

**THE**

# **SUNBIRD**



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**Queensland Bird Report (2020-2024)**

**Brigalow Belt North**



# THE SUNBIRD

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The *2024 Queensland Bird Report* encompasses papers for each of Queensland's 15 bioregions based on all the available data from eBird along with other data sources. The papers will be published as they are completed during 2025 and 2026 as one Volume of *The Sunbird*. When all the papers are published an overview will be written. The project is being managed for Birds Queensland by Stephen Prowse, Allison Roberts and Cameron Davidson with advice from Carly Campbell and Louis Backstrom and copy editing from Rod Gardner. We would like to acknowledge and thank all the authors, editors and the production team who contributed to the previous Queensland Bird Reports. This report builds on their work, adds value to those past contributions and facilitates the continuation of this project.

The aims of Birds Queensland are to promote awareness and appreciation, as well as conservation and scientific study of birds, with particular emphasis on the birds of Queensland. The society holds a general meeting and several field excursions each month. All members receive a monthly newsletter. For enquiries, including membership, please contact us via:

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**Front Cover:** Black-throated Finch. *Photo by:* Olive McTrusty.

## Brigalow Belt North

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### Geography

Covering 8% of the State with a total area of 136,740 km, the Brigalow Belt North (BBN) lies largely north of the Tropic of Capricorn (Figure 1). The characteristic plant communities are woodlands of highly water stress tolerant Brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla*). Over 90% of the Brigalow Belt has been cleared for agriculture.

The region stretches from Townsville to Natal Downs near Belyando Crossing in the north and then south to Alpha and just north of Gladstone. There are five catchment areas: Bohle, Lower Burdekin, Lower Fitzroy, Proserpine, and Ross. Rundle Range to the north of Gladstone is a range of hills around 280 metres above sea level (masl) and is dominated by woodland and dry rainforest (Sattler & Williams 1999). The Berserker Range just east of Rockhampton is mainly open forest and woodland communities dominated by eucalypts. There is a large pocket of dry rainforest along Moores Creek and Mt Archer reaching 604 masl. The Peak Range is a chain of prominent mountains between Moranbah, Clermont, and Dysart with Wolfgang Peak reaching 572 masl. Northwest of Mackay at Homevale there is a dramatic line of cliffs at the base of which there are open grassy woodlands, notophyll vine forests, dry softwood scrub, open eucalypt forests, and brigalow-belah communities (Sattler & Williams 1999). Mt Abbot, southwest of Bowen, reaches 966 masl and is home to a significant range of regional ecosystems. Mt Elliot, southwest of Townsville, reaches a height of 1,210 m asl, and nearby Saddle Mountain (1,183 m) supports rainforest above 600 m, semi-evergreen vine thickets, eucalypt forest, and grassy slopes interspersed with cycads and grass trees. Coastal areas have rich tidal mudflats, estuaries, beaches, mangroves, and patches of the beach scrub ecosystem. Much of the remainder of the BBN region is primarily acacia open forests and eucalypt woodlands with the main rural land use being beef cattle grazing on pastoral leases.

From north to south the major coastal population centres in BBN are Townsville, Ayr, Bowen, Rockhampton, and Yeppoon. Inland

population centres include Clermont and Emerald. Major roads are the Bruce, Capricorn, Gregory, Peak Downs, and Flinders Highways.

The mean annual rainfall from 1890 to 2005 was 590 mm with most rain falling during the summer months, but annual rainfall is very variable. Temperatures are also highly variable with mean minima ranging from 9° to 22°C and mean maxima from 24° to 32°C. Humidity levels during the summer months can be very high.

### Birds of the Bioregion

The importance of BBN ecosystems to Australia's native flora and fauna, including birds, is recognised nationally and internationally. It is an important biome of tropical and subtropical grasslands, savannas, and shrublands.

BirdLife Australia has identified four Key Biodiversity Areas (BirdLife Australia KBAs) in this bioregion: Fitzroy Floodplain and Delta, Shoalwater Bay, Broad Sound and Bowling Green Bay National Park. There are also wetlands identified under the Ramsar agreement including Shoalwater and Corio Bays and Bowling Green Bay. In addition, there are two wetlands listed as Wetlands of National Importance at Burdekin – Townsville Coastal Aggregation and the Burdekin Delta Aggregation. The coastal areas of the BBN provide important feeding mudflats for both resident and migratory shorebirds which in several locations exceed 1% of the global population.

