

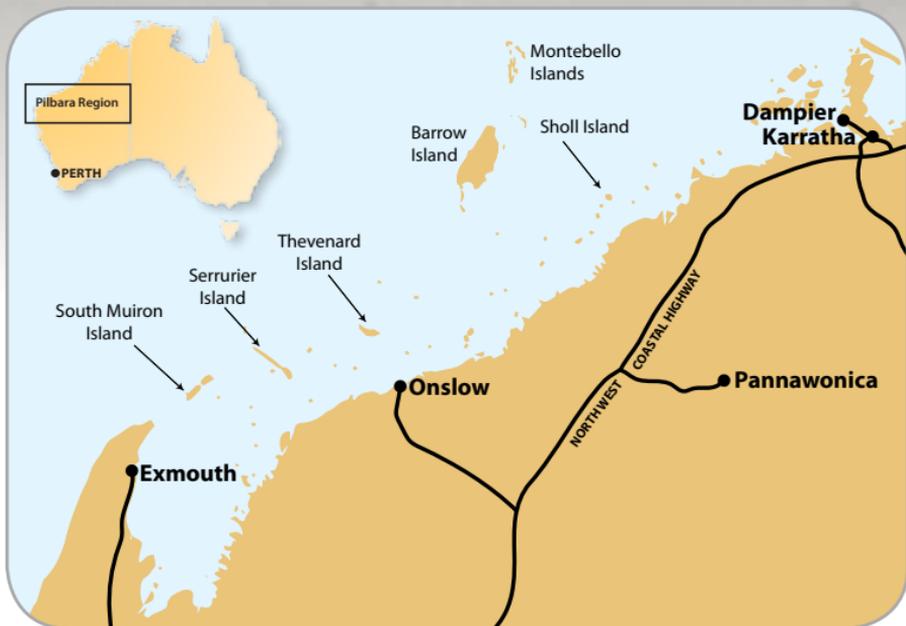
# Shorebirds and seabirds

## OF THE PILBARA COAST AND ISLANDS



Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions





# Shorebirds and seabirds of the Pilbara coast and islands

The Pilbara coast and islands, including the Exmouth Gulf, provide important refuge for a number of shorebird and seabird species. For migratory shorebirds, sandy spits, sandbars, rocky shores, sandy beaches, salt marshes, intertidal flats and mangroves are important feeding and resting habitat during spring and summer, when the birds escape the harsh winter of their northern hemisphere breeding grounds. Seabirds, including terns and shearwaters, use the islands for nesting. For resident shorebirds, including oystercatchers and beach stone-curlews, the islands provide all the food, shelter and undisturbed nesting areas they need.

## What is a shorebird?

Shorebirds, also known as ‘waders’, are a diverse group of birds mostly associated with wetland and coastal habitats where they wade in shallow water and feed along the shore. This group includes plovers, sandpipers, stints, curlews, knots, godwits and oystercatchers. Some shorebirds spend their entire lives in Australia (resident), while others travel long distances between their feeding and breeding grounds each year (migratory).

### TYPES OF SHOREBIRDS

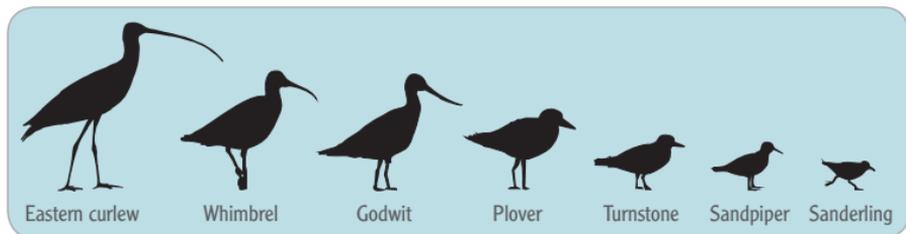


Diagram – adapted with permission from Ted A Morris Jr.

## LONG-DISTANCE TRAVELLERS

To never experience the cold of winter sounds like a good life, however migratory shorebirds put a lot of effort in achieving their endless summer.

Migratory shorebirds make some of the most impressive migrations of all animals. For some, the annual migration is close to a 30,000-kilometre-return journey from their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere to their feeding grounds in the southern hemisphere.

The migratory shorebirds of Australia migrate along a route known as the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (EAAF).

