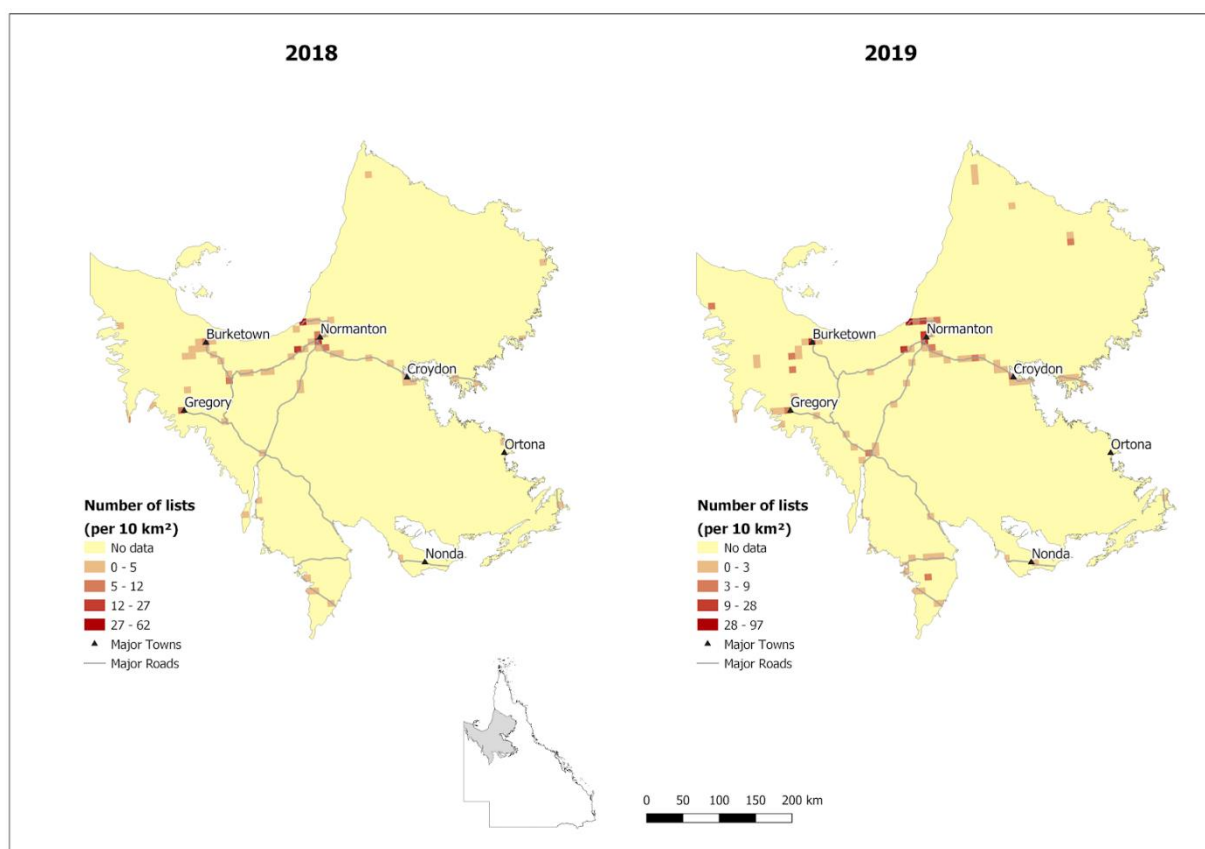


## 4. Gulf Plains

Kath Shurcliff



Map of Gulf Plains Bioregion, showing eBird survey effort

### Geography

The Gulf Plains Bioregion (GUP) is the third largest of Queensland's bioregions, covering 12.7% (219,109 km<sup>2</sup>) of the State and extends slightly into the Northern Territory (DES 2013). The bioregion supports extensive mangroves, wetlands, mudflats, grasslands, and savanna woodlands. GUP extends from the western border of Queensland with the Northern Territory around the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the western side of Cape York Peninsula. The plains are crossed by several large rivers including the Mitchell, Staaten, Gilbert, Norman, Flinders, Leichardt, Barkly, Albert, and Nicholson Rivers. The Plains are generally low-lying but the region does extend south into the higher-elevation headwaters of these rivers. The main settlements in this region are Croydon, Normanton, Karumba, Burketown, Doomadgee, and Georgetown with Kowanyama in the northeastern section.

