

20th March 2025

Issue No. 128

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## Nature Observations around The Cape



# Cape Chatter

### *Following the 'flight lines' ...*

A recent observation of a dozen or so vulnerable *Pacific Golden Plovers* in a flock near the road verge of Wilson Rd at the west end of **The Cape**, signifies that there is an amazing natural wonder underway at the moment, literally beginning at our back door. A massive migration is in process, as thousands of migratory shorebirds start returning to their breeding grounds and leave our southern land to head way up into the northern hemisphere on exhaustive journeys—some non-stop for several days over thousands of kilometers of oceans and land, some high in the sky, and some going at great speed. Coming the other way, one little winter migrant shorebird, the *Double-banded Plover*, is going against the grain—some visit our local coast from the south island of New Zealand to spend the winter here. There is so much 'invisible' activity in the air as 'long haul' birds make remarkable flights following established 'flyways'. Most humans are probably oblivious to these grand feats of endurance and resilience—so let me share a little glimpse into the lives of some of our locals.



The *Double-banded Plover* has started arriving from the mountains of *New Zealand* and can be observed along the *Bunurong Coast* until around August. It is the only winter migratory shorebird to visit Australia and returns to breed 'across the ditch' in the summer months. This little one was pictured just west of F Break.



## Flight lines and flyways of local migratory waders ...

Long haul migratory birds each follow particular flight lines within known 'flyways'. There are several flyways that connect feeding grounds in the southern hemisphere to breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere regions. Most migratory shorebirds from Australia use the **East Asian-Australasian Flyway** between east Asia and the western Pacific although some venture up and down using the West Pacific Flyway, some the eastern Pacific. Here's what some of our recorded locals get up to!



### Ruddy Turnstone

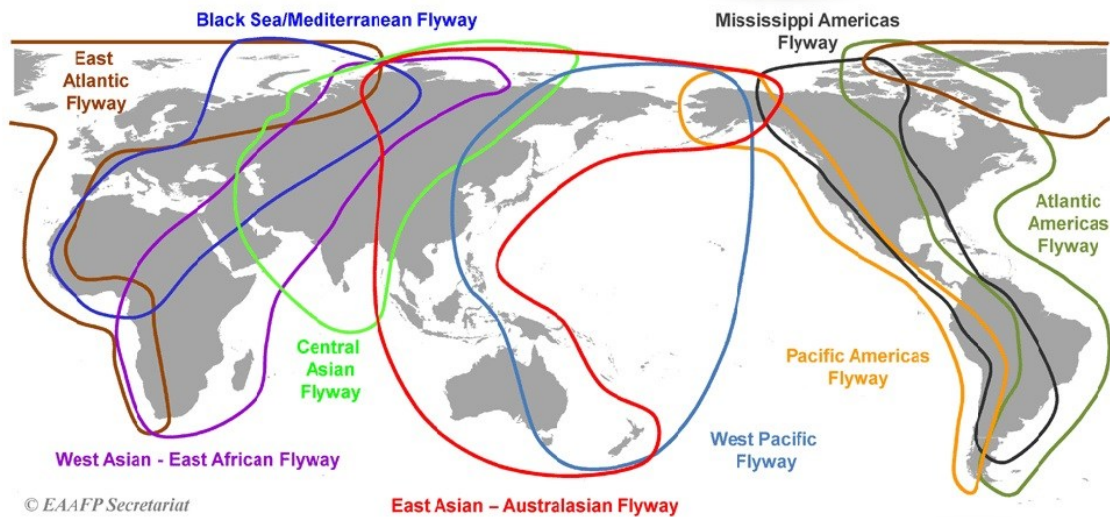
#### Endangered (Vic)

Breeds in Siberian tundra, stopping in east Asia then some transit the Pacific Ocean to reach Australia.



### Sanderling

Migrates from the high Arctic breeding grounds. Often hangs out with *Red-necked Stint* and  *plovers*, weighs in at only 60 g



