

Gold Coast Shorebirds



Eastern Curlews in flight

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Migratory birds undertake huge journeys which make any feats of human endurance seem meagre.

In 2022 a Bar-tailed Godwit fitted with a tracker set a new world record for long distance flying. It flew 15500 kilometres non-stop from the Yukon in Alaska to Anson Bay in Tasmania. The bird was five months old.

About 120 migratory birds use the Gold Coast Broadwater.

Migratory shorebirds are marvellous creatures which are worthy of our care, respect and attention. They are highly specialised which also makes them highly vulnerable.

The Gold Coast Shorebird Environment

Over sixty species of birds have been recorded on Curlew Island and the number of species for the whole of the Broadwater is likely to be much higher.

The main groups of birds found here are the international migratory shorebirds, Australian shorebirds, international terns, Australian terns, wetland birds, meadow birds and forest birds.

About 25 species of international shorebirds have been recorded on the Gold Coast but the most important species found here are the Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Double banded Plover, Little Tern and Common Tern. The national listing for the Eastern Curlew is *critically endangered* and the Bar-tailed Godwit is *vulnerable*. The size of the Gold Coast population for these birds is Nationally Significant under the EPBC Act.

Some birds tolerate human presence quite well or are nimble in avoiding human impacts but the international migratory birds do not tolerate close human presence very well. They have particular characteristics which make their survival in a habitat where there is high human impact almost impossible, unless that habitat is properly protected and managed.

International shorebirds perform feats of extreme endurance. Their migrations span the globe. They breed in the Arctic. By the time an Eastern Curlew returns to Australia it will have completed a round journey of 25000 to 30000 kilometres. Wild dogs are a natural predator and humans hunt them on their migration journey so they are wary of people and dogs. Though these birds are swift long distance flyers they are not agile on the ground. Launching to avoid danger burns up valuable energy from their fat stores which they need for their migration. These birds are land birds adapted for a marine environment and they are unable to swim.

They require a high sandy location (roost) to escape the effects of high tide. Good roosts are scarce and this can limit their ability to use a valuable foraging area.

Migratory birds are distributed throughout the whole of Moreton Bay. In the Moreton Bay Marine Park they are protected by a strong legal framework. The general sections of the 'Nature Conservation Act' only offer minimal protection for shorebirds so there is an administrative vacuum for a habitat which is not in a dedicated conservation area. The Gold Coast Broadwater is such an area.

Disturbance of shorebirds by people and dogs is the area's most significant problem and there is no legal framework or government authority to prevent this from happening. This alone will probably determine the ability of this shorebird population to survive.

It is hoped that the appointment of a trustee for Curlew Island will be accompanied with protection of the surrounding Curlew Banks.

Incremental loss of habitat is another problem which is happening on the Gold Coast because of the lack of proper environmental management here.

Proper shorebird management for the Broadwater will have a flow on effect for protecting many other species which use this area.

Shorebirds have three basic requirements.

1. **Safety.** The Gold Coast Broadwater is an unsafe environment. Impacts from dogs and people are not managed.
2. **Roost.** Curlew Island is an excellent high tide roost but it suffers from severe disturbance.
3. **Good foraging areas.** The Broadwater has rich intertidal banks but incremental loss of habitat is a problem.

