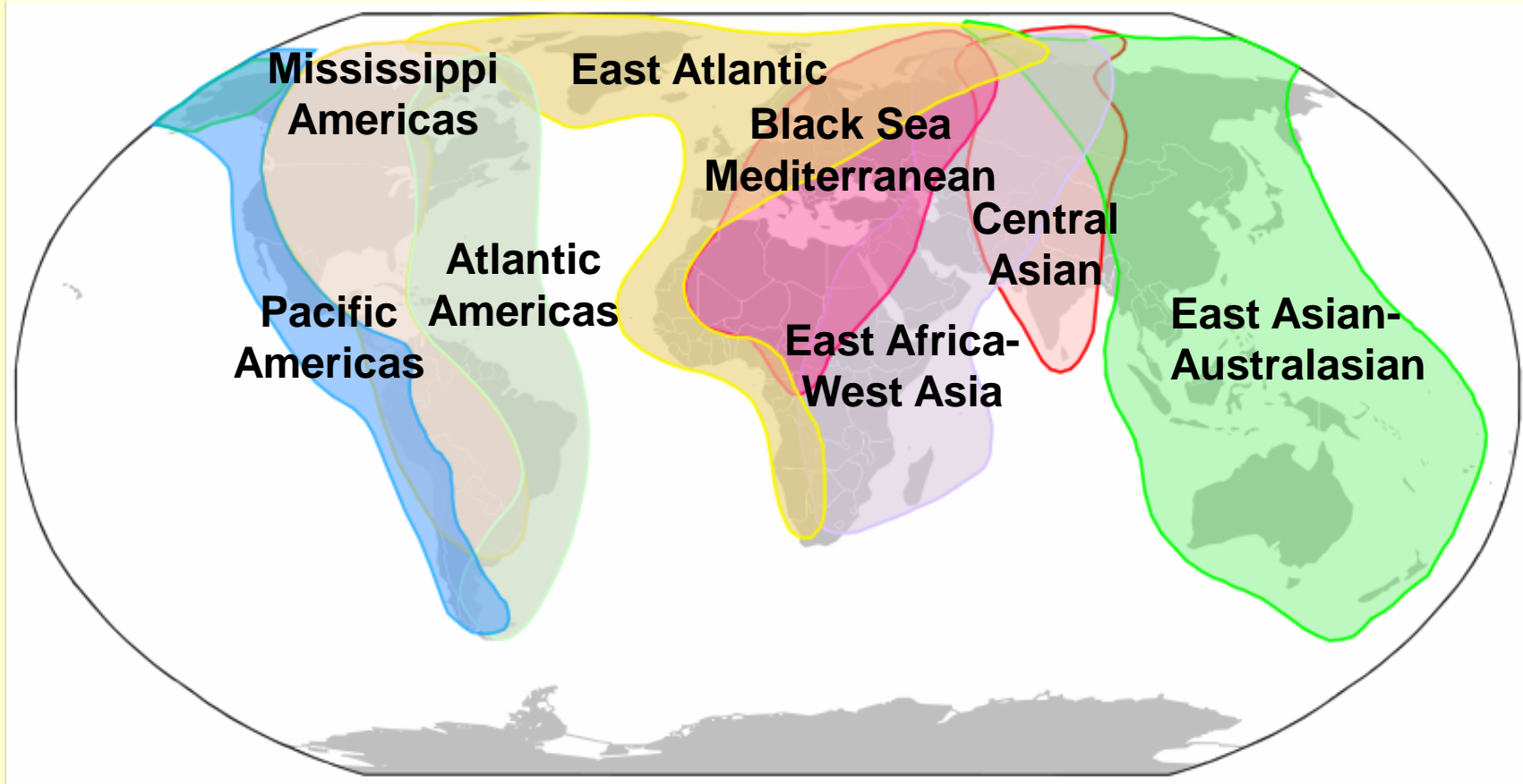


*Beach Stone-curlew egg on Corrie Island*



*Little Tern and 2 chicks at Winda Woppa*

# World flyways for migratory