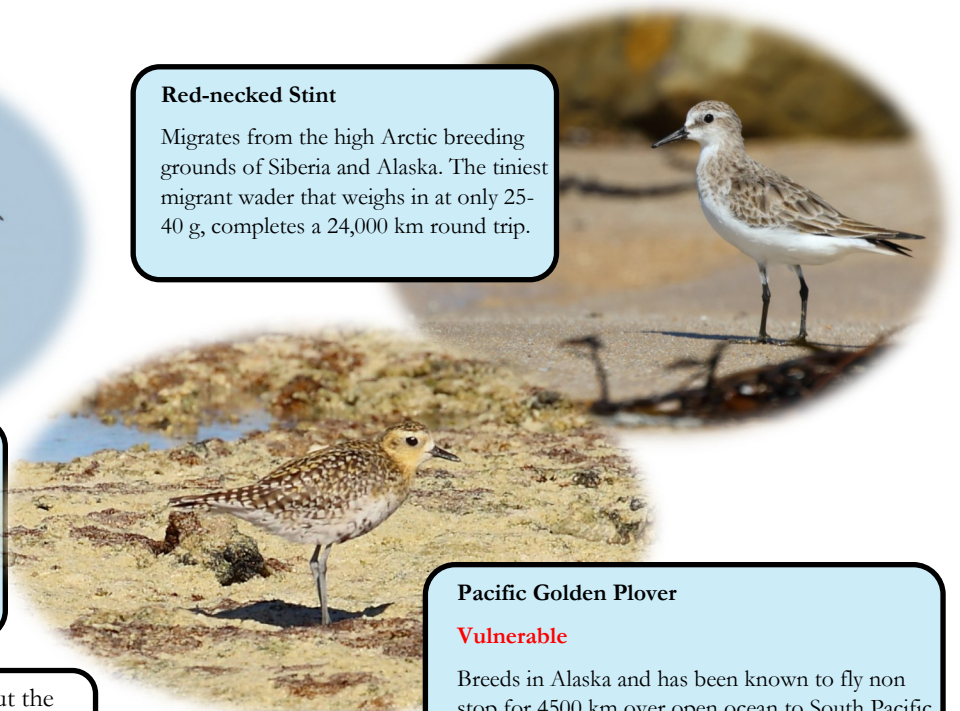
### Curlew Sandpiper

#### Critically Endangered

Breeds in high Arctic east Siberia, weighs about 80 g. Usually seen in flocks.

### Red-necked Stint

Migrates from the high Arctic breeding grounds of Siberia and Alaska. The tiniest migrant wader that weighs in at only 25-40 g, completes a 24,000 km round trip.



### Pacific Golden Plover

#### Vulnerable

Breeds in Alaska and has been known to fly non stop for 4500 km over open ocean to South Pacific islands before its onward journey to Australia.

If you are interested in reading more about the amazing journeys of these birds you can't go past "*Flight Lines*" by Andrew Darby.



## *Latham's Snipe ... on the move*

Just look at those big brown eyes! The first time I ever saw a migratory *Latham's Snipe* was about two months after settling into **The Cape** back in 2019, when one caught my attention moving among the newly planted wetlands. After seeing it move, I couldn't find it again, so great was its camouflage. I was immediately hooked on this bird. It is secretive, mysterious, cryptic, has beautiful big eyes and the most wonderful plumage. And, as I found out, it only spends six months of the year here—the rest of the time it makes remarkable journeys to and from northern Japan and north-eastern Russia where it breeds in the northern hemisphere summer. A staggering 20,000 km round trip (**see route map below**). That captivated me—to be in such close company with a long haul bird weighing in at about 200 g. Unlike most migratory waders on the coast, *Latham's Snipe* love it inland on muddy wetlands and sparsely covered grass/sedge patches in bogs and fields, and they appear to love the habitat at **The Cape**.



*Latham's Snipe arrive at The Cape around September and depart during March*

*The Snipe flight line indicates non stop flight of several days, speeds in excess of 100 kph reaching heights of several thousand metres*

*They make a couple of transit stops to forage and feed but arrive in an exhausted and depleted condition*

In 2024, *Latham's Snipe* were listed as a **vulnerable** species under the Federal Government EPBC Act 1990. Snipe numbers have been declining over the years from hunting and the decline in suitable habitat, particularly wetland habitat lost to development.



## Five years of Snipe Surveys ...

Spurred on by the presence of *snipe* within the area and the growing expansion of **The Cape** development, a small group of volunteers residents set out, back in 2020, to survey the species three times per season (September, December and January) as part of a national project looking at ways to save the species. The local findings have been instrumental in guiding the Developer in retaining important habitat areas used by *snipe* and creating new habitat areas as part of **The Cape's** overall landscape plan. So what is happening and where do the *snipe* hang out within the estate?

