

The Hooded Plover: First Confirmed Record in Queensland, the Longest Movement yet Recorded, and a Discussion of the Range Contraction in Eastern Australia

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Summary

We report a record of a Hooded Plover from Bribie Island in south-eastern Queensland. Although this may not represent the most northerly occurrence of the species, it is the first confirmed record from Queensland. Historical reports from Queensland are reviewed. Notes are provided on the distribution of Hooded Plovers in northern New South Wales, and an estimate of the minimum distance the bird must have moved is made. That distance represents the longest known movement made by this species. A review of the literature suggests that southern Queensland was formerly part of the range of the species, and that fragmentation preceded a large-scale contraction of range in eastern Australia.

Introduction

The Hooded Plover *Thinornis rubricollis* is endemic to southern Australia. The accepted current distribution of the species in south-eastern Australia includes the coasts of Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and southern New South Wales (Marchant & Higgins 1993). Here, we detail a sight record from Queensland, discuss the implications of this record, and examine the current and historical distribution of Hooded Plovers in eastern Australia.

The range of the Hooded Plover has declined in eastern Australia (Blakers et al. 1984). This has been accepted in the literature, without a discussion of what the former range was, and therefore the extent of the contraction, or how it might have occurred. Given that the species is considered Rare (Garnett 1992), it seems useful to understand this process: an understanding of a major contraction of range may provide indicators for future or ongoing contraction or even suggest possible solutions or preventative measures for further range contractions.

Since 1993, DC has conducted monthly surveys of six low-tide feeding sites in the Pumicestone Passage, in south-eastern Queensland. In addition, monthly monitoring of high-tide roost sites has been carried out on Bribie Island and in adjacent areas of the Moreton Bay Marine Park. Weekly counts of waders along the eastern side of Bribie Island were conducted, resulting in a good knowledge of the waders using the areas. Any unusual wader moving into or through the area was thus likely to be detected.

The Queensland sighting

On 18 May 1998, DC was conducting a regular wader survey on the sandy ocean beach at the northern end of Bribie Island (26°53'S, 153°07'E) in south-eastern Queensland. An unusual wader was flushed from the beach, about 1 km south of an old concrete fort (see map in Durrant & MacRae 1994), and it was noted that, in flight, there was a distinct wing-bar. After the bird landed, closer inspection revealed it to be a juvenile Hooded Plover. The observer has had field



The juvenile Hooded Plover at Bribie Island, Queensland, 19 May 1998

Plate 3

Photo: Donald Cameron

experience with Hooded Plovers in Western Australia, including participation on expeditions conducted by the Western Australian Museum.

As Hooded Plovers are not usually found in the area, the following day, DC and W. Curley returned to the same site and again found the bird on the beach, feeding and wading; it was occasionally seen panting. DC took a series of twelve photographs of the bird from 0930 h onwards; all clearly show a juvenile Hooded Plover (Plate 3).

The northernmost record in Australia of a Hooded Plover is from Wooramel River crossing, Western Australia (25°48'S) (Blakers et al. 1984, Marchant & Higgins 1993). On the east coast, this latitude corresponds with Fraser Island, about 120 km farther north than Bribie Island.

Identification and description

Two species which may be confused with a juvenile Hooded Plover are the Sanderling *Calidris alba* and the Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (a vagrant to Australia); other ringed plovers are also possible vagrants (Marchant & Higgins 1993). In addition, Double-banded Plovers *Charadrius bicinctus* can be misidentified by some observers as juvenile Hooded Plovers, and, with poor or brief views, Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*, especially in flight, can be easily mistaken for Hooded Plovers (M.A. Weston pers. obs.; see Plate 4). Plate 3 shows



An adult Hooded Plover (far right) flying in a flock of Ruddy Turnstones at Thirteenth Beach, near Barwon Heads, Victoria

Plate 4

Photo: Michael A. Weston

that excellent views were obtained, and is sufficient to demonstrate the specific identity of the bird on Bribie Island. Consequently, only a brief description is provided.