A ‘flyway’ is like a circuit of highways in the sky that migratory shorebirds fly, connecting them between their feeding grounds in the southern hemisphere to their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. As the journey is long, many need to stop along the way to refuel. There are 23 countries throughout the EAAF and many of these provide important areas called staging sites, where shorebirds can rest and refuel. Important staging areas include the Yellow Sea bordered by the coasts of China and the Korean Peninsula, the Southern Honshu region of Japan, Manila Bay in the Philippines and northern Australia.

## EAST ASIAN-AUSTRALASIAN FLYWAY





## THE RESIDENT SHOREBIRDS

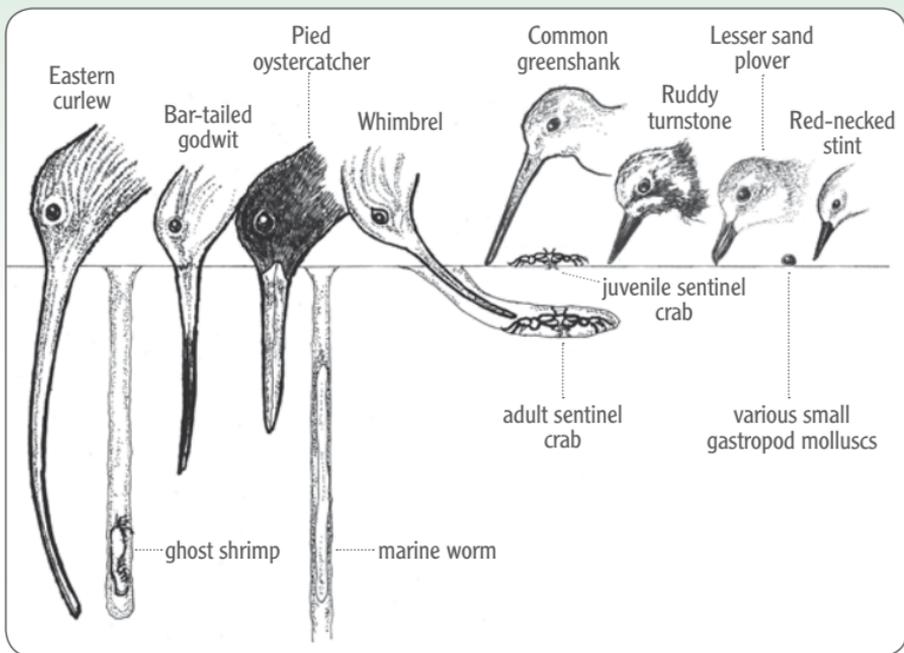
Oystercatchers, red-capped plovers and beach stone-curlews are among the species that call the Pilbara coast home. These resident shorebirds stay in Australia all year round and nest along the coast and on offshore islands.

## SPECIALIST FEEDERS

The unique shape of the bills among the different species of shorebirds means a variety of species can share the same shore with minimal competition. Long-billed species, such as bar-tailed godwits and eastern curlews, can probe deep into the sand, while short-billed species like ruddy turnstones and lesser sand plovers feed by pecking and probing at the surface in search for food.

The Pilbara coast and islands provide excellent feeding grounds for shorebirds, and enables them to eat enough food to increase their body weight by up to 70 per cent, providing enough fuel to migrate and breed.

## BILL SHAPES OF PILBARA SHOREBIRDS





## What is a seabird?

Seabirds include terns such as roseate, caspian, crested and fairy terns that often congregate in large flocks along the coastline and alongside shorebirds. However they differ from shorebirds because they forage at sea, feed upon fish and squid, only coming ashore to roost and nest.

Island habitats are important for seabirds such as terns and wedge-tailed shearwaters as they provide relatively undisturbed roosting and nesting habitats close to coastal oceanic foraging grounds.

## Threats facing shorebirds and seabirds

Unfortunately, shorebirds and seabirds are facing threats to their survival. Many species are experiencing significant population declines, causing them to be recognised as threatened species. As they aggregate in flocks along the coast they are particularly vulnerable to disturbance and predation. Factors that contribute to shorebird and seabird vulnerability include:

- Migratory behaviour and movements across international boundaries mean habitat must be protected across many jurisdictions.
- Long-distance migration imposes high-energy demands.
- Habitat requirements are specific, including close proximity of both roosting and foraging sites.
- Site fidelity and aggregation behaviour can lead to large numbers of individuals being affected by habitat change, disturbance and predation.
- Slow growth rates make young seabirds vulnerable for extended periods.
- Slow reproductive rates limit the ability of populations to recover from threats.
- Nesting habitat on the coast and on islands, including on beaches, can be impacted by recreation and natural events like high-tide flooding.