The GUP bioregion lies mostly within the Tropical and Grassland climate zones (BoM 2016), experiencing hot, wet summers along the coastal parts and drier, mild winters inland. The variation from north to south can be seen by comparing the mean annual rainfall and mean temperatures during the wet season at Normanton with those at Julia Creek, which is just outside the southern boundary of the bioregion. Normanton is much wetter than Julia Creek during both the wet season (March: 620 mm and 416 mm, respectively) and dry season (49 mm and 26 mm). Mean minimum temperatures are higher in Normanton than Julia Creek in the dry season (19 ° vs. 12 °C) but are similar in the wet season (BoM 2018).



Canary White-eye (Jim Sneddon)



Magpie Goose (Jim Sneddon)

## Birds of the bioregion and their conservation

The bioregion hosts most of the mangrove-specialised bird species of Australia, including White-breasted Whistler, Mangrove Golden (Black-tailed) Whistler, Broad-billed Flycatcher, Arafura Fantail and Mangrove Fantail. Rare and cryptic birds including Chestnut Rail, Beach Stone-curlew (near-threatened), and Gouldian Finch (near-threatened) are known to occur in GUP but are not recorded every year. The Queensland government historic records include 412 native species and five introduced species with 23 species listed as rare or threatened in CYP (DES 2013).

The two Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) in GUP are the entire coastline and Staaten River KBA, which supports a population of Golden-shouldered Parrots (BirdLife Australia 2019). There are three other national parks (NP): Finucane NP, north of Burketown with boat access only; Errk Oygangand NP, northeast of Kowanyama with vehicle access in the dry season only; and Rungulla NP in the southeastern section along the upper reaches of the Gilbert River with an all-weather access road, but no internal roads or tracks. In addition, there are the Mutton Hole Wetlands Conservation Park at Normanton and several Nature Refuges in the eastern part of the Gulf Region.

Popular birding localities include Delta Downs wetlands along Karumba Road, Normanton wetlands, Karumba mangroves, the Burketown mangroves and wetlands, as well as numerous river and creek crossings along the main development roads. During the wet season, from December to April, the low-lying areas are often flooded, restricting road access, so few birders visit GUP at this time.

Management issues in the region include the large-scale Gilbert and Flinders River irrigation proposals, where substantial amounts of water have been allocated. It remains to be seen what impacts these water allocations may have on the important wetland areas further downstream. During the period from late 2015 through 2016 there was extensive and unprecedented die-off of mangroves along the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

James Cook University, along with Indigenous ranger groups, is continuing to monitor the recovery of the mangroves in Karumba area. Recovery is hampered by large rafts of dead wood, reducing seedling survival, and further shoreline retreat has been documented (JCU 2019).

## Major events in 2018-2019

Cyclone Nora in March 2018 crossed the northern section of GUP near Kowanyama. Late in December 2018, Cyclone Owen crossed in the same area. Extensive flooding occurred along the Norman and Flinders Rivers with record-breaking rainfalls in upper reaches of the Gulf Plains during February 2019 (BoM 2020).

Annual wet season flooding continues to be crucial for the thousands of water birds, waders, and grassland specialists (e.g., cisticolas) which were recorded in January through April in the Karumba-Normanton areas. Fortunately, there was an experienced birder, R. Reed, resident in 2018–2019 throughout those critical wet season months to record observations. He also documented large numbers of migratory raptors, especially Brown Falcons and Nankeen Kestrels during June 2018.

eBird recorded 259 species from 5,638 records in 2018 and 253 species from 5,942 records in 2019 for GUP. The following list highlights selected bird species and occurrences of interest for 2018 and 2019 from eBird.