The bird was in full juvenile plumage. It had light grey upperparts, a distinctive white band over the nape, and a grey hood. There was a rather marked white supercilium; a similar stripe is shown in a photograph of a juvenile Hooded Plover in Pringle (1987). The legs appeared to be a very pale gold colour, but this may have been because of the bright sunlight reflected from the sand. The orbital ring was reddish, and duller than usually seen in the adult. All of these characters agree with the description of juvenile Hooded Plovers given in Marchant & Higgins (1993). The black at the tip of the bill of the bird was poorly defined, running back over the nostrils and towards the head. This is typical in juveniles in Victoria (M.A. Weston unpubl. data), where the black is less well defined on the bill of the juvenile than is shown in Marchant & Higgins (1993). A study of colour-banded birds in Victoria has revealed a great deal about how plumage changes with age in this species: juvenile plumage persists for less than one year (M.A. Weston unpubl. data). Based on this information, there is no doubt that the bird on Bribie Island had hatched in the 1997/98 breeding season.

The status of the Hooded Plover in Queensland

Although the Hooded Plover has formerly been reported in Queensland, modern texts have generally disregarded the possibility of Queensland being a part of the original range (e.g. Marchant & Higgins 1993). This is understandable, because of the reluctance of some workers to accept evidence of a distribution which included Queensland (North 1913–14, Serventy 1943), and the omission of Queensland from the range by some workers who were active at the time that the Queensland records were being reported (see opposite).

Below we present historical reports from Queensland (see Figure 1). In addition, we offer some discussion of the validity of these reports (bracketed figures are latitudes):

1. Ramsay (1888) included Wide Bay (25°52'S) in the range (under the name *Aegialitis monarchus*). Neither the source nor any other details were provided. All other areas listed (New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia) are within the current distribution.
2. The Salvin-Godman Collection of the British Museum lists two specimens from Queensland. Both were adults and were made into skins, but no other details were given (Sharpe 1896). However, Serenty (1943) considered that the locality data concerning the specimens was possibly incorrect on the basis of a communication from T. Iredale. Indeed, Hindwood (1945) subsequently found errors in the position of a specimen of an Eyrean Grasswren *Amytornis goyderi* quoted in Sharpe (1883), one of the *Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum* series that described the Hooded Plover specimens. Despite the presence of some errors in the catalogue, the doubt cast on the accuracy of the labels on the specimens of Hooded Plovers is difficult to accept, as the reasons for it are not elucidated. We can only guess that the main reason for rejection of the labels was based on the assumption that Hooded Plovers had never occurred in Queensland.
3. Campbell (1900) included southern Queensland in the range of the species, but provided no supporting evidence; no source was cited.
4. Berney (1903) reported Hooded Plovers as common on bore streams around Richmond (20°44'S) in the summer of 1899–1900. He even mentioned that a female was shot for identification purposes. It is difficult to accept this report, given the inland nature of the locality, the habitat (bore streams have never been recorded as a suitable habitat, not even in Western Australia, where semi-arid environs are inhabited), and the very northerly location. Surprisingly, he also recorded Black-fronted *Elseya melanops* and Red-kneed Dotterels *Erythrogonyx cinctus* at the same location, so we might consider that these species were not confused with Hooded Plovers. Based on his publications, Berney's activities were confined to northern Queensland (see Whittell 1954) and he may never have encountered a Hooded Plover in the field before this report. The species was not mentioned in his subsequent publications from the same area (for example, see Berney 1907), even though he once again recorded Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels. The omission of the Hooded Plover from the later lists, without explanation, might suggest that an embarrassing mistake had been made.
5. The official checklist of Australian birds (RAOU 1913) included Queensland within the range, along with all other states where the species currently occurs. No source or details were offered. The 1926 Checklist (RAOU 1926) recorded Sydney as the northern limit of the species' range in eastern Australia. Neither Checklist provided the source of the information used to determine the distribution, though it is interesting to note that the 1926 Checklist was published after North (1913–14), who questioned the inclusion of Queensland in the range (see below).
6. North (1913–14) cited the specimens recorded by Sharpe (1896) and the Wide Bay report by Ramsay (1888) as the reasons for including Queensland within the range; he also felt the need to state '... personally I have never seen or