## CONSERVATION OF SHOREBIRDS AND SEABIRDS

Under the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and WA's *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, species, subspecies and varieties of native wildlife are listed as threatened or specially protected if they are at risk of extinction, are rare, or otherwise in need of special protection. Birds featured in this guide may have the following status listed under the EPBC Act:

**Critically endangered** – at extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.

**Endangered** – at very high risk of extinction in the wild.

**Vulnerable** – at high risk of extinction in the wild.

Many species in this guide are also granted protection under the EPBC Act as a 'migratory' species due to being listed under international conventions and agreements that Australia is party to.

Disturbance from human recreation activities is increasingly putting shorebirds and seabirds at risk. Activities carried out in feeding, roosting and nesting areas, such as walking (including with dogs), four-wheel driving, boating close to shore, jetskiing, windsurfing, kitesurfing and camping can have significant negative impacts on shorebirds and seabirds. Disturbance may force birds to change their behaviour from feeding or roosting to vigilance and anti-predator behaviour. This can have dramatic effects on their ability to rest and restore their energy, compromising their survival.

## SHARING OUR SHORES – HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Keep your distance – admire birds from afar. Look for bird nesting and activity using binoculars when approaching an island.
- When boating near islands, keep your speed to a walking pace and avoid areas being used by birds.
- While on the island keep your visit ashore brief and stay along the water's edge.
- Leave the small bird nesting islands for the birds – stay on your boat or in the water.
- Don't take dogs onto islands.
- Be mindful when driving along the beach as shorebirds and seabirds nest in the sand between the high tide line and up into the dunes. Stick to areas designated for beach driving.
- Take your rubbish home with you and dispose of it properly. Fishing line can entangle marine wildlife. If you come across other people's rubbish, please dispose of it too.
- Get involved – contact your local Parks and Wildlife Service office to find out more about shorebirds and seabirds in your area.
- If you find a sick or injured seabird or shorebird, contact the Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055.



## Bar-tailed godwit - northern Siberia

(*Limosa lapponica menzbieri*)

### Critically endangered

Length	37–39cm
Wingspan	62–75cm
Weight	250–450g
Bill	Long, slightly upturned bill, black with a pink base
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Intertidal flats, mangroves, sandy beaches, sandbars, spits and coastal saltmarsh
Diet	Molluscs, crustaceans, worms and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Northern Siberia and Russia
Did you know?	Bar-tailed godwits hold the world record for the longest non-stop flight of more than 11,000km.



## Eastern curlew

(*Numenius madagascariensis*)

### Critically endangered

Length	50–60cm
Wingspan	110cm
Weight	900g
Bill	Very long downward-curved bill; if it turns its head backwards, the tip of the bill can reach beyond its body
Leg colour	Blue-grey
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, intertidal coastal mudflats, tidal flats, mangroves, sandy spits, sandbars and beaches
Diet	Crustaceans, molluscs and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: July–April
Breeding	Russia and north-east China
Did you know?	The eastern curlew is the largest migratory shorebird in the world and is endemic to the EAAF. They are quite wary and tend to take flight well before any other shorebird.





## Great knot

(*Calidris tenuirostris*)

### Critically endangered

Length	26–28cm
Wingspan	58cm
Weight	128–216g
Bill	Slightly downward-curved black bill
Leg colour	Dark greenish-grey
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, intertidal mudflats and sandflats
Diet	Molluscs, worms, crustacean and occasionally sea cucumber
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Siberia and Russia
Did you know?	Great knots have been known to fly close to 6000km non-stop.



## Red knot

(*Calidris canutus*)

### Endangered

Length	23–25cm
Wingspan	45–54cm
Weight	120g
Bill	Robust, short straight bill
Leg colour	Greenish-grey
Habitat	Intertidal flats, sandy beaches, sand spits and mudflats
Diet	Worms, bivalves, gastropods, crustaceans and echinoderms
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Siberia and Alaska
Did you know?	Red knots can detect prey in the mud up to 5cm away using sensitive pressure sensors on their bill.



Non-breeding plumage



Breeding plumage

## Lesser sand plover

(*Charadrius mongolus*)

### Endangered

Length	18–21cm
Wingspan	49–58cm
Weight	75–90g
Bill	Short, thick black bill
Leg colour	Grey
Habitat	Sandy beaches, sand spits and mudflats close to mangroves
Diet	Insects, crustaceans, molluscs and polychaete worms
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–May
Breeding	Siberia
Did you know?	A handy hint to help identify the lesser sand plover: the length of the bill is equal to the distance from the base of its bill to its eye.