Eastern Curlew



Bar-tailed Godwit

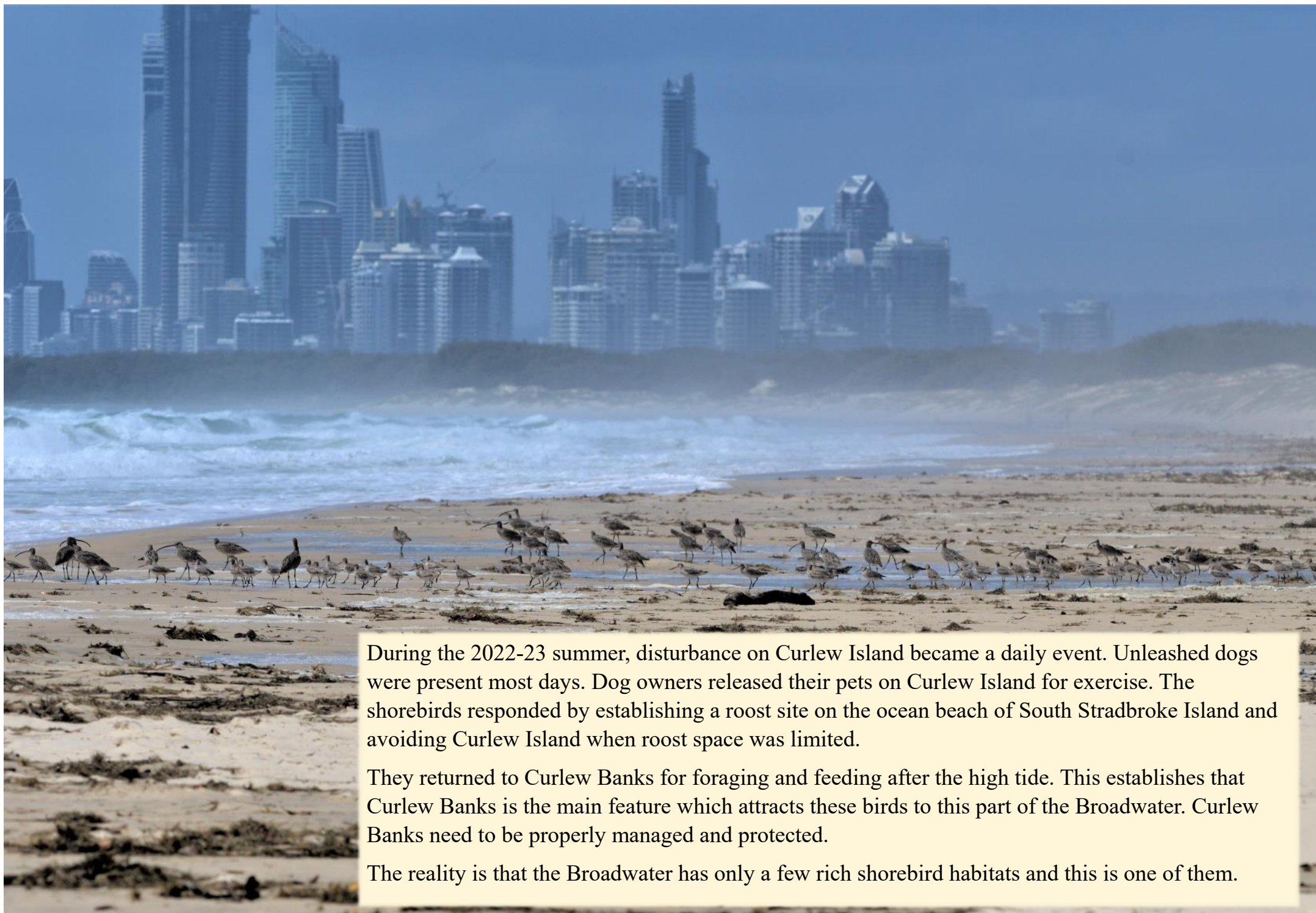


Whimbrels



Double-banded Plover





During the 2022-23 summer, disturbance on Curlew Island became a daily event. Unleashed dogs were present most days. Dog owners released their pets on Curlew Island for exercise. The shorebirds responded by establishing a roost site on the ocean beach of South Stradbroke Island and avoiding Curlew Island when roost space was limited.

They returned to Curlew Banks for foraging and feeding after the high tide. This establishes that Curlew Banks is the main feature which attracts these birds to this part of the Broadwater. Curlew Banks need to be properly managed and protected.

The reality is that the Broadwater has only a few rich shorebird habitats and this is one of them.

The Broadwater Roosts and Intertidal Banks

Curlew Island is the only roost site in the southern Broadwater.

Birds often leave this roost due to excessive disturbance or extreme high tides. When they leave Curlew Island they usually fly to the ocean beach on South Stradbroke Island. They are frequently disturbed here as well, by beach walkers or 4WD beach traffic. When this happens they will seek to return to Curlew Island or fly in a holding pattern above the island. This wastes fat reserves which they need for their migration.

The surveyed area for Curlew Island only covers the green top of Curlew Island. All bird activity is on the sandbanks which surround the island and the foraging areas of Curlew Banks. Unless these areas are included in the protected area, the environmental problems of this location will be unable to be solved.

The sandbank system of the Broadwater includes Carter Bank, Kuringle Flats on Wavebreak Island, Curlew Banks, Seaworld Bank, end of Moondarewa Spit and Fisherman's Wharf Bank.