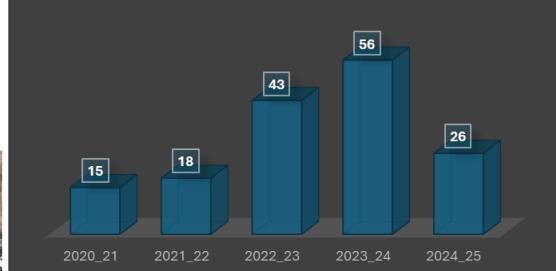
Latham's Snipe numbers by habitat location—2020 to 2025



\*Numbers represent the total birds seen in surveys over the five seasons

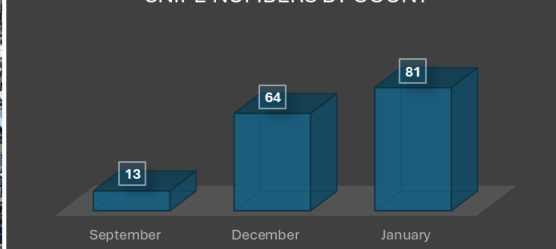
*The Cape's habitat is now supporting nationally important numbers of Latham's Snipe over summer and if this trend continues, it is on the cusp of being declared a site of national importance under the EPBC Act 1990.*

SNIFE NUMBERS BY SEASON



*Snipe* numbers have been steadily increasing since 2020 as the landscape has developed. The last season reflects a very dry summer and *snipe* numbers have been low across most of Victoria.

SNIFE NUMBERS BY COUNT



*Snipe* numbers are lowest in September when the birds are still arriving from their migratory flight, build up in December with numbers peaking in January.

### *Snipe hot spots*

The central 'bog' (66 birds) and natural south east wetland (48 birds) are the preferred locations of *snipe* within **The Cape**. The central creek line (24 birds) is also becoming popular for day time roosting, despite being close to housing.

### *Key Threats to Snipe*

- ◆ Loss of habitat
- ◆ Disturbance by humans
- ◆ Predation by feral animals
- ◆ Litter and pollution

## *It is just not migratory waders in the air!*

Another remarkable bird has been flying over **The Cape** during the warmer months. It is usually seen in conjunction with weather changes, especially preceding humid, westerly changes when there is a lot of invertebrate prey in the sky to feast on. I have observed it a couple of times this summer, including today, the 20th March 2025, preceding the change.



The *Fork-tailed Swift* (aka the *Pacific Swift*) **above**, has long, narrow and tapered wings and is amazing to watch. They change course quickly catching insect prey 'on the wing'. These birds migrate to Australia over the warmer months and originate in north east Asia. It is uncommon to see them this far south in Australia, but I have recorded their presence here in three of the past six years. They are seen in large foraging flocks hundreds of metres above the ground but will come lower if the prey is lower. You will often see them mixed at the lower levels with the much more common *Welcome Swallow* **below left**.



## *Other interesting bird changes*

You know there is change in the air locally when you start hearing the calls of birds that have been silent for a few months. In particular, two of the loveliest callers are back: the *Grey Butcherbird* (**below**) and *Grey Shrike-thrush*, (**below left**) belting out calls from early morning.





## Bird changes ...

The little *honeyeaters*—the beautiful *Eastern Spinebills*, which love the cooler months here, have arrived. They are a real treat to see if you can get a glimpse of them, as they are very quick.



The noisy and aggressive *New Holland Honeyeater* (**below**) are making the most of the *Coastal Banksia*, interspersed between territorial squabbles with the *Little Wattlebird* and chasing off the *Brown Thornbill*.



As the dry continues the smaller bush birds are still hanging out within the home garden where there is food and water. The tiny *Brown Thornbill* (**below**) in particular is making itself at home and remains a daily visitor to the garden.



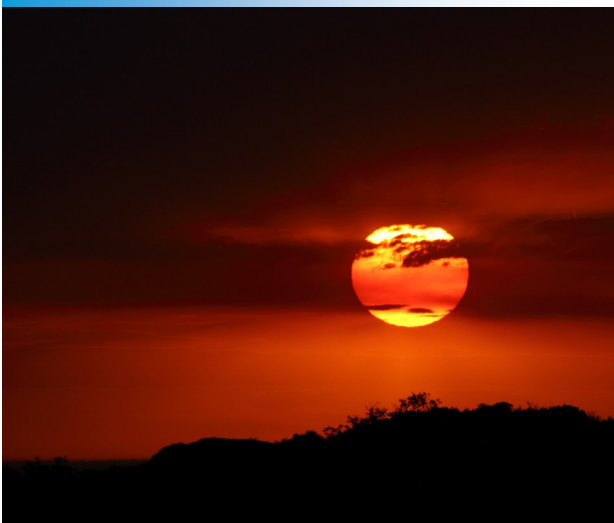


## *A big bow and not much rain ...*

The dry continues ... there was hardly any precipitation associated with this rainbow event a few days back. Hopefully this prolonged dry spell breaks. As I write this there has been a little relief. However the landscape really needs re-hydrating. Remember to keep your bird baths full and refreshed—they are so important for our animals in these dry times.



### Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the  
Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Contact David by email or through the website to report interesting nature observations at **The Cape**.

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