

2. Torres Strait Islands

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Red-capped Flowerpecker (Richard Noske)



Red-headed Honeyeater (Paul Jensen)

Geography

The Torres Strait Islands (TSI) lie within the Cape York Bioregion but are sufficiently distinct in their avifauna to be treated separately in this report. They represent the northernmost part of Australian territory. The most northerly inhabited island of Boigu is only 6 km from the mainland of Western Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The region is very similar to that defined as the Torres Shire, but the latter includes some areas of the adjoining mainland and excludes many occupied islands which have their own specific Islander Councils. The Shire is located north of latitude 11°S and extends over 160 km from north to south between the PNG mainland and the northern tip of Cape York. It extends approximately 250 km from east to west.

The islands can be grouped into four major clusters: (1) the Western Group of continental high islands, composed of granitic and basalt rocks (Mabuiag, Badu, Moa, Thursday, Horn, Hammond, Prince of Wales and Friday); (2) the Northern Group of low islands, composed of sedimentary deposits, mangrove muds and peats (Boigu, Dauan and Saibai); (3) the Central Group of low sandy islands (Yam, Warraber, Coconut and Masig); and (4) the Eastern Group of high volcanic islands (Murray, Darnley and Stephen). The human population of the islands at the 2016 census was 4500, most of whom live on the administrative centre of Thursday Island.

The Equatorial climate (BoM 2016) is monsoon-tropical, with a wet season from December to April (Kuki season), due to the influence of the rain-bearing monsoon winds from the northwest. On Thursday Island, 94% of the rain falls during this wet season (Gab Titui 2019). During the dry season, from June to October, the winds are reversed, blowing from the southeast (Sager season). This wind shift possibly assists migrating birds.

Birds of the bioregion and their conservation

Draffan et al. (1983) identified records for 243 species from TSI and divided them into 87 residents, 26 consistent partial-year residents, 73 regular erratic visitors, and 57 vagrants. Most bird species of TSI are migratory, and for some, the islands are an important resting and replenishing habitat for their migration. Some non-migratory species appear to have arrived when there were land bridges connecting some of the islands to Australia or Papua New Guinea, and now seem to be isolated island populations (Draffan et al. 1983).

The islands are either heavily developed or relatively pristine. Urban development on Thursday and Horn Islands continues to increase, but many of the other islands are low-lying and subject to inundation from rising sea levels. The Cane Toad *Rhinella marina* has recently been introduced to Thursday and Horn Islands, as well as some outer islands, after an established colony on Cape York spread to Possession Island in the mid-1980s (TSRA 2019a). Local authorities have initiated a Cane Toad Buster Program but whether it has reduced the impact on wildlife remains unclear.

The Land and Sea Management Unit (LSMU) of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) was established to coordinate delivery of the Environmental Management Programme under the Commonwealth's *Torres Strait Development Plan 2016-2036* (TSRA 2019b). This includes a Traditional Ecological Knowledge Project in which nine communities on eight islands maintain separate databases for cultural and natural resource information. The Warraberalgal and Porumalgal Indigenous Protected Areas, in the Central Group of islands, include an important seabird rookery on Maza Gulya, where the dua (Common Noddy) and sara (Bridled and Roseate Terns) nest in significant numbers. Management of these areas is carried out by rangers under the LMSU.



Map of Torres Strait Islands, with locations mentioned in text

Major events in 2018-2019

No significant unusual weather patterns were recorded in 2018 which would affect the birds of the region. The monsoon weather regime had settled into the Strait before the beginning of the year. Some tropical cyclones moved across to the south and brought above average rainfall until the middle of April (BoM 2019). 2019 was a wetter summer despite a late start to the monsoon. This was primarily due to Tropical Cyclone Trevor which crossed to the south in March, and Tropical Cyclone Ann in May. The rest of the year was generally drier and warmer than average (BoM 2020).

During these two years there were a couple of instances of 'fish kill' in waters near Warraber and Iama Islands. Representatives from TSRA have suggested it is likely due to an increase in the surface water temperature. These events should be monitored as they could impact the local seabird species that rely on local fish. There was a large bushfire on Ngurupai (Horn) Island that burnt out two thirds of the island in late 2019 (TSRA 2019c).

The records for the Pallid Cuckoo, Red-kneed Dotterel, and Wood Sandpiper are noteworthy as these are all uncommon species in the Torres Strait region. There were less observations during 2019 as there was not a guided trip to Boigu and Saibai Islands as there was in 2018. The following list highlights selected bird species and occurrences of interest for 2018 and 2019 from eBird.

2018 Notable bird records

Australasian Grebe. Seven birds recorded at Thursday Island on 13 October.

Black Noddy. A flock of about 100 birds observed 10 km east of Mt Adolphus Island on 22 February.

Blue-faced Honeyeater. Two birds observed on Horn Island on 10 December.

Canary White-eye. A count of five birds recorded on Little Woody Island on 10 December.

Channel-billed Cuckoo. Over 30 observed crossing Boigu Island, heading north on 13 March.

Coconut Lorikeet. Two birds flying across the channel recorded at Saibai Island on 30 March.

Collared Imperial Pigeon. Five birds recorded at Boigu Island on 13 March.

