

Red-kneed Dotterel

Erythronyctes alpinus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult Red-kneed Dotterel – note its prominent red ankles! (photo: Alwyn Simple)

This is a smart-looking small shorebird with adults having a broad black breastband and black cap, white throat and underparts, and brown upperparts. Adults also have a characteristic chestnut band on their flanks, with a white strip above that band that runs the length of the body.

Males and females are virtually indistinguishable (on average, males are marginally larger but there is much overlap in the sizes of the two sexes). Both sexes incubate. Juveniles are plain brown-and-white birds, and potentially they could be mis-identified as one of the vagrant plover types (NB they have no white collar). At around seven weeks of age, juveniles moult into an immature plumage and then they look like muted versions of the adults – grey in the parts where the adults are black, and having no chestnut band on their flanks. At around 12 months of age they moult into adult plumage.

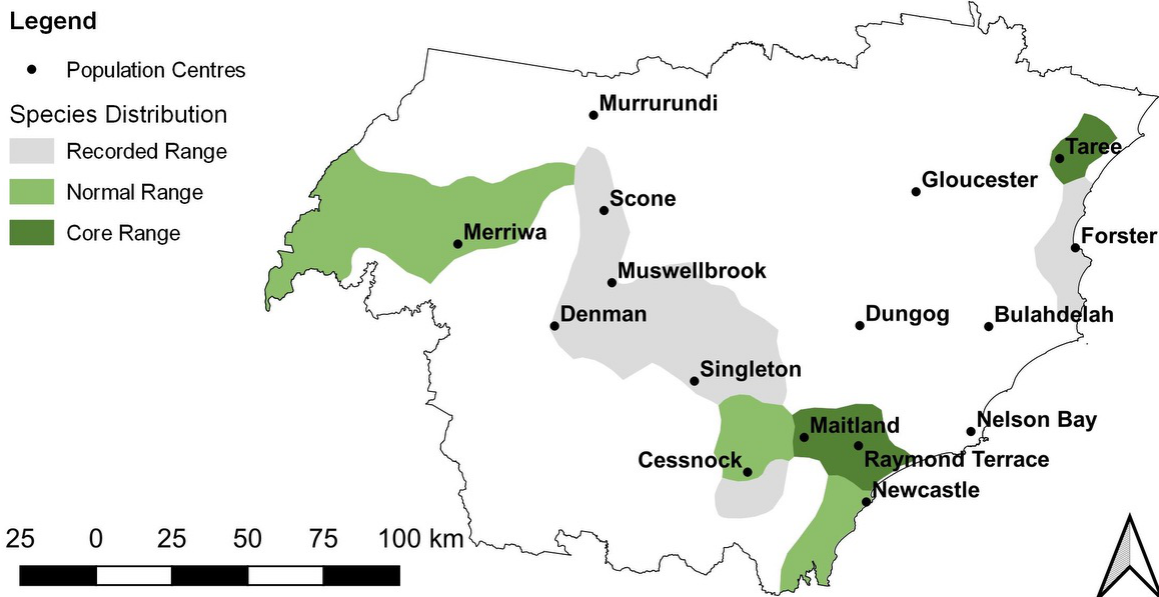
Red-kneed Dotterels are endemic to Australia, and no sub-species are recognised. They prefer freshwater wetlands, or brackish ones, and usually they are more commonly encountered at inland waters. However, they readily move around within Australia in response to the locally-prevailing conditions.



A juvenile Red-kneed Dotterel (photo: Alan Stuart)

Regional Status

Most years there are at least some records of Red-kneed Dotterels in the Hunter Region, and there are frequent reports of them breeding here. However, their regional status is dominated by the prevailing conditions in inland Australia. Sometimes when it has rained a lot inland, very few birds are present locally (and there was a 21 month period spanning 2010-11 when none were recorded); and sometimes there are hundreds of birds, during times of inland drought. The main location for them in the region is the Hunter Estuary, especially the less tidally affected parts. The estuary has had a peak count of 222 birds (in November 2014) and there are many records of 50-150 birds. Some smaller wetlands around Coopernook/Taree and in the upper Hunter Valley regularly attract Red-kneed Dotterels too, but in lower numbers (usually less than about 15 birds).



Distribution map for Red-kneed Dotterel (map by Dan Williams).

Seasonal patterns

In southern Australia, Red-kneed Dotterels tend to be more common near coasts in the summer months (source: The Australian Bird Guide). That pattern of movement does not occur locally – for example, in recent years the mean winter counts in the Hunter Estuary were of 25 birds compared to a mean count of 17 birds in summer (Stuart & Lindsey in *Stilt* 2021). However, the seasonal movement patterns are masked by the influxes which occur unpredictably.



Two adult Red-kneed Dotterels, with an immature bird in between them (photo: Rob Palazzi)

About the name

Red-kneed Dotterel

The term “dotterel” is used rather arbitrarily for some small plover-like shorebirds (with the rest of them being called plovers). A plausible explanation of its origins is from a combination of *dote* (a simpleton; dotty) and the French suffix *erel* which is a diminutive implying contempt. This explanation is based on the once-widespread European Dotterel being easily captured when nesting. “Red-kneed” is descriptive, but quite wrong. Our bird does have prominent red “knees” but actually they are its ankles. Nevertheless, they are a salient feature of the otherwise brown legs.

Erythrogonyx cinctus

The genus name is from the Greek words *eruthros*, red, and *gonu*, knee. It’s quite a shame about the anatomical error! The species name acknowledges the striking breastband of adult birds – it derives from the Latin word *cinctus*, which is the term for the gird strap of a toga.



Red-kneed Dotterels in flight (photo: Mick Roderick)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 1.

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