## Greater sand plover

(*Charadrius leschenaultii*)

Vulnerable	
Length	22–25cm
Wingspan	44–60cm
Weight	75–100g
Bill	Thick black bill
Leg colour	Grey
Habitat	Coastal wetlands, intertidal mudflats, sandy flats, sheltered sandy beaches
Diet	Crustaceans, polychaete worms, molluscs and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: July–April
Breeding	Mongolia, north-western China and southern Siberia
Did you know?	A handy hint to help identify the greater sand plover: the length of its bill is longer than the distance from the base of its bill to its eye.



Non-breeding plumage



Breeding plumage

## Ruddy turnstone

(*Arenaria interpres*)

Length	22–24cm
Wingspan	50–57cm
Weight	115g
Bill	Black, stout, wedge-shaped bill
Leg colour	Orange
Habitat	Rocky shores, sandy beaches, mudflats
Diet	Worms, crustaceans, molluscs, and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Eastern Siberia and western Alaska
Did you know?	Ruddy turnstones are named after their feeding behaviour of flipping over stones, shells, seaweed and other objects.



## Sanderling

(*Calidris alba*)

Length	20cm
Wingspan	40cm
Weight	50–60g
Bill	Short, straight, broad-based black bill
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Open sandy beaches, sandbars and spits, typically found foraging in the wave-wash zone
Diet	Worms, crustaceans, spiders, insects and occasionally fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–May
Breeding	North America, Russia and the Arctic
Did you know?	When sanderlings are in Australia, they will eat enough to gain 60 per cent of their body weight so they can make the return journey to their breeding grounds.



## Red-necked stint

(*Calidris ruficollis*)

Length	13–16cm
Wingspan	29–33cm
Weight	23–35g
Bill	Short, straight, slightly downward-curved bill
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Sheltered beaches, spits, sand banks, saltmarsh, intertidal mudflats and sandflats
Diet	Worms, molluscs, crustaceans and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Siberia and west Alaska
Did you know?	Red-necked stints can fly non-stop from north-western Australia to Vietnam and South China.



## Whimbrel

(*Numenius phaeopus*)

Length	40–45cm
Wingspan	76–89cm
Weight	300–490g
Bill	Long, downward-curved bill
Leg colour	Blue-grey
Habitat	Intertidal mudflats, sandflats among mangroves
Diet	Worms, crustaceans, molluscs and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Alaska
Did you know?	If the whimbrel turns its head backwards, its bill will reach the middle of its back.



## Grey-tailed tattler

(*Tringa brevipes*)

Length	25cm
Wingspan	51cm
Weight	86–135g
Bill	Long, slender black bill
Leg colour	Yellow
Habitat	Mangroves, rocks, beaches, reefs and intertidal mudflats usually associated with mangroves and seagrass
Diet	Polychaetes, molluscs, crustaceans, insects and fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Siberia
Did you know?	Barrow Island and the eastern side of the Exmouth Gulf regularly support more than one per cent of the global population of the grey-tailed tattler.



## Common sandpiper

(*Actitis hypoleucos*)

Length	19–21cm
Wingspan	32–35cm
Weight	37–50g
Bill	Straight bill, no longer than its head
Leg colour	Yellow–grey
Habitat	Coastal and inland wetlands, intertidal sand flats
Diet	Bivalves, amphipods, crabs and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: July–May
Breeding	Russia
Did you know?	Common sandpipers continuously bob and wag their tails while foraging.



## Common greenshank

(*Tringa nebularia*)

Length	30–35cm
Wingspan	55–65cm
Weight	190g
Bill	Long and slightly upturned
Leg colour	Yellow-green
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, mudflats, saltmarsh
Diet	Molluscs, crustaceans and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Extensive range in the Northern Hemisphere
Did you know?	Common greenshanks will bob their head if alarmed and make a distinctive 'choo choo choo' call.



## Sharp-tailed sandpiper

(*Calidris acuminata*)

Length	17–22cm
Wingspan	36–43cm
Weight	51–86g
Bill	Short, slightly downward-curved bill
Leg colour	Yellow-green
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, sandy beaches, rocky shores, intertidal mudflats and mangroves
Diet	Molluscs, crustaceans and insects; also known to ingest grit, sand and charcoal
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: August–April
Breeding	Northern Siberia
Did you know?	Sharp-tailed sandpipers are also known to forage on freshwater wetlands.



