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Beach-nesting Birds

Birds that need beaches to breed include Hooded Plovers, Pied Oystercatchers, Sooty Oystercatchers, Little Terns and Beach Stone-curlews. All these species are now under threat in at least some parts of Australia. They all lay their eggs in scrapes on sandy or rocky beaches. Although the newly hatched chicks are capable of running soon after they hatch, they are unable to fly until they lose their down and grow some flight feathers.

Along the Surf Coast the endangered Hooded Plovers make their nests on sandy beaches during spring, and are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance. The Hooded Plover is non-migratory. Local movements to salt lakes immediately behind beaches occur in winter and individuals sometimes fly several hundred kilometres along the coast to meet up with others.



Little Tern



Little Tern chick

Threats

Eggs and chicks of beach-nesting birds have always been vulnerable to natural events such as hailstorms, storm tides or being buried by windblown sand, as well as being subject to predation. But now people have added extra threats, including:

- Predation by dogs, cats, foxes and rats.
- Trampling of eggs and chicks by people, as well as horses, sheep and cattle.
- Crushing of eggs and chicks by off-road vehicles driving along the beach.
- Disturbance by people on the beach, often with their dogs, allowing increased predation by gulls and ravens, death of eggs or chicks by exposure to too much heat or cold, and reduced feeding by chicks, causing their starvation.
- Becoming entangled in litter, especially discarded fishing-line.
- Death from oil-spills and other pollution.



Little Tern eggs

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Roosts for shorebirds and terns

There are about 30 species of migratory shorebirds that breed in northern Russia, Mongolia, China and Alaska and spend their non-breeding season around the Australian coast, and one species, the Double banded Plover, breeds in New Zealand and winters in Australia. Many shorebirds feed on intertidal mudflats and roost (rest) on beaches at high tide. They are highly vulnerable to disturbance from people and their dogs, by jet-skis and ultra-light aircraft. This is especially detrimental in late summer and early autumn when they are trying to build up their energy supplies, preparing for the long migratory flight back to the Northern Hemisphere.

When the level of disturbance prevents birds from gaining sufficient weight to migrate, their feeding grounds and roosts become untenable; many popular beaches have become useless as shorebird habitat because of frequent disturbance. The same issues apply to roosting terns and non migratory shorebirds: frequent disturbance causes the birds to use more energy, so they must feed more often, and if the availability of food is a limiting factor, populations will decline.

Sharing our Beaches with the Birds

Some special birds need beaches for at least part of their lives, for feeding, breeding or resting. However, beaches are also highly favoured by people for recreation: swimming, surfing, sunbathing, fishing, walking and, in some places, four-wheel driving. Where the needs of birds and the enjoyment of people come into conflict on the beach, the birds usually lose out.



Uncontrolled dogs are a threat to birds that breed on the beach, such as Hooded Plovers.

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Guidelines for bird-friendly beaches

By following some simple guidelines, we can share our beaches with the special birds that live there. When you visit the beach:

- Look for signs that birds may be nesting, and stay away from them. In general, the closer you stay to the water's edge, the less likely you are to disturb breeding birds. In southern Australia, most beach-nesting birds breed between September and December. In northern Australia, Beach Stone-curlews breed mainly July–October, and Oystercatchers June–August.
- Ensure that your dog is under effective control. This usually means that it must be leashed at all times on the beach; check local regulations. Do not allow your dog to wander or scavenge above the high-tide line, where it may crush eggs or kill chicks, and do not let it chase flocks of roosting shorebirds (critical in the pre-migratory period between February and April).
- Keep cats in at night time as they are natural hunters of wildlife.
- Recreational vehicles are not permitted on Victorian beaches.
- Dispose of litter properly. Never discard fishing line before chopping it up or melting it into a blob.
- Become informed. Look out for information and warning signs. Observe local regulations regarding sensitive areas. Learn about the birds that are found on your favourite beach, as well as their needs and the threats that they face.

Guidelines for bird-friendly beaches (continued)

- Support community conservation. Join environmental protection, research and monitoring programs of community conservation organisations — such as Birds Australia's Beach-nesting Birds project, or a wader study group — and help look after our beach birds.

Let's allow the birds to enjoy our beaches as much as we do!

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Hooded Plovers in a shelter set up by volunteers

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The Hooded Plover

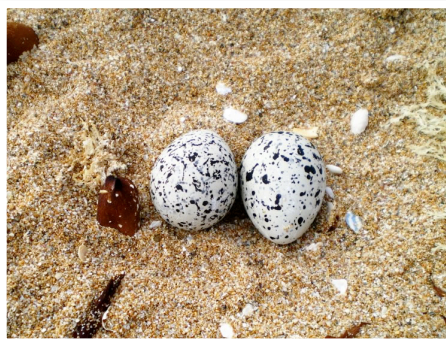
Length 19–23 cm; wingspan 36–44 cm; weight 90–100 g.

The Hooded Plover is a medium-sized sandy-brown plover. It has a black head and a white nape, and the black hindneck collar extends around and forks onto the breast. The underparts are white. The iris is dark brown, with a red eye ring. The legs are pink. Males and females are similar. Juveniles look like adults, but without the black head, hind neck and front of mantle, which are sandy-brown instead. Juvenile legs are pale orange. For detailed information on their development from egg to adult, see: <http://www.myhoodie.com.au/Age.html>

In Victoria, the highest densities of Hooded Plovers occur on beaches with large amounts of beach-washed seaweed. Densities are lowest on narrow, steep beaches, where there are few or no dunes, and where human activities are most intensive. They make a nest by scraping the sand at the high water mark where one to two eggs are laid. On the Surf Coast they are found at Pt. Roadknight and Anglesea.



Hooded Plover and chick



Hooded Plover eggs

The Hooded Plover's diet includes insects, sandhoppers (*Orchestia* sp.), small bivalves, and soldier crabs (*Mictyris platycheles*). It forages at all levels of the beach during all tide phases. It is most usually seen in pairs or small groups, darting about at the water's edge as waves recede, bobbing and pecking along the shore.

In Victoria 'The Hoodie' is listed as a vulnerable species with only about 400 birds being sighted. The Hooded Plover's survival depends on undisturbed beaches, which are needed for successful breeding. Dogs, foxes and humans walking on the high tide line can unknowingly trample the eggs. Off-road vehicles are a particular problem.

What is being done to protect 'The Hoodie'?

The Great Ocean Road Coastal Committee has:

- installed special signs on Point Roadknight beach during each breeding season to alert beachgoers to nesting areas. These signs advise on appropriate human behaviour around these sites.
- fenced off special breeding sites from humans, dogs, cats and foxes.

Birds Australia:

- Volunteers visit the site every day during breeding season to monitor the birds and deal with situations that may threaten the birds. You might like to help them out.

<http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/our-projects/5-steps-to-volunteering-for-hoodies.html>