

GONE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE



Image by Paul Gray



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Watching a pair of shorebirds wheeling above as you walk along a windswept beach is a familiar and comforting experience. But what if you returned the next day to find them gone, as if they'd disappeared in the blink of an eye?

It's a concern that's driving efforts to get Tasmanians, and national and overseas visitors involved in protecting resident shorebirds like the Pied Oystercatcher, Hooded Plover and Red-capped Plover.

"Pied Oystercatchers can live for over 30 years," says NRM South's Lyndel Wilson. "They can occupy the one beach for their entire adult life and so when you see the same birds day-in day-out it can lull you into a false sense of security, a belief that population numbers are okay."

The reality is different. Pied Oystercatcher populations are decreasing throughout Australia, and in Tasmania breeding populations of Hooded Plovers and Red capped Plovers are also on the decline.

Mounting pressures on shorebirds include people modifying coastal habitat and off-leash dogs trampling eggs and frightening breeding birds. Vehicles driven on beaches can also add to the problem by running over birds and chicks, as well as disturbing feeding and nesting behaviour.

Lyndel has spent the past year working on programs with the Glamorgan Spring Bay, Tasman and Sorell councils, as well as the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service and BirdLife Tasmania to form the South East Regional Shorebirds Alliance.

"We're working on a number of programs across Southern Tasmania to improve community understanding of the pressures these little birds face and how we can all be part of the solution," says Lyndel.

Although the challenges are extremely serious, the solutions are tending towards the playful.

One of those solutions is BirdLife Tasmania's 'dogs breakfasts' events. "Essentially we get a bunch of local dog owners together for breakfast down at a local beach, hand out free dog leashes bearing slogans such as 'I'm a wet sand walker' and 'I don't chase chicks', then talk to them about how they can walk their dog without disturbing local shorebird habitat."

That playful approach has also been used by Tasmanian Parks rangers, who have taken the shorebird conservation message to beachside residents and tourists as part of regular 'roves' conducted during last summer's Discovery Rangers program.

During that time they spoke to people about shorebird conservation at beaches right across Tasmania, including Adventure Bay on Bruny Island, Friendly Beaches on the east coast, Marions Bay on the Tasman Peninsula and Cockle Creek, near the start of the South Coast Track.

The alliance has also benefited from the involvement of the Southern Coastcare Association of Tasmania, which has helped volunteers get the message out about the need to keep dogs on leads to help protect shorebirds and their chicks, that it's important to walk near wet sand and away from the high tide areas where nesting usually occurs, and to monitor shorebirds as part of the annual shorebird count.

In January this year the Glamorgan Spring Bay Council had some good news to report as a result of increased shorebird awareness. Several breeding successes have been recorded in the area, with three Hooded Plovers hatching at Spring Beach and two Oystercatchers hatching at Piermont, near Swansea.

"When the old adults die and aren't replaced by a young breeding pair it's really sad," says Lyndel. "We call it 'blink out'. So when we hear news of a successful hatching it does wonderful things for the spirit. It shows us that the hard work is paying off."