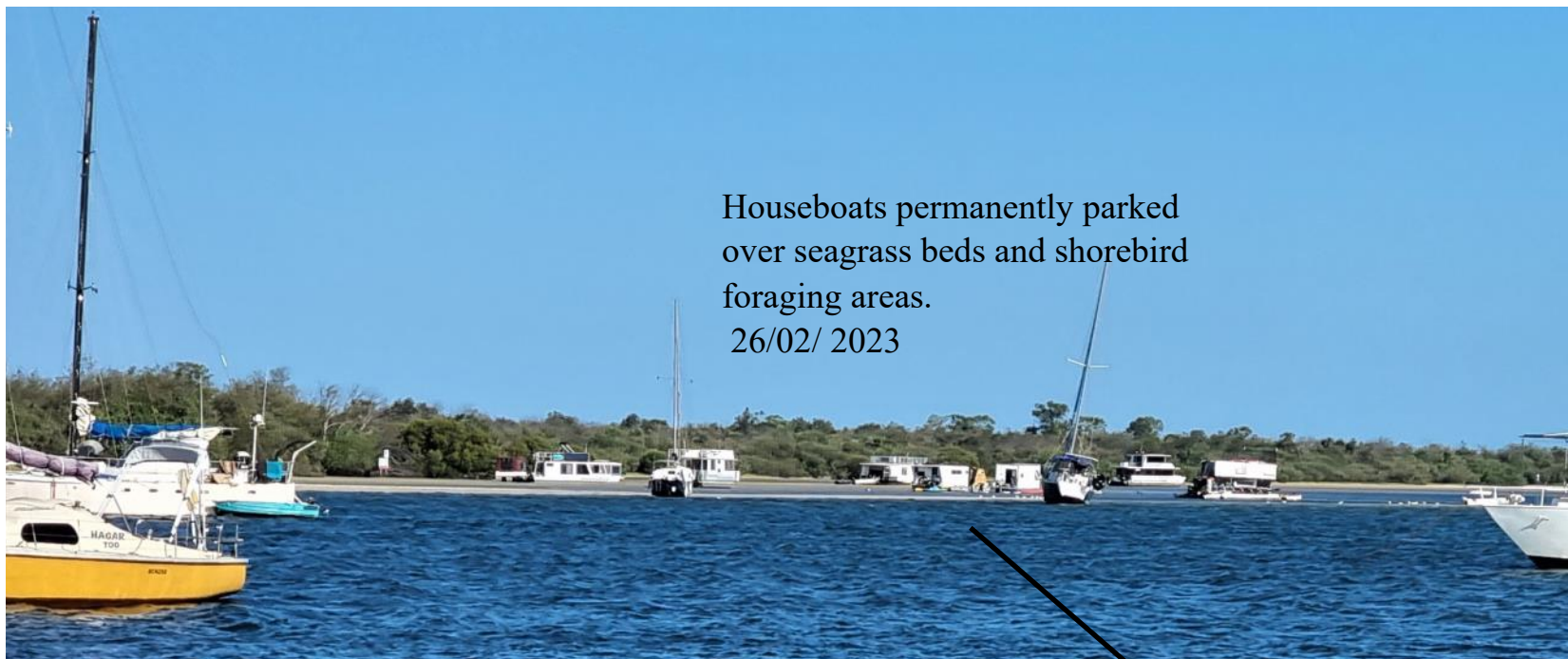
Prior to 2012 shorebirds were regularly seen at all these locations but since that time their activity has been restricted to Curlew Banks.

Curlew Banks is a rich habitat and this year the shorebirds have maintained a constant presence here. Count numbers indicate that it also draws birds from other parts of the Broadwater.

There has been a severe decline in shorebird numbers world wide during the past 10 years and this may in part explain why they now use a more limited range of habitats here. However in the case of Wavebreak Island, the profusion of boats permanently parked over their foraging habitat is the probable reason why they now avoid this location.

The continued presence of shorebirds here, in spite of all the difficulties they have encountered this year, is a clear indication that with proper management, this habitat and their presence here, may be maintained.





Houseboats permanently parked
over seagrass beds and shorebird
foraging areas.

26/02/ 2023

Boat parking on Kuringle Flats

Inter-tidal banks such as Kuringle Flats support a wide range of marine life besides shorebirds.

The Gold Coast Broadwater has no environment management and there is no authority which has the power to prevent this destructive practice.

Incremental loss of habitat.

Wavebreak Island

In past times shorebirds frequented the edges of the seagrass beds as shown in the map. The profusion of house boats now parked over this area has discouraged shorebirds from visiting this site. These boats are also likely to be causing damage to the seagrass beds.