## 2018 Notable bird records

**Arafura Fantail.** All records limited to Karumba throughout the year.

**Australasian Shoveler.** Three records of up to seven birds recorded over four days in May.

**Australasian Swamphen.** Several flocks reported on Karumba wetlands including a large flock of 150 observed in April.

**Australian Brush-turkey.** Only one observation reported at Karumba.

**Australian Pratincole.** Flock of 500 birds recorded at Karumba in June.

**Australian Swiftlet.** A single record of 12 birds recorded at Karumba in April.

**Barking Owl.** Two observations recorded at Karumba in May, and one around the Burketown area in July.

**Beach Stone-curlew.** Near-threatened. Only one observation recorded at Karumba in October.

**Black Kite.** Flocks of up to 200 birds observed at Karumba in June.

**Black-fronted Dotterel.** Flocks of up to 35 birds observed at Karumba in April.

**Black-tailed Godwit.** Near-threatened. Numerous sightings recorded at Karumba and Normanton with flocks of 250 and 150 birds observed at Karumba in September and November respectively.

**Black-tailed Native-hen.** Six observations recorded from the Normanton and Burketown areas from May through November.

**Black-throated Finch.** Numerous observations recorded at the Cumberland Dam and Georgetown area, and one observation further west of three birds at Croydon in October.

**Broad-billed Flycatcher.** Only two observations recorded at Karumba in April and May.

**Broad-billed Sandpiper.** Two birds observed at Karumba in October.

**Brolga.** Flocks of up to 350 birds recorded at Normanton in June, and 500 observed at Karumba in November.

**Brown Falcon.** Up to 85 birds observed at Normanton in June.

**Brown Quail.** Observations recorded at Karumba in April and June, and Normanton in June and November.

**Brown Songlark.** Three observations recorded in the Karumba-Normanton area, and one recorded at Georgetown in July through November.

**Buff-sided Robin.** All observations recorded along the Gregory River.

**Bush Stone-curlew.** One recorded at Croydon in April, and one at Karumba in June.

**Chestnut Teal.** 10 birds recorded at Karumba in July.

**Crimson Chat.** One observation recorded at the Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Normanton in July.

**Dusky Moorhen.** A single observation was recorded near Burketown on the Gregory River in July.

**Dusky Woodswallow.** Four birds observed around the Normanton area in April.

**Eastern Barn Owl.** Only one recorded at Normanton in April.

**Emu.** Only two records reported from July and August.

**Eurasian Coot.** Flocks of up to 1,200 were observed at Karumba in April.

**Flock Bronzewing.** Observations from June through November in the Normanton area with the largest flock of 150 birds observed in November.

**Freckled Duck.** Several observations of 200+ birds were recorded at Karumba in April, and 150 birds observed at Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Normanton in July.

**Galah.** Up to 600 birds were observed at Normanton in June.

**Glossy Ibis.** Large flocks with a maximum of 1,750 birds observed at Karumba in April.

**Golden-headed Cisticola.** Large flocks of a maximum of 250 birds observed in January in the Karumba area.

**Gouldian Finch.** Near-threatened. Only three observations recorded of single birds in creeks within the Gregory and Nicholson River catchments.

**Great Crested Grebe.** Several observations were recorded at Karumba wetlands during April with one flock of 150 birds. Two birds also observed in July at Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Normanton.

**Great Egret.** Up to 60 birds observed at Karumba in January, and 45 recorded in April.

**Great Knot.** Endangered. A flock of 1,500 birds observed at Karumba in September.

**Great-billed Heron.** Only one recorded at Karumba in July.

**Grey Butcherbird.** One recorded around the Normanton area in August.

**Grey Teal.** Numerous records of large flocks with a maximum of 7,500 observed at Karumba from April through June.

**Ground Cuckooshrike.** Two observations recorded around the Normanton area in April and November.

**Hardhead.** Maximum flock size of 2,500 birds recorded at Karumba in April.

**Hoary-headed Grebe.** Four observations recorded throughout the region during May, June, and October.

**Horsfield's Bushlark.** Flocks with a maximum of 1,000 birds observed at Karumba in January.

**Latham's Snipe.** A single observation recorded at Karumba in April.

**Laughing Kookaburra.** Two observations recorded at Karumba in January and March, and one recorded near Gregory Downs in May.