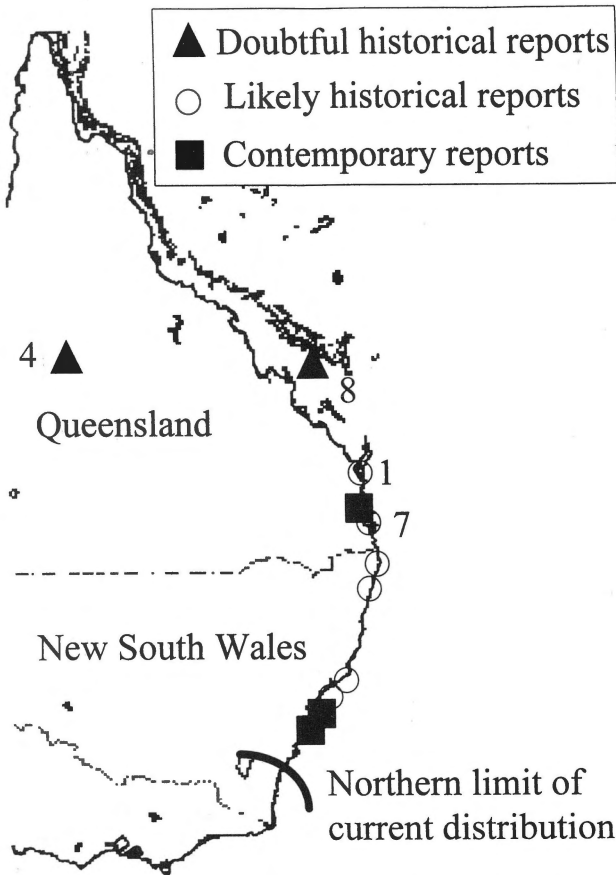


Figure 1. Sites of specific historical reports of the Hooded Plover, and their relation to the contemporary northern records and the current distribution. Numbers refer to those in text on the status of the Hooded Plover in Queensland.

heard of a specimen that was obtained in any locality north of Sydney...' (p. 283).

7. Of particular interest is the report of a flock on Peel Island, in Moreton Bay, in April 1917 (Agnew 1921). However, none of the species with which Hooded Plovers could be confused was mentioned.
8. Marshall (1934) described a survey of some islands of the Whitsunday Group ($20^{\circ}10'S$), off the eastern coast of Queensland. He reported that the Hooded Plover occurred in 'moderate' numbers. On the basis of this report, the Hooded Plover was included in a list of the birds of the Great Barrier Reef (Kikkawa 1976). The birds were also listed in the habitats in which each had been found most commonly. For the Hooded Plover, this was said to be exposed coral reefs and rocky shores. This unlikely habitat, the fact that such a numerous population was undetected by other ornithologists, and the low latitude all suggest that the birds were misidentified. It is noteworthy that he did not record

Ruddy Turnstones on the Whitsunday Islands, despite the fact that this species is widely distributed in coastal Queensland and on nearby islands (Kikkawa 1976, Storr 1984, Lane 1987). Perhaps his 'Hooded Plovers' were really Ruddy Turnstones (see p. 9).

9. The Hooded Plover was included in the *List of Queensland Birds*, and was said to be distributed around tropical and sub-tropical seas, including shorelines and non-continental islands, inhabiting saline habitats, including salt pans, estuaries and mangroves (Lavery 1969). No source was given for this inclusion, nor was there any indication of how the list was compiled. Some reports were evidently from the literature and personal communications; some were from the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme. It seems that the list also included information from other sources; the reference to tropical seas possibly derives from the Whitsunday record (Marshall 1934).

The inclusion of Queensland in the range of the Hooded Plover was not universally accepted by early workers; Mathews (1913) excluded Queensland but included all other states in which the species currently occurs. The species is not included in the list of Queensland birds (Storr 1984), and we are not aware of any confirmed records from Queensland until now, despite considerable ornithological attention in coastal Queensland, including Bribie Island and nearby islands (e.g. Vernon & Martin 1975a,b; Durrant & MacRae 1994).