Common Tern. Three observations recorded of single birds in March at Saibai and Thursday Islands.

Eastern Osprey. Nesting recorded at Saibai Island in March and Horn Island in May.

Eclectus Parrot. Several observations of a male bird recorded at Boigu and Saibai Islands in March.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Introduced. A healthy population recorded on Thursday Island, and 30 counted on Saibai Island.

Glossy Ibis. A count of seven birds recorded on Thursday Island on 28 December.

Grey Teal. 47 recorded at Horn Island STW ponds on 26 March, and 2 recorded on Thursday Island in October.

Gurney's Eagle. One observed over passage beside Saibai Island with Whistling Kites on 15 March.

Large-tailed Nightjar. One bird recorded when flushed from roadside on Boigu Island on 13 March.

Little Tern. About 150 birds observed on Boigu Island on 29 March.

Mangrove Gerygone. Observations recorded at Saibai, Boigu, and Horn Islands in March.

Mangrove Robin. Five birds observed on Little Woody Island in December.

Masked Lapwing. Over 50 recorded on Horn Island in March.

Nankeen Kestrel. Two birds recorded on Thursday Island on 24 August.

Northern Fantail. Three birds recorded on Saibai Island on 30 March.

Oriental Dollarbird. Counts of up to 80 birds recorded passing north over Boigu and Saibai in March with many immatures in the flock.

Pacific Swift. Up to 15 birds observed at Boigu and Saibai in March.

Pallid Cuckoo. One bird recorded at Saibai Island on 30 March.

Peregrine Falcon. One bird recorded at Horn Island on 25 March.

Pied Stilt. Up to ten birds recorded at Boigu Island in March.

Red-capped Flowerpecker. One bird at Boigu Island recorded on 14 March.

Red-kneed Dotterel. A pair observed on Boigu Island in March.

Royal Spoonbill. A count of 30 birds recorded roosting in mangroves near Saibai Island in March.

Rufous-throated Honeyeater. One bird recorded on Saibai Island on 16 March.

Shining Bronze Cuckoo. Two observations recorded from Horn Island in March and April.

Silver Gull. Greater numbers recorded on Thursday Island in October with counts of 100+.

Superb Fruit Dove. Single birds recorded at Boigu and Saibai in March.

Terek Sandpiper. 50 recorded on Horn Island on 18 March.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon. Numerous records around Boigu and Saibai Islands in March. More than 200 observed flying south over Thursday Island in October, and up to 500 recorded at Little Woody Island in December.

Wandering Whistling Duck. A small flock recorded at Saibai in March

White-browed Woodswallow. A count of 20 birds recorded at Thursday Island on 23 March.

White-throated Needletail. Flocks of up to 100 birds observed at Boigu and Saibai in March.

Wood Sandpiper. A pair observed on Boigu Island on 12 March.

2019 Notable bird records

Ashy-bellied White-eye. Up to six birds recorded at the Woody Island group on 18/19 December.

Australasian Swamphen. Two found as roadkill in January on Thursday Island.

Australian Hobby. One bird recorded on Thursday Island on 21 April.

Barking Owl. Remnants of lorikeet and rail at roost observed on Thursday Island in May.

Black-naped Tern. Two birds observed at Little Woody Island on 19 December.

Bridled Tern. Observation recorded from the Woody Island group on 19 December.

Brown Goshawk. Records of single birds recorded on Thursday and Horn Islands in January and May.

Brown Honeyeater. Observation recorded from Little and Great Woody Islands in December.

Brown-backed Honeyeater. Five counted on Thursday Island on 9 May.

Buff-banded Rail. One bird recorded on Thursday Island on 19 April.

Canary White-eye. Up to four birds recorded at the Woody Island group on 18/19 December.

Chestnut-breasted Mannikin. Commonly observed all year with counts of up to 200 birds and nest building on Thursday Island in January.

Eastern Osprey. A nest with two young recorded on Thursday Island on 9 May.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Introduced. Up to 13 birds recorded on Thursday Island, and one recorded on Horn Island.

Far Eastern Curlew. Endangered. Fourteen birds counted at Horn Island on 31 May.

Grey Shrikethrush. One bird recorded on Thursday Island on 19 January.

Grey-tailed Tattler. Fourteen birds recorded at Woody and Great Woody Islands on 19 December.

Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo. Observation recorded at the three Woody Islands in December.

Lesser Crested Tern. Two birds recorded in Albany Passage on 28 March.

Little Kingfisher. Observation recorded at Great Woody Island on 18 December.

Magpie Goose. Several groups recorded flying over Thursday Island on 5 January.

Mangrove Robin. Up to four birds recorded at Woody and Great Woody Islands in December.

Pacific Black Duck. Four birds recorded at Horn Island STW ponds on 29 May.

Sooty Tern. Observation recorded from the Woody Island group on 19 December.

Superb Fruit Dove. One found dead on Thursday Island on 6 January.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon. One count of 1000 birds recorded at Little Woody Island on 19 December.

Tree Martin. Two birds observed south of Horn Island on 28 March.

Varied Honeyeater. One observed on a nest at Horn Island in May.

White-bellied Cuckooshrike. Two birds observed on a circuit of Thursday Island on 9 May.

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