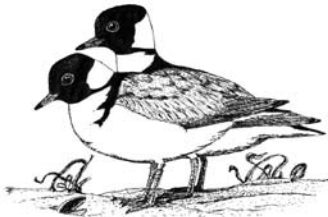


Sharing our Beaches with the Birds

Bird-friendly behaviour for the beach



Hooded Plovers make their nests on sandy beaches during spring, and are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance. © Birds Australia

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. By following some simple guidelines, we can share our beaches with the special birds that live there.

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. 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.

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.

Penguin problems

Little Penguins breed in many places around the southern coastline of Australia. They usually have to waddle across an open beach to get to their nesting burrows. While on the beach they are vulnerable to attacks by foxes and roaming dogs, disturbance from people and some are hit by vehicles on beach-side roads. They are most vulnerable while crossing the beach after sunset and before sunrise, something that should be considered by people who use our beaches in the evening or early morning.

Guidelines for bird-friendly beaches

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).
- Take care with recreational vehicles. Regulations vary between states. Where permitted, keep all off-road vehicles within designated areas. During the breeding season, be sure to drive only below the high-tide mark, and time your journey to avoid driving at high tide.
- 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.
- 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!