**Leaden Flycatcher.** Only three observations recorded around the Karumba area in April, May, and November.

**Lemon-bellied Flyrobin.** Only one observation recorded near Burketown.

**Little Corella.** Up to 1,000 birds observed at Normanton in April.

**Little Curlew.** Only one observation of seven birds recorded at Karumba in September.

**Little Egret.** Up to 500 birds recorded at Karumba in April.

**Little Woodswallow.** Records include nine birds observed at the Nicholson catchment in June, six observed south of Georgetown in May, and observations recorded on Burke Developmental Road in May.

**Mangrove Fantail.** All records restricted to Karumba from May through September.

**Mangrove Golden Whistler.** Only four observations recorded at Karumba and Burketown in May, July, and September.

**Mangrove Robin.** Five observations recorded in Normanton and Karumba throughout the year.

**Masked Lapwing.** Maximum group size recorded was 150 birds at Karumba in April.

**Nankeen Kestrel.** A flock of 75 birds recorded in Normanton in June with the observer noting "northern winter migration" (R. Reed personal communication).

**Noisy Miner.** A single record of six birds recorded at the Cumberland Dam in September.

**Pacific Black Duck.** Maximum flock of 750 birds observed at Karumba in April.

**Peregrine Falcon.** Only two observations recorded from Normanton in May and November.

**Pied Heron.** Maximum numbers of 800 birds recorded at Karumba in April, and 750 birds recorded in January.

**Pied Oystercatcher.** Three observations recorded at Karumba in July, September, and October.

**Pied Stilt.** Large groups with a maximum of 1,500 birds recorded at Karumba in April.

**Pink-eared Duck.** Large flocks of up to 2,000 birds observed at Karumba from April through June.

**Plumed Whistling Duck.** A maximum flock size of 3,500 birds was recorded at Karumba in April.

**Purple-crowned Fairywren.** Three observations recorded near Burketown.

**Red Knot.** Near-threatened. A flock of 450 birds recorded at Karumba in September.

**Red-chested Buttonquail.** One observation recorded at Normanton in April, and one at Burketown in July.

**Red-collared Lorikeet.** Only two records near Burketown in July and October, and one on Nicholson River catchment in June.

- Red-kneed Dotterel.** Up to 50 birds observed in the Normanton area in April.
- Red-necked Avocet.** Four observations recorded of up to 27 birds at Karumba, Normanton, and Burketown in September through November.
- Red-necked Stint.** Near-threatened. A flock of 750 birds recorded at Karumba in September.
- Red-tailed Black Cockatoo.** Flocks of up to 125 birds observed at Normanton in April.
- Rock Dove.** Introduced. Only six observations recorded from Normanton where they were seen throughout year, indicating they are resident and established there.
- Royal Spoonbill.** Maximum flock of 175 recorded at Karumba in April.
- Ruddy Turnstone.** A single observation recorded at Karumba in September.
- Rufous Shrikethrush.** Only two observations of this under-recorded species, both south of Burketown along the Gregory River catchment.
- Rufous Songlark.** A maximum of 100 birds observed at Normanton in April.
- Sarus Crane.** Flocks of up to 75 birds recorded at Karumba from September through November.
- Shining Bronze Cuckoo.** Observations recorded at Karumba in April and Normanton in June and November.
- Spotless Crane.** A single observation recorded from Burketown in October.
- Square-tailed Kite.** Only one recorded at Normanton in October.
- Star Finch.** Observations of up to of 250 birds recorded at Karumba in September.
- Torresian Imperial Pigeon.** Only two observations recorded from Karumba in November.
- Welcome Swallow.** Only one observation recorded near Normanton in June.
- Western Gerygone.** One observation recorded south of Normanton in September.
- Whiskered Tern.** Numerous large flocks recorded with a maximum of 500 birds at Karumba during April.
- Whistling Kite.** Flocks of up to 50 birds recorded at Karumba and Normanton in April and June.
- White-breasted Whistler.** All records restricted to Karumba in January, April, May, July, and September.
- White-necked Heron.** Up to 50 birds observed at Karumba in June.
- White-winged Tern.** Numerous flocks recorded at Karumba including one estimated at 4,000 birds during April.
- Yellow Chat.** Three birds recorded at Normanton in April.
- Zitting Cisticola.** Large flocks with a maximum of 350 birds recorded in January in Karumba.

