

Count to shore up global bird population

Bird-loving Mandurah Cruises lends support to Shorebird 2020 official count

Armed with binoculars and telescopes, a crew from Mandurah Cruises recently spent the day counting. Counting shorebirds that is, as part of the national 'Shorebirds 2020' monitoring and conservation program.

The initiative plays a crucial part in the Peel-Yalgorup Wetland's recognition as a site of 'international significance' under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971).

Retaining this important protective status occurs through an official 'count', conducted annually, of rare shorebirds who migrate from the Northern Hemisphere via the East Asian-Australasian Flyway to Mandurah.

In the past, the Shorebirds 2020 program lacked resources needed to carry out counting in shallow, hard-to-reach parts of the Peel-Harvey Estuary. Thanks to support from Mandurah Cruises – using one of its shallow-draft tour boats – closer, less restricted access to the birds was achieved for the first time in 30 years.

Facilitated by the Peel-Harvey Catchment Council (PHCC) in collaboration with Birdlife WA, the 11th annual count took place in February 2018, spanning the full 26,000-hectare breadth of the Peel-Yalgorup System. It was conducted by experienced ornithologists and birders with the help of 57 trained volunteers, including 5 Mandurah Cruises' staff.

The collected data is currently being collated for submission to national conservation body, Birdlife Australia, with exact statistics on shorebird species' numbers to be publicly announced in the coming months.

"So far, results are showing an overall increase in bird numbers from last year, by almost 10,000 birds," said PHCC Chairman, Andy Gulliver. "We counted 36,995 shorebirds across all sites. This amount is just under the annual average of approximately 44,000 from counts over the past ten years."

Counting for Conservation

The Peel-Yalgorup System was officially recognised under the Ramsar Convention in 1990, designating it as a wetland of international importance. Identified as 'Ramsar 482', it is a vital part of the East-Asian Australasian Flyway.

Global data suggests that habitat damage is one of the biggest threats to shorebirds using the Flyway, with serious impacts associated with urban development and recreational activities.

"The shorebird count plays a major part in local conservation efforts, helping to inform national population trends and assist with information around what is driving any population changes here and across Australia," said Mr Gulliver.

The Peel-Yalgorup System sits within the Peel-Harvey Catchment and is made up of the Peel-Harvey Estuary and a series of saline, brackish and freshwater lake systems.

The Ramsar Convention, known as the 'Convention on Wetlands' is an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It was named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the Convention was signed in 1971.

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Travelling Shorebirds

The Peel-Harvey Estuary is home to tens of thousands of waterbirds, including many rare migratory shorebirds. These birds, usually found wading in groups, feed on swamps, tidal mudflats, beaches and open wetlands.

From October to March, thousands of shorebirds seek warmth and refuge in the area, travelling from as far away as Siberia, North China and Alaska.

Among these transient species is the Eastern Curlew, with only 21,000 birds believed to be left in the world. Other fascinating species include the Common Greenshank and the Red-Necked Stint.

“When the birds arrive here, they must regain their body weight lost in their travels before they fly back to Siberia to breed,” Mr Gulliver said. “Some birds can expect to lose up to 70% of their body weight in the 12,000-kilometre trip, so it is vital for their survival that they feed and rest undisturbed while visiting our Ramsar site.”

This wonder of nature is keenly observed by visiting bird watchers from all over the world.

Example Species – The Red-Necked Stint, our little globetrotter!

This tiny bird weighs around the same as a Tim Tam (around 30 grams). It breeds in Siberia, then travels to the Peel-Harvey Estuary for our summer. Despite its size, the Red-Necked Stint embarks on a 25,000-kilometre round trip each year. It takes six weeks for these birds to travel more than 12,000 kilometres to breed in the north, then 12 weeks to travel that same distance to Mandurah.

Mandurah Cruises’ Support

“The extra resources and special boat access from Mandurah Cruises made a significant difference to the accuracy of the count. These numbers are essential in assessing the role our Ramsar site plays as habitat for migratory shorebirds,” Mr Gulliver said.

Mandurah Cruises’ active support of the count also includes ongoing training of its crew members, plus sponsorship of the 2020 Shorebird Identification Workshop, run by leading ornithologist Bill Rutherford.

Mandurah Cruises’ Director, Myrianthe Riddy, says the specialised training enables its team to promote important messages about conservation and sustainability to the general public.

“Our crew are very well informed about the uniqueness of the natural environment here, in particular, about the fragility of the shorebird population. This allows them to share key conservation facts and to identify sightings of rare birds in their live commentaries on board our tours,” Ms Riddy said.

A member of the Shorebird 2020 team, Mandurah Cruises’ staff member Natalie Goddard, said the count was fascinating to be part of.

“It was a really long day, with eyes glued to binoculars and telescopes continually,” she said. “It was such a rewarding experience, getting to understand how shorebirds use these precious wetlands, to help guide future management of the area.”

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Images:

bit.ly/shorebirds-count

Further Information Sources:

birdlife.org.au | peel-harvey.org.au | murray.wa.gov.au

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