Twenty-five listed species have been observed in the BBN (Table 1), and the loss of 11 species around the Rockhampton region over the past 130 years has been reported (Noske & Briggs, 2021).

### Notable changes over 2017-2024

#### Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*)

The Little Tern is the most recent bird species to be listed as Vulnerable under the EPBC Act. BirdLife Australia comments, "In the last 30 years, Australia's population of Little Terns has

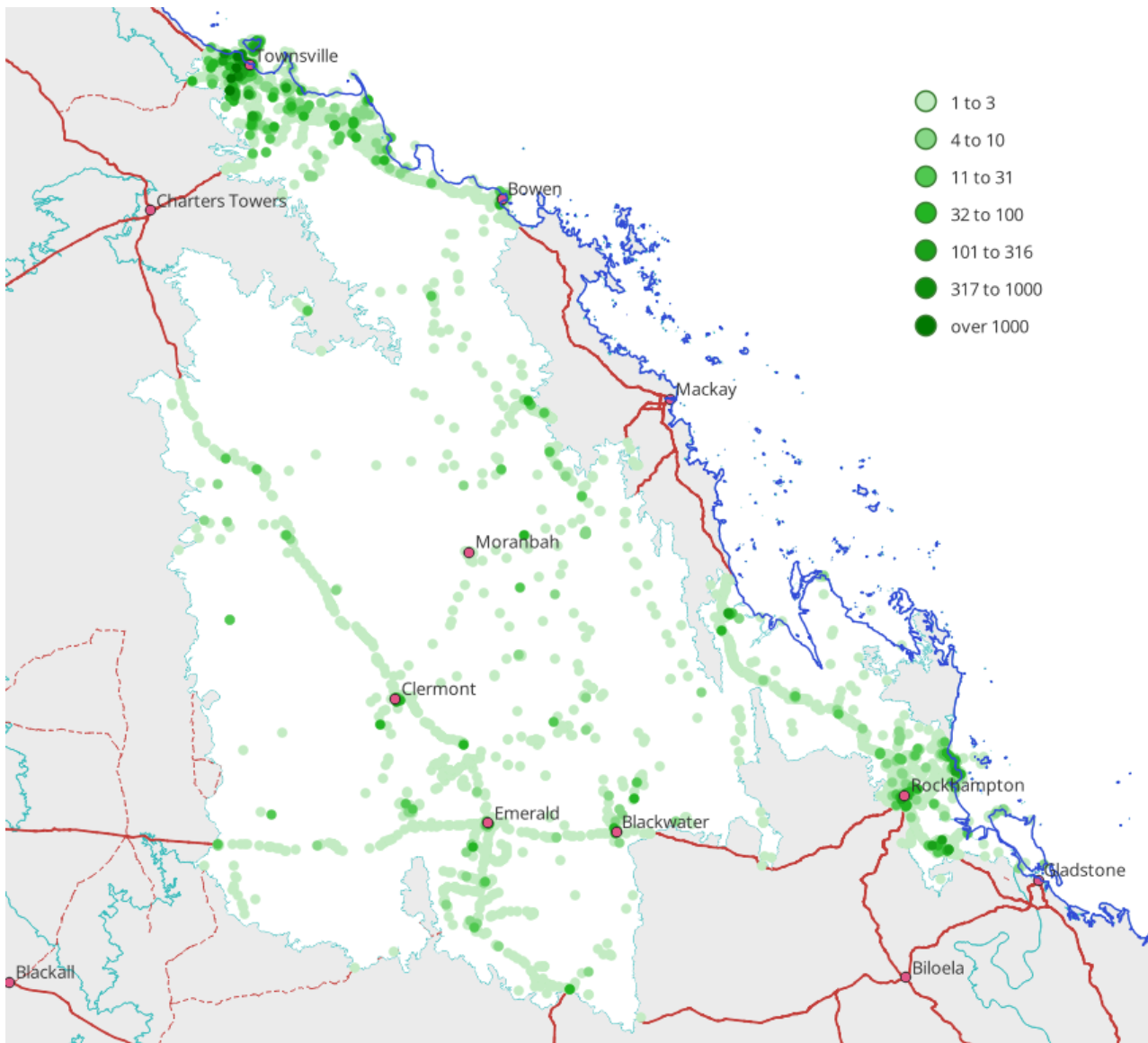


Figure 1 Brigalow Belt North showing eBird survey effort from 2020 - 2024. Each point represents an eBird survey location and the intensity is scaled to the number of reported checklists at that location.

declined by around 4% – leaving just 2,700 surviving mature individuals. Alarming, experts have predicted that the species' population may fall further and more steeply, with a decline of up to 10% forecast over the next three generations.” There are many coastal areas of the BBN where the Little Tern lives and breeds, and the population in three of those exceeds 1% of the global population.