## 2019 Notable bird records

**Apostlebird.** Flocks of up to 150 birds observed at Normanton in June.

**Arafura Fantail.** Three observations recorded at Karumba in January and May, and one on Gregory River in July.

**Australasian Swamphen.** Four observations recorded with a maximum of 21 birds at Karumba and Normanton in January and March.

**Australian Brush-turkey.** Only three observations recorded in Karumba.

**Australian Bustard.** Groups of up to 47 birds observed around the Normanton area in April.

**Australian Pelican.** Flock of up to 150 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Bar-breasted Honeyeater.** Observations recorded at Normanton in March and Burke in July.

**Black Bittern.** Only one bird recorded at Burketown in August.

**Black Falcon.** One recorded near Karumba in April, one south of Julia Creek in May, and one near Burketown in July.

**Black-eared Cuckoo.** One bird recorded at Normanton in October.

**Black-tailed Godwit.** Near-threatened. Several large flocks with a maximum of 350 birds recorded at Karumba in January with other flocks throughout the year.

**Black-tailed Native-hen.** Three observations recorded of one or two birds recorded at Normanton in January, November, and December.

**Black-throated Finch.** Three observations recorded in Croydon in May and June.

**Broad-billed Flycatcher.** Only three observations recorded at Karumba from April through June.

**Brolga.** A maximum of 350 birds recorded at Karumba in January with records of smaller numbers throughout year.

**Brown Booby.** One bird recorded at Normanton in March.

**Brown Quail.** Only three observations recorded scattered throughout the region in February and July.

**Buff-sided Robin.** The first record of this species this far east included two adults and an immature bird which suggests a successful breeding in area

**Bush Stone-curlew.** Only one observation recorded at Croydon in August.

**Common Myna.** Introduced. First and only observation recorded in Karumba in January, but no further observations.

**Common Tern.** Two observations recorded at Normanton in January and May.

**Curlew Sandpiper.** Near-threatened. One observation recorded of four birds at Karumba in October.

**Dusky Moorhen.** Observations recorded were one near Burketown, one at Cumberland Dam, and one at Georgetown in July.

**Dusky Myzomela.** Only one observation recorded at Kowanyama in January.

**Emu.** Only three observations recorded in January and August.

**Eurasian Coot.** A maximum of 125 birds observed at Karumba in March.

**Flock Bronzewing.** Several flocks of up to 60 birds recorded in the southern extremity of Gulf Plains near Julia Creek between February and June.

**Galah.** Flock estimate of 1,500 birds recorded at Normanton in May.

**Glossy Ibis.** Large flocks of up to 2,500 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Gouldian Finch.** Near-threatened. One record of a flock of 30 birds in the far western area of the region in the Nicholson catchment.

**Great Cormorant.** One observation of six birds recorded near Normanton in August.

**Great Crested Grebe.** Up to 20 birds observed at Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Normanton in May through July.

**Great Egret.** A flock of 125 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Great Knot.** Endangered. Flock of 500 birds observed at Karumba in September.

**Great-billed Heron.** Three observations of single birds recorded at Karumba in January, March, and August.

**Grey Teal.** Maximum flock number of 125 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Grey-tailed Tattler** One bird observed at Karumba in October.