birds





# East Asian - Australasian Flyway



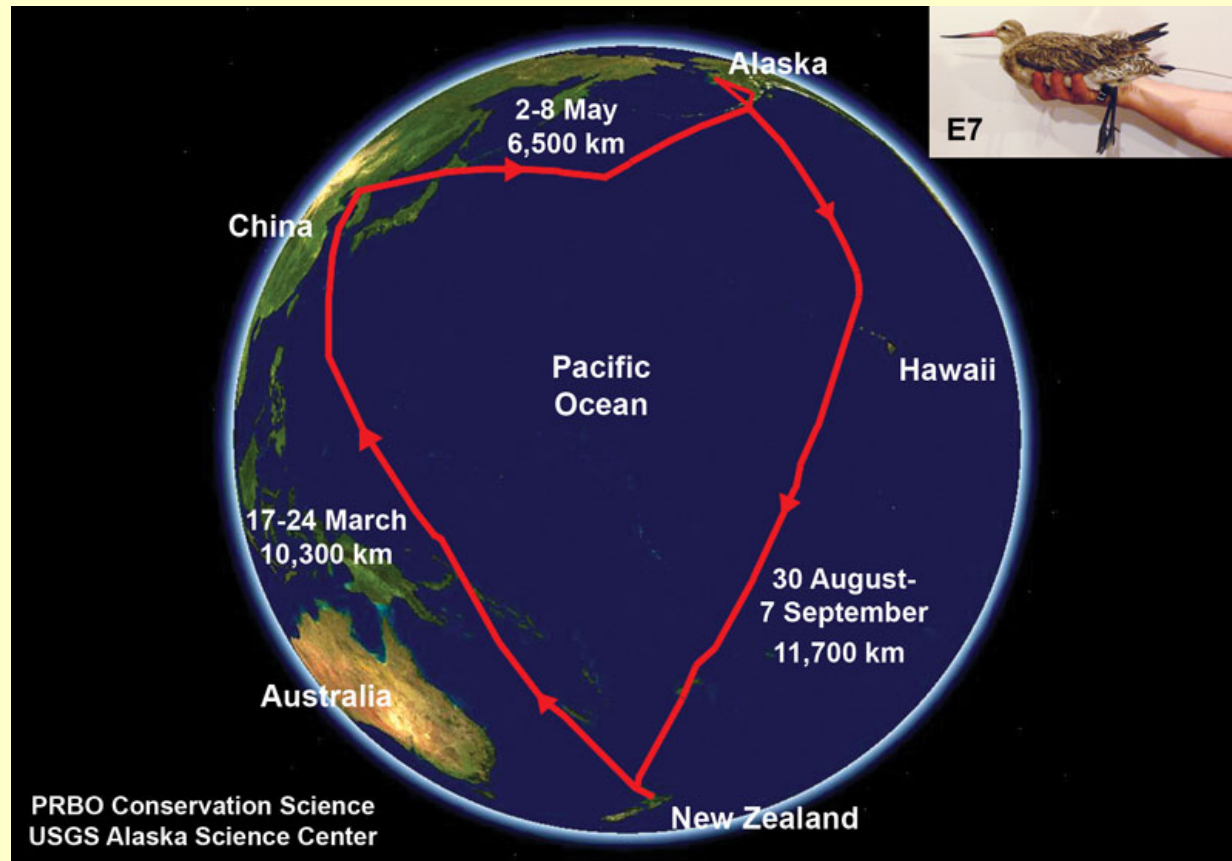
*Shorebirds breed in  
Siberia, North China  
and Alaska in June and  
July*