### **Glossy Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*)**

The IUCN Red List Assessment for this species says, “Reporting rates suggest a rapid population decline of >30% has taken place over the last three generations.” The extremely restricted diet where they only eat seed cones of sheoak (*Allocasurina*) species seems to be one

of the major factors. The loss of these trees in coastal areas due to clearing for agriculture and urban expansion has depleted their main source of food. Data is also showing that only small populations are persisting in isolated locations such as Paluma Range National Park (NP), Eungella NP, Byfield NP, Mt Archer NP and Blackdown Tablelands NP. Some of these locations lie outside of the BBN but all are at a higher altitude, which may be caused by a number of reasons. It may be that being within a national park, the Sheoaks are protected and provide a secure source of food. Alternatively it may be that increasing temperatures are causing Glossy Black Cockatoos to seek out the cooler climates at altitude. Research needs to be undertaken to determine the cause.



Plate 1 Black-throated Finch (Olive McTrusty).

### **Black-throated Finch (*Poephila cincta*)**

Plate 1: The population of Black-throated Finches has been a subject of concern in recent years due to habitat loss and fragmentation. These birds rely on specific grasses and shrubs for nesting and foraging, and as these habitats are destroyed or degraded by human activities such as agriculture and urbanisation, their numbers will continue to decline.

### **Capricorn Yellow Chat (*Epthianura crocea macgregori*)**

Plate 2: This Critically Endangered species is found in marine plains in the southeast of the BBN. The population fluctuates with natural seasonal variation but increasing sea levels due to climate change are inundating their habitat and affecting the population. They prefer channels lined with sedges such as *Schoenoplectus subulatus* which is tolerant of tidal salt water inundation but not long-term submersion in salt water. Large areas of *S. subulatus* have been killed off by long-term inundation caused by sea level rise and this has reduced available habitat.

### **Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)**

World Stats puts the population of the Common Myna in Australia at 1.2 million. Since it first arrived in the BBN in 2012 it has spread throughout the bio-region and the population continues to grow. It is particularly numerous in populated areas. Common Mynas have a significant impact on native bird species. Their preference for nesting in tree hollows and aggressive nature means that the breeding



Plate 2. Capricorn Yellow Chat (Allan Briggs)

success of native species is adversely impacted. A study by The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (2014) showed that the Common Myna occupied up to 90% of nesting spaces.

### **Squatter Pigeon (Southern) (*Geophaps scripta scripta*)**

This species was upgraded to Vulnerable in the September 2017 update to the Queensland Nature Conservation Act of 1992. The main threats to this species include ongoing clearance of habitat for farming or development purposes; grazing of habitat by livestock and feral herbivores; and predation, especially by feral cats and foxes (Garnett and Crowley, 2000).

### **Little Corella (*Cacatua sanguinea*)**

The numbers of this species have increased dramatically since 2017 especially in the Rockhampton area where reported numbers have gone from 160 in 2017 to around 2000 in 2024. This is consistent with other parts of Australia where numbers have increased especially in coastal areas.

### **Yellow Honeyeater (*Stomiopera flava*)**

Following surveys by Birdlife Capricornia, a definite southward movement of the range of the Yellow Honeyeater has been noted. This was flagged in 2020 when a member reported the species at Alligator Creek where it joins the Fitzroy River north of Rockhampton. Historical data from eBird clearly demonstrates this change with the most southerly sightings for each year (excluding 2013) shown in Figure 2.

In fourteen years, the range has moved some 300 km further south. It is considered to be a sedentary species, so this movement is not due to migration. The pattern of the southward movement coincides with creeks and wetlands, indicating that the birds are following watercourses and water-bodies. This would concur with a study by Votto (2025) that suggested that due to the higher temperatures caused by climate change, honeyeaters are seeking out water sources as the environment dries out. However, there is no evidence of other honeyeater species showing the same southward extension of their range, which poses the question ‘what is causing this behaviour in the Yellow Honeyeater?’ These conclusions must be considered in the context of the smaller amount of data prior to 2020 and there is an obvious need for more research and analysis..