Moondarewa Spit

A small roost used to exist at the end of Moondarewa Spit. Shorebirds abandoned this location after a dredge was parked there for 12 months.

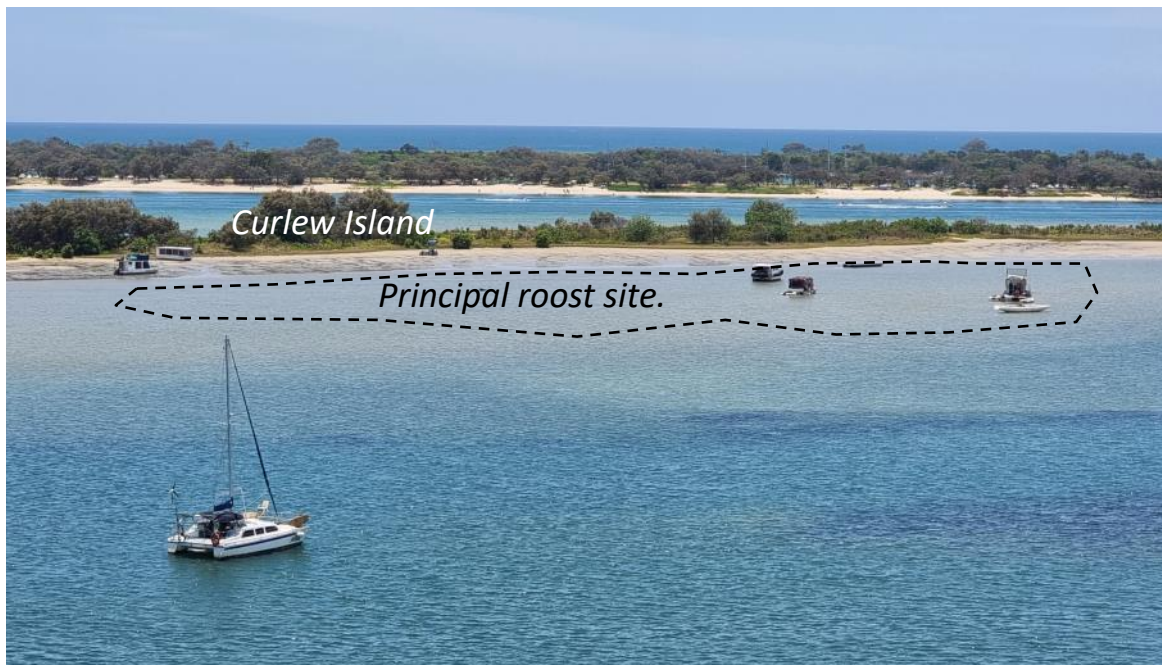
Fisherman's Bank and Seaworld Bank

This area has been abandoned by shorebirds. It is an area of high boat movements and helicopter activity.

Carter Bank

Shorebirds now avoid this area. It is an area of high boat movement. Many bait diggers visit this bank





Incremental loss of habitat is now happening on Curlew Banks in much the same way has happened on Wavebreak Island.

