

CATCH REPORT 23-06-2019

There was a good turnout for the second catch of the season as a small crowd of eager locals and visitors assembled outside the Observatory office at midday to hear what was in store for the afternoon. The net had been set earlier that morning at Campsite Beach. It was a very different beach compared to the rock-hard pindan and stony pebbles of the previous week. Setting the net involved carefully following in each other's footprints and tip-toeing around each other trying to make as little impact as possible on the beach (*which is impossible! But young birds are a bit dumb – ed*) so as not to discourage the birds from nearing the net as the tide came in.

After the regular briefing and demonstration from Chris we all piled into cars and headed off to Campsite. A small team went further down the road and started walking back along the beach, serving as both a twinkling team and advance running group. The net was a reasonable distance from where the majority of people were waiting on the cliff and as always, getting to the net ASAP was of paramount importance!

On arrival at the beach there was a sizeable roost of knots, godwits and other waders as well as a healthy number of terns. Unfortunately, efforts to get the knots and godwits in position in front of the net instead of the terns were futile, as the majority took off and presumably headed for friendlier net-free beaches. Luckily some, including Eastern Curlew, remained and the sudden boom of the canons startled everyone into running mode.

The run to the net always seems to take forever, especially when it involves running full pelt on soft sinking sand! It was a wet catch, with the front of the net already in shallow water. A great team effort at the net saw the Eastern Curlew, the species most in danger of the incoming tide, lifted from the water, and the net, along with the rest of the birds, quickly moved further up the beach. As the Curlew were walked back to the holding cages the rest of the birds - Gull-billed Terns, several Bar-tailed Godwits, a couple of Pied Stilts and a Caspian Tern, were extracted and ferried in boxes and hands to the waiting cages.

There is always a bit of "organized chaos" while sorting the birds out and putting them in cages. This was exacerbated by the fact that two sub-species (see later) of Gull-billed Terns were caught. The Australian subspecies, *macrotarsa*, were unable to be put in together or with members of the other migratory subspecies, *affinis*, as they can be very aggressive. Finding enough single cages and boxes for them took some organizing but they were all soon safely resting and having a break before the processing stage. One Pied Stilt had other ideas though, and upon somehow finding the opening in the top of its cage, made a successful dash for freedom!

Despite missing out on a large number of migratory shorebirds, it proved to be a very interesting catch. Being able to compare the two subspecies (see later) of Gull-billed Terns up close was great. The prize of the catch was an *affinis* Gull-billed Tern in full breeding plumage with a beautiful sleek black cap. At this time of year most of the birds in the bay are younger birds in non-breeding plumage that have not yet started yearly northward migrations to breed. Therefore, to catch an individual in full breeding plumage was fairly unusual. The moults were once again the most challenging and interesting aspect. You just start to get the hang of it and then you get one with an interesting variation that makes you start second-guessing yourself again! Perhaps that's why it's always been my favourite part so far.

The Bar-tailed Godwits were colour-banded and blood taken. The Eastern Curlews, stilt and terns were all banded, flagged, weighed and measurements taken. The kids had a great time helping in the release of some of the birds, especially the Eastern Curlew. Some of them had been to the Shorebird Quest, a giant puppet show put on at Town Beach in May, featuring a Curlew called Curtis. On Sunday they got to see and hold a real-life curlew up close!



3 Curtis' ready to be released

Pack-up was quick and efficient with so many helping hands. The careful folding of the large shade-cloth while keeping it out of the sand is always a great example of team work. Low betide if it ever fell in the sand! The sun was low in the sky by then and everyone enjoyed a quick munch of banana cake as we stood around the cars before parting ways.

A big thank you to everyone who was involved. It was another great day of fun, teamwork, and learning.

Thanks to Merryn Pryor, BBO Assistant Warden for writing the report and Larry O'Brien, BBO Campground Host for images

23-06-2019								
SPECIES	NEW	RETRAP	Age 1 1st Year of Life	Age 1+ 1st Year of life or older	Known Age 2	Age 2+ 2nd year of life or older	Known age 3	TOTAL
Australian Tern	19	6	0	0	0	25	0	25
Bar-tailed Godwit	5	0	2	0	1	2	0	5
Caspian Tern	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Eastren Curlew	12	0	6	0	3	2	1	12
Gull-billed Tern <i>affinis</i>	31	0	29	0	0	2	0	31
Pied Stilt	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
TOTALS	69	6	37	2	4	31	1	75

Note below.

Retraps

3 of the Australian Tern retraps were considerably older than some of the kids at the catch, 14+, 15+ and 18+. That means a minimum age of 14, 15 or 18.

Taxonomy.

A bit of a pain really, why can we all not just agree on one name for each species in the world?

I don't actually want any replies to that!

In this report we are following the IOC checklist. That doesn't mean we will in future reports!

Black-winged, White-headed, Pied Stilt. All have been names for the species/subspecies occurring in Australia. Currently IOC call the Australian birds Pied Stilt *Himantopus leucocephalus*.

Gull-billed Terns are split by the IOC in to Australian Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* and Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* with 5 subspecies recognised around the globe. *Affinis* is the subspecies that we get here. It is a non-breeding migrant and like many shorebirds some 1st year birds stay on the non-breeding grounds in their first year. The IOC list doesn't have *affinis* as occurring in Australia, but I assure you, it does.



non-breeding plumage *affinis*

breeding plumage *affinis*

Chris Hassell

27-06-2019