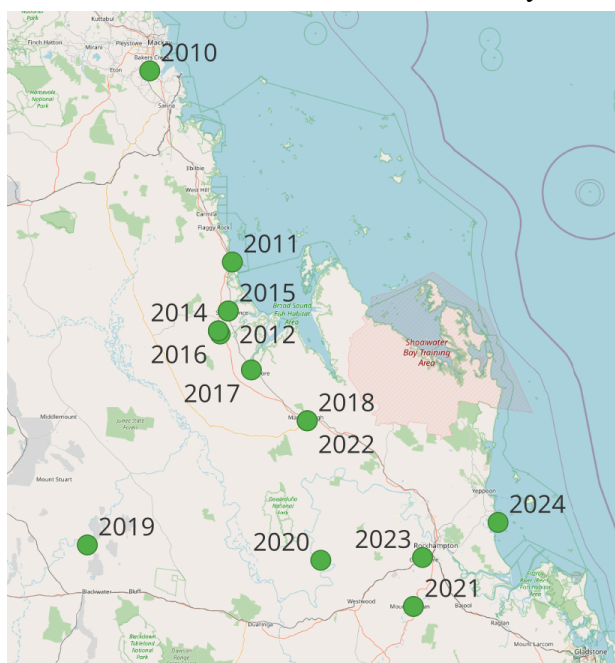


Figure 2. Southernmost sightings of the Yellow Honeyeater for each year, 2010 - 2024, showing southward movement.

## Listed Species

Sightings of species listed as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered under the Commonwealth EPBC Act and the Queensland Nature Conservation Act are shown in Table 1.

## Conservation

BirdLife Capricornia (BirdLife Capricornia, 2025) undertakes a wide variety of bird-related conservation activities including annual surveys of shorebirds on the Broad Sound Coast and Curtis Island, annual surveys and monitoring of Key Biodiversity Areas and monthly shorebird

surveys at Kinka Beach, Kinka Wetlands and Qld Alumina Ltd settling ponds at Gladstone. Annual surveys of the Capricorn Yellow Chat across six locations are also conducted.

## Major Events

The Brigalow Belt (BRB) bioregion recorded the highest rate of woody vegetation clearing of all bioregions in the state in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 (193,000ha/year). (Qld Govt State of the Environment Report, 2020). That represented 52% of the total for Queensland. 323,600 hectares of forest and bushland were cut down and cleared in Queensland between 2021-22 (Australian Climate and Biodiversity Foundation, 2024). If the same 52% was applied for the Brigalow belt that would equal 161,800ha/year. This is a small reduction but is still a considerable amount of habitat that is being removed each year with significant impact on bird populations.

Urban development in coastal areas is resulting in land clearing for housing and other infrastructure, which is reducing habitat for feeding and nesting. For example the population of Yeppoon increased by 17% and Townsville by 6.3% between 2017 and 2024 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Townsville City grew by a total of only 1.5% in the 4 years between 2017 and 2021, but the last three years has seen 1.5% as its average annual growth rate.

In 2017 tropical cyclone Debbie crossed the coast at Airlie Beach and dropped to a tropical low as it turned south through BBN and caused widespread flooding (BOM 2025). 2019 was Australia’s hottest and driest year on record with temperatures two degrees above the long term average and rainfall 40% less than the long-term average (BOM 2020 review). Bush fires at Cobraball west of Yeppoon destroyed 6,000 hectares of bush land. 2021 was a La Niña year with heavy rainfall and Byfield, north of Yeppoon being the wettest place in Australia which recorded 550mm in 24 hours in March. Tropical Cyclone Kirrili crossed the coast north of Townsville in January 2024 (OIGEM 2025) with localised flooding. All of these events would have impacted birdlife but the extent of that impact is unknown.

**Table 1** Sightings of listed species.

**Number:** (Number Observed: the cumulative sightings from 2017 - 2024) there will be double counting in this column when there were multiple observers or bird(s) stayed in the same location for multiple days.

**Aus** shows the conservation status under the Australian Commonwealth EPBC Act

**Qld** shows the conservation status under the Qld Nature Conservation Act

V = vulnerable, E = endangered, CE = critically endangered.