## Little curlew

(*Numenius minutus*)

Length	23–31cm
Wingspan	68–71cm
Weight	120–178g
Bill	Black-brown bill with a pink base on the lower mandible
Leg colour	Blue-grey
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, saltmarshes, coastal swamps, mudflats, sandflats, beaches
Diet	Insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: October–April
Breeding	Russia
Did you know?	If the little curlew turns its head backwards, its bill will reach the base of its neck.



## Marsh sandpiper

(*Tringa stagnatilis*)

Length	22–26cm
Wingspan	40–45cm
Weight	52–80g
Bill	Long, straight bill
Leg colour	Green–grey
Habitat	Coastal and inland wetlands, intertidal mudflats
Diet	Insects, molluscs and sometimes crustaceans
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: September–April
Breeding	Europe and Siberia
Did you know?	Marsh sandpipers are usually seen foraging in shallow water.



## Terek sandpiper

(*Xenus cinereus*)

Length	22–24cm
Wingspan	36–45cm
Weight	95g
Bill	Black, upturned bill
Leg colour	Orange
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, intertidal mudflats and mangroves
Diet	Crustaceans, molluscs, insects and seeds
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Juveniles: Year-round Adults: September–May
Breeding	Russia, Finland, Siberia and the Arctic tundra
Did you know?	Terek sandpipers change their foraging behaviour depending on the prey.



## Sooty oystercatcher

(*Haematopus fuliginosus*)

Length	39–48cm
Wingspan	72–91cm
Weight	580–750g
Bill	Red
Leg colour	Red
Habitat	Rocky shores, coral reefs and sandy beaches; usually within 50m of the ocean
Diet	Molluscs, crabs, crustaceans, marine worms, sea stars, sea urchins and small fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: July–September Nests: A scrape in the sand
Clutch size	1–3
Did you know?	Sooty oystercatchers are endemic to Australia.



## Pied oystercatcher

(*Haematopus longirostris*)

Length	46–48cm
Wingspan	72–91cm
Weight	650–750g
Bill	Thick red bill
Leg colour	Red
Habitat	Intertidal sandflats, mudflats and sandy beaches
Diet	Molluscs, worms, crabs and small fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: July–October Nests: Shallow scrapes in sand above the high tide mark
Clutch size	2–3 eggs
Did you know?	Pied oystercatchers will make a loud sharp high-pitched alarm noise if a nest is being approached. They can open oyster shells and other shellfish with their strong beaks.



## Red-capped plover

(*Charadrius ruficapillus*)

Length	14–16cm
Wingspan	27–34cm
Weight	35–40g
Bill	Short black bill
Leg colour	Grey
Habitat	Beaches, mudflats and saltmarsh
Diet	Worms, mussels and crustaceans
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: July–September Nests: Sandy beaches
Clutch size	1–3
Did you know?	Red-capped plovers are the most common widespread beach-nesting bird in Australia.



## Beach stone-curlew

(*Esacus magnirostris*)

Length	50–57cm
Wingspan	89–109cm
Weight	1000g
Bill	Large, thick brown/black bill with a yellow base
Leg colour	Yellow
Habitat	Strictly coastal, offshore islands, sandy beaches, tidal mudflats, sandflats and mangroves
Diet	Mainly crabs
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: August–October Nests: On open sandy beaches above high tide line
Clutch size	1
Did you know?	Both parents will care for the young for 7–12 months.



## Fairy tern

(*Sternula nereis nereis*)

Vulnerable	
Length	22–27cm
Wingspan	44–53cm
Weight	70g
Bill	Breeding plumage – orange-yellow Non breeding plumage – black
Leg colour	Yellow
Habitat	Sandy beaches and dune systems of offshore islands and mainland shores
Diet	Bait fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Resident sub population – year-round Migratory population June–September
Breeding	In the Pilbara: June–November Nest: Sand scrape
Clutch size	1–2
Did you know?	The main threat to fairy terns is human disturbance, particularly at breeding sites. Recreational activities such as dog walking, camping, jetskis, windsurfing and kite surfing, four-wheel driving and motorbike riding can adversely impact the species and lead to an increase in predation by introduced species and birds of prey.



## Bridled tern

(*Onychoprion anaethetus*)

Length	30–32cm
Wingspan	77–81cm
Weight	110–180g
Bill	Grey black bill
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Rocky shores and rock stacks of offshore islands
Diet	Fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	September–April
Breeding	In the Pilbara: September–April Nests: Offshore islands on rocky or coral-covered ground, concealed in crevices and under rocks
Did you know?	Bridled terns forage well offshore in blue water, usually in small groups.