**Ground Cuckooshrike.** Two observations recorded along the Gregory River in May and July.

**Hardhead.** Maximum number of 175 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Hoary-headed Grebe.** Two observations recorded at Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Normanton in May and June.

**Intermediate Egret.** A flock of 80 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Large-billed Gerygone.** One observation recorded at Kowanyama in January.

**Leaden Flycatcher.** Five records scattered from Croydon to Burketown throughout the year.

**Lemon-bellied Flyrobin.** Three observations recorded near Normanton in September and November, and one observation on Gregory River in July.

**Lesser Frigatebird.** Eight birds observed at Karumba in May.

**Little Curlew.** Four observations recorded of flocks with a maximum of 6,000 birds in the Karumba area in January.

**Little Eagle.** Only one observation recorded along the lower reaches of the Leichhardt River in April.

**Little Egret.** A flock of up to 1,500 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Little Tern.** Two observations recorded at Karumba in May and August.

**Little Woodswallow.** One observation recorded at the Gregory River in June.

**Mangrove Fantail.** Four observations recorded at Karumba in May and August.



**Marsh Sandpiper.** Up to 80 birds observed at Karumba in May with smaller groups observed throughout the year.

**Masked Woodswallow.** A flock of 400 birds observed at the Gregory River in April.

**Noisy Friarbird.** Only one observation recorded near Normanton in May.

**Oriental Cuckoo.** One observation recorded of two birds in Normanton in January.

**Oriental Pratincole.** A flock of up to 4,000 birds recorded at Karumba in January.

**Pacific Black Duck.** Maximum flock number of 100 birds recorded at Normanton in July.

**Peregrine Falcon.** Only one observation recorded near Croydon in June.

**Pied Heron.** A flock of up to 5,000 birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Pied Stilt.** Large flocks of up to 500 birds recorded in Karumba in May with smaller numbers observed throughout the year.

**Plumed Whistling Duck.** Maximum flock number of 650 birds observed at Normanton in January.

**Radjah Shelduck.** Large flock of 152 birds recorded at Normanton in July.

**Red-browed Finch.** One observation recorded at Kowanyama in January. This species was not previously recorded at this locality.

**Red-collared Lorikeet.** Four observations recorded around the Burketown area in July, and one near Normanton in September.

**Red-necked Avocet.** Two observations recorded in Normanton and Karumba in January, and two in Normanton in November.

**Rock Dove.** Introduced. All records limited to Normanton with a maximum of 27 birds observed.

**Royal Spoonbill.** Large flock of 400 birds observed at Karumba in March.

**Rufous-banded Honeyeater.** Two observations recorded of single birds at Kowanyama in January and Karumba in December.

**Sarus Crane.** A maximum of 122 birds observed around the Karumba area throughout the year.

**Shining Bronze Cuckoo.** Two observations recorded at Karumba and Normanton in April and November.

**Spotted Nightjar.** Only one observation recorded in May near Normanton.

**Star Finch.** Only one observation recorded of four birds at Karumba in June.

**Straw-necked Ibis.** One flock of 550 birds observed at Karumba in March.

**Swamp Harrier.** Only two observations recorded at Normanton in March and April.

**Terek Sandpiper.** Flock of 40 birds recorded at Karumba in May.

**Torresian Imperial Pigeon.** Three observations recorded in Karumba from January through April.

**Varied Lorikeet.** Flock estimate of 250 birds recorded at Normanton in November.

**Welcome Swallow.** Two observations recorded in Karumba and Normanton in July.

**Western Gerygone.** One observation recorded near Normanton in July, and two at Karumba in July and August.

**White-throated Needle-tail.** Only one observation of two birds recorded at Karumba in January.

**White-winged Tern.** Only one observation of three birds recorded at Karumba in March.

**Wood Sandpiper.** Several observations recorded in Normanton in January, October, and November, and one recorded around the Georgetown area in October.

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