Northern limits of range in New South Wales

In order to place the Queensland record in a regional context, a discussion of the range of the Hooded Plover in eastern Australia is useful. The current range has its northern limits in New South Wales. In acknowledgement of a range contraction we have dealt with the subject in two time periods:

Up to 1950

Ramsay (1888) included the Richmond and Clarence River districts of northern New South Wales (as well as Queensland) in the range of the Hooded Plover. In the first decade of the 20th century, Hooded Plovers were reported from the Tweed River district, on the far north coast of New South Wales, at 28°18'S (Mellor 1908). In 1942, Keast (1944) visited the area, but did not record Hooded Plovers. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the species was recorded at Port Stephens (32°42'S), about 160 km north of Sydney (Chisholm & Cayley 1929, Hordern & Hordern 1931), where it is now considered locally extinct (Slack 1993).

Late in the nineteenth century, North (1898) reported that the species was not common in the Sydney district (33°53'S), and in 1913 he remarked that the species was extremely rare around the district. Since the early part of the twentieth century, there have been only three records from the Sydney area, though two involved more than one bird (Hindwood & Hoskin 1954, Hoskin 1992). Exactly when these records were made is somewhat confused in the literature, with records implied or stated in 1940, 1942, 1943 and 1949 (Hindwood & Hoskin 1954, Hoskin 1992). However, further investigation has revealed that the 1949 record was stated in error (E. Hoskin in litt.). The observers responsible for the observation were: F. Johnston (1940), D. Serventy (1942) and M. Schraeder (1943) (E. Hoskin in litt.). In a lifetime of birdwatching, Hoskin has never seen a Hooded Plover in the Sydney area (in litt.).

1950–1998

The omission of New South Wales from some recent distribution maps has been identified as being erroneous (Britton 1996). In 1973 a pair was recorded at Shoalhaven Heads (34°52'S) (Gibson 1977). Based on reports from coastal New South Wales, Lane (1980) considered that Hooded Plovers occurred north to about Nowra (34°53'S). More recently, it was claimed that Wreck Bay, on the southern side of Cape Jervis (c. 35°11'S), was the most northerly point of distribution in New South Wales (Chafer 1984). Lane (1985) also pointed out that there were historical records from farther north, but did not provide any contemporary records. Since then, two records from north of Jervis Bay have been mentioned in N.S.W. Bird Reports: in August 1986, a juvenile was seen at Coniston Beach (34°26'S), comprising the second record for the County of Camden, which stretches north from the Shoalhaven River (Cooper 1990); in October 1988, a juvenile was seen at Windang, near Lake Illawarra (34°32'S) (Cooper 1992). A.K. Morris (pers. comm.) does not know of any other recent records north of Jervis Bay.

In 1988, the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG) searched 190 km of beaches in New South Wales, north to Jervis Bay (35°08'S) and Comerong Beach (34°51'S) (Morris 1989). The northernmost Hooded Plovers were two adults found at Cudmirrah–Berrara (35°12'S). However, it is possible that odd birds may have occurred north of the area searched. It was possibly this survey which led to the claim that no breeding pairs have been recorded north of Jervis Bay (Pringle 1987). However, the record in 1973 at Shoalhaven Heads (north of Jervis Bay) was of a pair during the breeding season (see Gibson 1977).

The 1996 AWSG National Hooded Plover Survey (unpubl.) provides the most convincing evidence about the northern limit of distribution of Hooded Plovers in New South Wales. In order to assess the population of Pied Oystercatchers *Haematopus longirostris* in New South Wales, the northern coastline was covered in addition to the southern coastal range of the Hooded Plover; in total, 879 km of coastline were surveyed. This allowed an accurate and up-to-date determination of the northern limit of the range of the Hooded Plover: the northernmost birds were located at the mouth of the Shoalhaven River and Comerong Beach (34°51'S) (P. Straw pers. comm.).

In summary, the account of Morris et al. (1981) seems accurate: birds (other than vagrants) occur north to Jervis Bay and at least sometimes, and possibly regularly, slightly farther north at the Shoalhaven River and Comerong Beach.