## Caspian tern

(*Hydroprogne caspia*)

Length	53–60cm
Wingspan	127–140cm
Weight	640–680g
Bill	Red
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Sheltered sandy and muddy shores on islands and the mainland
Diet	Fish (5–25cm in length) as well as the eggs and young of other birds
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: March–November Nests: Shallow scrape in the sand in the open or among low lying vegetation
Clutch size	1–3
Did you know?	Caspian terns are the largest tern in Australia.



## Roseate tern

(*Sterna dougallii*)

Length	31–39cm
Wingspan	67–76cm
Weight	86–115g
Bill	Slender pointed black bill, red base in breeding season
Leg colour	Orange–red
Habitat	Rocky and sandy beaches, coral reefs, sand cays and offshore islands
Diet	Small pelagic fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: March–July and October Nests: Shallow scrape in the sand
Clutch size	1–3
Did you know?	Roseate terns nest on a different island each year.



## Crested tern

(*Thalasseus bergii*)

Length	42–50cm
Wingspan	90–115cm
Weight	250–545g
Bill	Yellow
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Exposed ocean beaches
Diet	Pelagic fish (10–50cm), also known to prey on turtle hatchlings
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: March–June Nest: Offshore island beaches in shallow scrape in bare sand. Usually in dense colonies
Clutch size	2
Did you know?	Crested terns are strictly a coastal species.



## Common tern

(*Sterna hirundo*)

Length	31–37cm
Weight	110–145g
Bill	Black
Leg colour	Black
Habitat	Ocean beaches, mudflats, sandflats, rocky shores and occasionally mangroves and sand dunes
Diet	Small fish – usually greater than 15cm
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	August–May
Breeding	Europe, Asia and North America
Did you know?	Common terns live for about 20 years.



## Little tern

(*Sternula albifrons*)

Length	20–28cm
Wingspan	45–55cm
Weight	49–53g
Bill	Breeding plumage: Yellow with a small black tip Non-breeding plumage: Black
Leg colour	Breeding plumage: Bright orange Non-breeding plumage: Dull orange-brown
Habitat	Sheltered coasts, sand spits, ocean beaches and occasionally mangroves
Diet	Fish – usually smaller than 10cm
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	Northern Australia (Kimberly–North Queensland) from September–January
Did you know?	Little terns plunge into shallow water to catch prey.



## Wedge-tailed shearwater

(*Ardenna pacifica*)

Length	46–47cm
Wingspan	97–99cm
Weight	320–510g
Bill	Dark grey bill
Leg colour	Flesh-coloured feet
Habitat	Vegetated islands, excavate burrows under dense vegetation
Diet	Fish, cephalopods, crustaceans and insects
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	June–April
Breeding	In the Pilbara: November–April Nests: In burrows on offshore islands
Did you know?	Recent research has indicated that more than one million shearwaters migrate to the Pilbara islands each year to nest.



## Eastern osprey

(*Pandion cristatus*)

Length	50–65cm
Wingspan	145–170cm
Weight	Females 1.0–1.1kg, males 1.2–1.9kg
Bill	Black
Leg colour	White
Habitat	Nest on natural and artificial stands along coastal habitats
Diet	Mainly fish
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: June–September Nests: On islands and the mainland; in a nest made of sticks and debris which can be used for many years
Clutch size	1–4
Did you know?	Eastern ospreys plunge into the water feet-first to catch prey.



## White-bellied sea eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucogaster*)

Length	75–85cm
Wingspan	180–220cm
Weight	2.5kg–4.2kg
Bill	Bluish grey with a black tip
Leg colour	White
Habitat	Offshore islands, beaches, reefs, lagoons, estuaries mangroves, saltmarshes and tidal flats
Diet	Fish, sea snakes, young seabirds including sooty and roseate terns and wedge-tailed shearwater
Can be seen in the Pilbara/North West	Year-round
Breeding	In the Pilbara: May–August Nests: On offshore islands and the mainland; in a nest made of sticks which can be used for many years
Clutch size	1–3
Did you know?	White-bellied sea eagles first breed at six years of age.



## More information

For more information on shorebird and seabird conservation please contact your local office.

### **Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions Parks and Wildlife Service**

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If you find a sick or injured bird, contact the Wildcare Helpline



Department of **Biodiversity,  
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