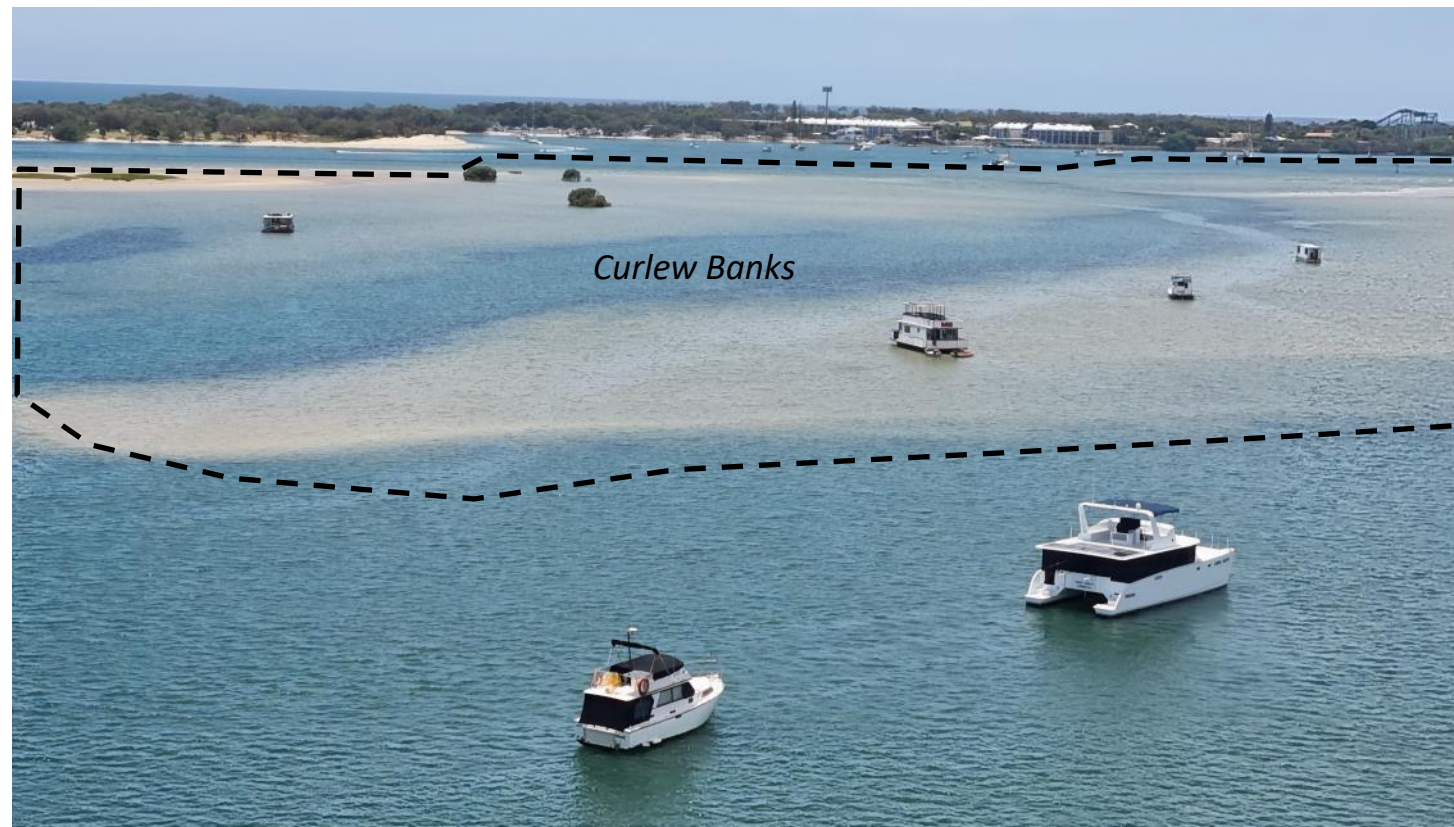
Boats are now being parked over foraging areas and roost sites. There is the potential for Curlew Banks to become as crowded as Kuringle Flats.

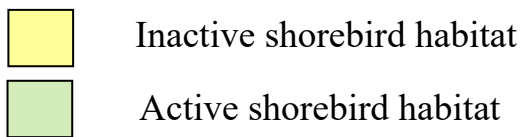
This is a recent development and may be stopped if action is taken now. Some of these boats are unattended and others have permanent residents. All impact heavily on the natural environment and bird movements.

The Gold Coast Waterways Authority has assisted by attempting to discourage permanent boat anchoring here. However they work with old and complicated rules which are not directly related to environment protection. Determined offenders are able find a path through these rules.

More precise regulations are required that allow visits to the area but prevent long stays.

Dedicating Curlew Banks as a protected area would allow the opportunity to enact such rules.





The areas where shorebird activity has been lost have always been secondary habitat when compared with Curlew Banks. Though these areas are no longer active shorebird habitats, a wide range of other species still use these areas.

The challenge is to prevent Curlew Banks and Curlew Island from becoming an inactive shorebird area. This system has no connection to the mainland and this makes moderation of impacts highly achievable.

Impacts on shorebird habitats is a world wide problem. When the focus is on the Gold Coast during the Olympic games it would be good to show the world how we have dealt with this problem.

This may be achieved by:

- Designating Curlew Banks as a protected area.
- Erect proper signage on Curlew Island to inform the public of its purpose.
- Conduct a public education programs about Curlew Island and Curlew Banks
- Manage shorebird disturbance caused by dogs and people.
- Limit access to Curlew Island at high tide when the shorebirds need the island for themselves.
- Carry out enforcement actions against uncooperative visitors.
- Prevent long term parking of boats on Curlew Banks.
- Counter activities which lead to incremental loss of habitat.

