



Wildlife of Towra Point Nature Reserve

Migratory wading birds

Wading birds are among the world's most travelled migrants. They have an endless summer, crossing the equator twice a year as they travel to and from their breeding grounds in the Northern Hemisphere.

During their non-breeding cycle, wading birds, whose species include plovers, sandpipers, curlew and snipe, descend on the Southern Hemisphere in huge flocks. Some two million of these birds – many weighing as little as 30 grams – make an annual round trip of 25,000 kilometres to Australia.

Reaching Australia in September, the birds feed mainly on invertebrates that live in mudflats. In April they head north again to breed in the Russian Far East and Alaska.

Some of the birds that feed on the intertidal flats around Towra Point migrate over 12,000 kilometres from as far away as Siberia, China and Japan. These include the endangered golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) and the little tern (*Sterna albifrons*). Towra Point is also used by many non-migratory waders, such as the endangered pied oyster-catcher (*Haematopus longirostris*).

Wading birds prefer a combination of sand and mud, which supports small invertebrates such as worms, crabs and shellfish on which the birds feed. Some birds probe deeply into the sediment; others take food from the surface. Feeding differences are reflected in the shapes and lengths of their bills.

The little tern nests on low areas of sand and shingle. An island adjacent to Towra Point is one of the major remaining nesting sites for little terns in New South Wales.



Little tern nesting

Wading birds in the Towra Point area are associated with water, their preferred feeding habitat being intertidal beach zones, sand spits, tidal mudflats and saltmarsh. They are active, small to medium sized birds. The smallest is the red-necked stint, only 14cm long and a summer visitor from north-eastern Siberia and north-western Alaska. The largest is the Eastern curlew, with a length of 61cm. It is a regular spring and summer migrant from north-eastern Siberia.



Red-necked stint

The population of waders at Towra includes resident and migratory species. Nearly all are seasonal visitors. Most migrate from their northern hemisphere breeding grounds of the Arctic Circle, Alaska, Asia and Siberia. The double-banded dotterel breeds in New Zealand and the Latham's snipe flies direct from Japan without a stopover.

Most waders have long, slender bills - straight, turned up or down curved - used to probe deep into the sandy habitat for crustacea and invertebrates, their principal food. Some waders such as the oyster catcher use their bills to turn over shells, stones and seaweed in search of food. They are equipped with semi-webbed feet with long toes adapted for walking on soft feeding habitats and have long legs for their body size.

The following species have been observed using Towra Point for feeding or other activity:

- Eastern curlew
- whimbrel
- bar-tailed godwit
- grey-tailed tattler
- pied oystercatcher



Latham's snipe

The Australian Littoral Society in 1977 recorded 163 species of insects and 37 species of spiders, considered to be an underestimate of the actual diversity on Towra Point. The Society also recorded eight species of reptiles and four species of amphibians. Included was the Eastern long-necked tortoise which is intolerant of saline conditions and apparently is endemic to the freshwater Mirrormere Pond.

Eight reptile species were identified by the Society, including three snake species, namely, the red-bellied black snake, marsh snake and small-eyed snake.

There is little doubt that a more detailed study would expand this list.

A study of Botany Bay by NSW State Fisheries found that 47 commercial species of fish caught offshore spend their nursery and growing period within Towra Aquatic Reserve.

Following a concerted conservation campaign, commercial trawling was banned in Botany Bay to preserve and protect the juvenile fish and crustacea from exploitation.

All amateur fishermen are required to be licensed to fish in and around Botany Bay.



Eastern curlew



Pied oyster catcher



Whimbrel



Terek sandpiper