*Stopover at staging  
sites in Yellow Sea*

*Migrate south to Australia  
& New Zealand*



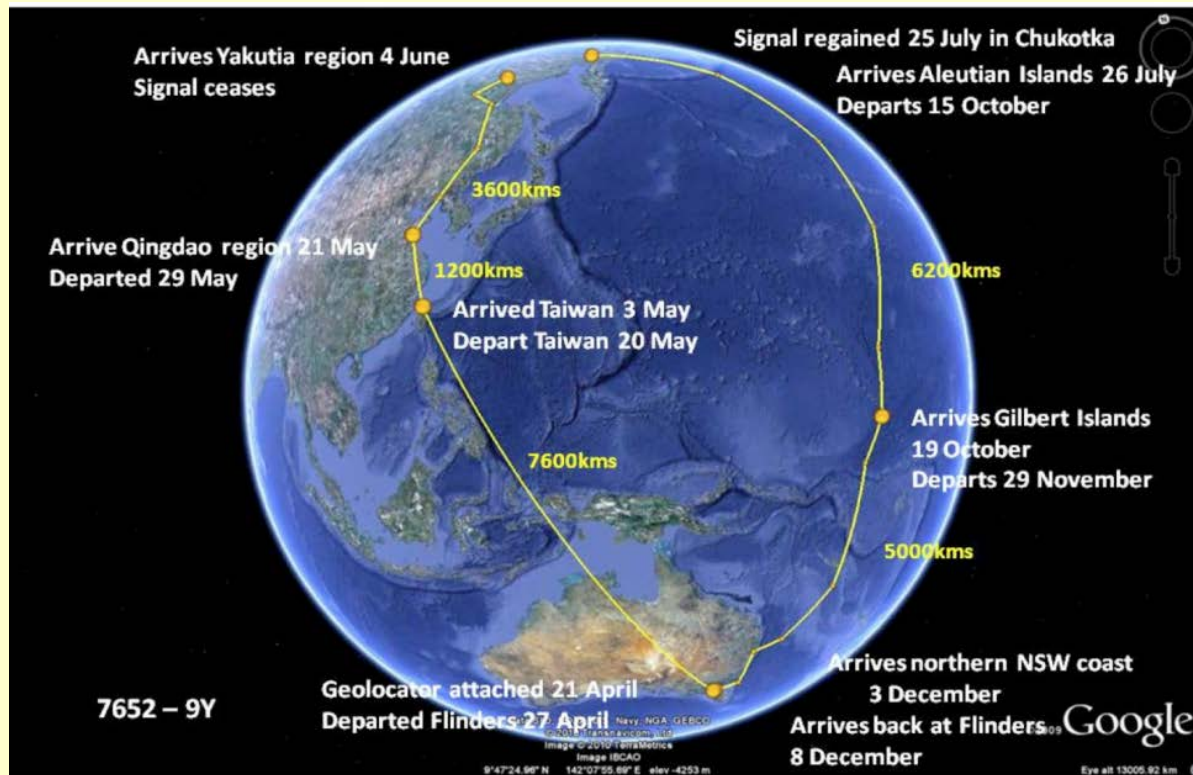
# Bar-tailed Godwit satellite tracking



- In 2007 NZ scientists fitted 16 Bar-tailed Godwits with satellite transmitters
- Birds flew non-stop to Yellow Sea, then non-stop to Alaska
- One godwit E7 flew non-stop 11,700 kilometres from Alaska to NZ in 9 days
- Total round-trip 30,000km! (for a 250-350g bird!)

# Smaller geolocators, smaller birds...

- Since 2008, geocator studies are being progressed to smaller shorebirds
  - Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Greater Sand Plover, Grey-tailed Tattlers ....



- Geo-locators were fitted to Ruddy Turnstones in southern Australia
- Birds flew non-stop to Taiwan, then on to their breeding grounds in 2 further stages
- Return via Gilbert Islands
- This bird weighs just 100-130g!

# Conclusions

- 55-60 shoreline species are present locally
  - ~30 migratory waders and terns
  - ~25 Australian endemics
- Total numbers in summer are >4,000 birds
- Manning Estuary and Port Stephens are the main sites
- The beaches between Port Stephens and Old Bar are under-surveyed
- 5 (perhaps 6) species breed locally in our estuaries and beaches
- Breeding species have a difficult time of it
  - Predation, disturbance, weather & tide events
- Six of our common/regular visiting species are classified as threatened in NSW/Australia
  - As are several of the less common species

# What you can do to help

- Learn where birds prefer to be and help protect those areas from disturbance
- Keep records, count numbers present, monitor the trends
  - Submit details to the national database
- Join a local bird club
- Join BirdLife Australia (national body: knowledge and advocacy)
- Get involved



birds are in our nature