

Long-distance Aussie migratory birds 'under threat'

8 September 2014, by Karen Gillow

Two once-common migratory birds have been nominated this week for admission to Australia's list of threatened species.

Catastrophic recent declines in populations of the curlew sandpiper and eastern curlew have resulted in their nomination for threatened status, based on work led by researchers at the NERP Environmental Decisions Hub.

"Australia is the end-point of one of the world's great bird migration routes, that connects us with a dozen Asian countries," project leader Dr Richard Fuller says.

"The curlew sandpiper and eastern curlew both migrate from Australia each year to Arctic Russia where they breed, stopping off in China, Korea and other East Asian countries to refuel along the way.

"These amazing migrations are among the most awe-inspiring journeys of the [natural world](#), with birds covering tens of thousands of kilometres each year," he says. One bird, banded in Victoria, was next reported from Yakutya in Siberia, 11,812 kms distant.

"However populations of these great travellers have crashed, with drops in numbers over the past 20 years of more than 75% for the curlew sandpiper, and 68% for the eastern curlew", says Dr Fuller.

"This is a devastating loss for species that were once quite common."

According to Nick Murray, who studied coastal habitat loss in Asia for his PhD, there is a worrying possible explanation for the declines. "During their long migrations, the birds stop to feed at 'refuelling' sites in estuaries around the Yellow Sea. About two-thirds of this habitat has been lost in the past 50 years due to coastal development as the region undergoes an economic boom," he says.

Other threats here in Australia are also impacting these shorebirds. "Along our increasingly crowded coastlines, there is intense demand for recreational and commercial use, and coastal biodiversity can suffer as a result", explains Dr Fuller.

The Director of the NERP Environmental Decisions Hub Professor Hugh Possingham said "Conserving migratory animals is extremely hard because they fly across international borders. European countries, Canada and the US, have all worked closely with countries in Africa and Central or South America respectively, to conserve migrant birds".

"The Australian Government has been instrumental in setting up international agreements to protect migratory species across the Flyway, and the challenge now is to implement action to stop further decline, and restore lost habitat."

"Robust international action is needed to ensure protection of the whole migration route, because the whole system is only as strong as its weakest point" concluded Dr Fuller.

More information: Nicholas J Murray, Robert S Clemens, Stuart R Phinn, Hugh P Possingham, and Richard A Fuller 2014. "Tracking the rapid loss of tidal wetlands in the Yellow Sea." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 12: 267–272. dx.doi.org/10.1890/130260

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