Northern limits of breeding

It is possible that the birds occurring in the far north of the range are non-breeding birds. Therefore, we have also examined the northern limits of the breeding range. The Birds Australia Nest Record Scheme (NRS) contains data from 273 Hooded Plover nests, from each state within the range of the species (R. Poulter pers. comm.). The northernmost nests were recorded in inland Western Australia: two nests were recorded at 29°55'S. In eastern Australia, the northernmost nests are in South Australia, on north-western Eyre Peninsula, where two nests have been reported at 32°26'S. Two northerly (and inland) nest records from South Australia (Winkie Swamp, 34°18'S, 140°34'E) will not be considered further because they are outside the accepted habitat and range of the species, and confirmation that these nests were indeed those of Hooded Plovers is required. The most northerly nest in New South Wales was at 35°15'S, thus the comment by

Table 1

The direction and Great Circle distance (straight line between two points at sea level) between Bribie Island and estimated northern limits of the Hooded Plover population in New South Wales.

Site	Direction	Distance (km)
Sydney (historical)	13°43'	797
Port Stephens (historical)	8°54'	653
Northernmost nest in N.S.W. in NRS (contemporary)	15°16'	959
Northernmost records in N.S.W. (1996 survey)	14°26'	912–915

Blakers et al. (1984) that in eastern Australia breeding has not been recorded north of 35°S still holds true for New South Wales, but not for South Australia. An examination of nest records in the NRS shows that nesting occurs along the southern coast of New South Wales, and it indicates that considerable breeding occurs in the northernmost part of the range (there are five records of breeding north of 35°30'S).

It is noteworthy that the historical records from the Sydney area span both breeding and non-breeding seasons, as do the recent records from the Shoalhaven Heads and adjacent estuary (Hindwood & Hoskin 1954, Gibson 1977, AWSG unpubl. data). We are unaware of any records of breeding from either the Sydney or Shoalhaven Heads areas, and Hoskin (1992) stated that the records around Sydney were not of breeding birds. The records at Port Stephens were in the breeding season, in November 1928 and January 1931 (Chisholm & Cayley 1929, Hordern & Hordern 1931). Colour-banding in Victoria has shown that birds in adult plumage during the breeding season are not necessarily breeding birds (M.A. Weston unpubl. data). Therefore the occurrence of adults during the breeding season does not necessarily mean breeding occurs in the area.

Longest movement

Between 1953 and 1996, the longest movement of a Hooded Plover recorded by the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme was 144 km (Baker et al. 1997). There is now considerable additional and recent information on the movements of juvenile Hooded Plovers, recorded from a colour-banding study in Victoria: some juveniles make substantial movements, and the longest recorded to date is over 200 km (M.A. Weston unpubl. data). The recent determination of the northern limits of the Hooded Plover in New South Wales allows us to estimate the minimum distance the individual recorded at Bribie Island had moved. The two most realistic northern limits are the northernmost nest and the northernmost record, judged from the 1996 survey. Both give a straight-line distance of over 900 km to Bribie Island. Therefore, this is the longest movement yet recorded for the species. However, these estimates would require revision if breeding is recorded north of 34°S on the New South Wales coast. Table 1 shows the distances between Bribie Island and various estimates of the current northern limits of the distribution of the Hooded Plover in New South Wales.

Discussion

The observation of a Hooded Plover in Queensland is notable for two reasons: it is the first confirmed record of the species from that state; and it appears to be

the longest recorded movement by the species. This record, along with our investigation of the current and historical distribution on the eastern coast of Australia, leads to several questions:

Was Queensland ever part of the range of Hooded Plovers?

We located nine references to the Hooded Plover in Queensland, the most recent being in 1969. Of these, one reference lacked any first-hand information (North 1913–14), three probably had no first-hand data (Campbell 1900, RAOU 1913, Lavery 1969) and two were doubtful (see below).