Species	Aus	Qld	Number	Location	Comments
Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>	V	V	294	This species was recorded at 9 locations with most being observed at Bushland Beach, Townsville	
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	V	V	7306	This species was recorded at 35 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta, Wunjunga Wetlands, Alva Beach Claypan and at various locations around Townsville.	At several of these sites the birds observed exceed 1% of the global population.
Red Knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>	V	V	1438	Most of these observations were made at various locations around Townsville	
Curlew Sandpiper <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	CE	CE	2597	This species was recorded at 22 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta, Wunjunga and Alva Beach Claypan.	At Alva Beach Claypan almost 1% of the global population has been observed.
Great Knot <i>Calidris tenuirostris</i>	V	V	46099	This species was recorded at 24 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta and Bushland Beach.	At Burdekin River Delta and Bushland Beach close to 1% of the global population has been observed.
Glossy Black-Cockatoo <i>Calyptorhynchus lathami</i>		V	71	Small numbers of birds observed at 9 sites.	
Greater Sand Plover, Large Sand Plover <i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	V	V	11	This species was recorded at 19 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta and Bushland Beach.	
Lesser Sand Plover, Mongolian Plover <i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	E	E	6663	This species was recorded at 28 locations with most being observed at Kinka Beach and Bushland Beach.	
Capricorn Yellow Chat, Yellow Chat (Dawson) <i>Epthianura crocea macgregori</i>	CE	CE	331	Surveys conducted by BirdLife Capricornia on several properties between the Fitzroy River and Broad Sound.	
Beach Stone-curlew <i>Esacus magnirostris</i>		V	114	This species was recorded at 26 locations with most being observed at Bowen, Cungulla and Bushland Beach.	This species is normally only seen in pairs or a small family group. The numbers seen at Bowen, Cungulla, and Bushland Beach over the period of 2017 to 2024 would most likely be the same birds seen many times.

Species	Aus	Qld	Number	Location	Comments
Latham's Snipe, Japanese Snipe <i>Gallinago hardwickii</i>	V	V	4	This species was recorded at 25 locations with most being observed at Sheepwash Lagoon and Townsville Town Common.	This species is normally only seen singly or in small numbers feeding around a wetland. The numbers seen at Townsville Common over the period of 2017 to 2024 were only in one, twos and threes but cumulatively added up to a bigger number.
Squatter Pigeon (southern) <i>Geophaps scripta scripta</i>	V	V	Large numbers	Throughout BBN	There have been many thousands of reports of this species in the BBN. There is some debate around the question of whether this species should be listed as vulnerable.
White-throated Needletail <i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i>	V	V	61	This species was recorded at 7 locations with most being observed at Townsville Town Common.	
Western Alaskan Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica baueri</i>	E		723	This species was recorded at 5 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta.	
Northern Siberian Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica menzbieri</i>	E		12	This species was recorded at 16 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta.	
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>	E		47	This species was recorded at 7 locations with most being observed at Murray Lagoon, Rockhampton and St Lawrence Wetlands.	
Powerful owl <i>Ninox strenua</i>		V	1	Coowonga, near Rockhampton	
Eastern Curlew, Far Eastern Curlew <i>Numenius madagascariensis</i>	CE	CE	2791	This species was recorded at 45 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta and Bushland Beach.	Cumulatively from 2019 to 2024 the number of Eastern Curlew exceeds 1% of the global population of 350. However, there is no single count that does that.
Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	V	V	801	This species was recorded at 18 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta and Cungulla.	
Southern Black-throated Finch <i>Poephila cincta cincta</i>	EE				
Black-throated Finch <i>Poephila cincta</i>	E	E	440	This species was recorded at 26 locations including Flinders Highway and Gunnado Road.	
Australian Painted Snipe <i>Rostratula australis</i>	E		6	This species was recorded at 3 locations.	

Species	Aus	Qld	Number	Location	Comments
Little Tern <i>Sternula albifrons</i>	V		4187	This species was recorded at 30 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta, Little Sheepwash Creek, Cape Bowling Green and Bushland Beach.	Cumulatively from 2017 to 2024 the number of Little Terns exceeds 1% of the global population of 300. Several counts exceeded the 1% criterion. However, the Little Tern (Western Pacific) and Asian migrants of the same species are often seen together. It is difficult to tell them apart except when the Little Tern (Western Pacific) is in breeding plumage
Common Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>	E		671	This species was recorded at 35 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta, Wunjunga Wetlands and Bushland Beach.	
Terek Sandpiper <i>Xenus cinereus</i>	V	V	974	This species was recorded at 15 locations with most being observed at the Burdekin River Delta.	The count of 600 in November 2019 at the Burdekin River Delta exceeds the 1% threshold of 500

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