It is always difficult to assess historical records for accuracy, and none of the reports we located was beyond doubt. Nevertheless, we offer an interpretation of the records here. We reject the reports of Marshall (1934) and Berney (1903) on the basis that the habitats described are not habitats known to be used by Hooded Plovers, and that the locations of the reports are well north of any other recorded occurrence of the species. Of course, vagrants occur extraliminally, and often in unusual habitats, but the authors wrote of Hooded Plovers in moderate numbers (Marshall 1934) or being common (Berney 1903), suggesting that they were not referring to vagrants. Of the remaining reports, there is a single sighting (Agnew 1921); two specimens (Sharpe 1896); and another based on either a sighting or one or more specimens, either lost or details of which cannot be found (Ramsay 1888).

It is reasonable to assume that if the Hooded Plover occurred in Queensland, the range would have included the whole of the New South Wales coastline, because potentially suitable habitat (sandy beaches) occurs along the entire coastline. The records at Port Stephens (Chisholm & Cayley 1929, Hordern & Hordern 1931) are well known, and are generally accepted (Marchant & Higgins 1993). We also located historical records from the far north coast of New South Wales (Ramsay 1888, Mellor 1908). The timing and location of these records are as expected if the Hooded Plover had occurred in Queensland. We suggest that there is enough evidence not to dismiss the idea of a historical distribution which included Queensland.

How did the range contraction occur?

If we assume that southern Queensland was formerly part of the distribution of the species, we can offer an account of the contraction of that range in eastern Australia, based on the pattern of records.

Apart from the bird on Bribie Island, the Hooded Plover was last reported in southern Queensland in 1917. In 1913 they were already very rare in the Sydney area (North 1913–14), and gradually became rarer, effectively isolating a northern population from the population in southern New South Wales. The northern population persisted 160 km north of Sydney in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but must have disappeared quickly. By the early 1980s, the range had contracted south to around Cape Jervis. Although pairs are sometimes recorded from the Shoalhaven River estuary, the only records farther north have been of juveniles, which were presumably vagrants. In summary, processes in the vicinity of Sydney may have fragmented the population on the east coast, causing the northern population to become extinct, and the southern population to contract southwards.

The process or processes that caused the population decline are unknown.

The fact that the contraction was dramatic and rapid (possibly over 900 km during the first half of the 20th century) suggests that, in the 20th century, some factor had taken effect which was previously absent or less problematic. Populations of humans in Brisbane and Sydney, as well as in many coastal towns, have increased greatly. Associated with this, it seems likely that increased levels of disturbance by people and predation by introduced animals may have caused the reproductive success of Hooded Plovers to decrease; a combination of this and the fragmentation of habitat was probably responsible for the southern contraction of the species' range.

Are such long-distance movements unusual?

Our knowledge of the current northern limits of the distribution has allowed us to estimate the distance moved by the Hooded Plover on Bribie Island at over 900 km. Of course, it is possible that Hooded Plovers in other parts of the range make longer movements, perhaps even regularly. It has been proposed that, in Western Australia, Hooded Plovers disperse northwards following wet conditions (Newbey 1996); this means that birds might regularly move distances of several hundred kilometres. However, the vast area of potential habitat in Western Australia means that it is impossible to be reasonably sure about the origins of birds in the far north of their range without individually banding or colour-marking them.

We are not suggesting that the movement of the Hooded Plover in Queensland was made in one continuous flight. Nevertheless, considerable barriers, such as two capital cities, must have been negotiated.

Why did the Hooded Plover move north into Queensland?

A possible explanation for this movement is that the juvenile was associated with flocks of migratory waders moving north along the eastern coast of Australia between February and April. Indeed, adult and juvenile Hooded Plovers have been seen flying in a tight, highly co-ordinated manner with flocks of Ruddy Turnstones (Plate 4).

Acknowledgements

D. Cameron wishes to thank Frank Bigg, Stuart Pell, Jill Denning and members of the Queensland Wader Studies Group and Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Coastal Management Staff. Funding agencies supporting M.A. Weston were: Holsworth Wildlife Research Fund, Stuart Leslie Research Fund, Ingram Trust, Barwon Heads Committee of Management, and the Australian Bird Environment Foundation. We thank Birds Australia, the AWSG, P. Straw, A.K. Morris, J.M. Peter, R. Poulter and, in particular, E. Hoskin (and the Keith Hindwood Bird Recording Service) for their help.

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