

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment. ‘A bird in the hand....

(by Brian Kane)



Imagine being given the task by the Creator at the beginning of time to design 3500 bird species for our world. This task would also require that the birds be made as varied and colourful as possible, and be placed in a suitable environment for their individual survival needs. On reflection, this would indeed be a daunting task.

Australia has a wonderful diversity of 750 bird species to delight us and half of these species can be found in the Kimberley. Even in our darkest moments the sound of these joyful birds can lift our spirits.

It has been recognized in more recent times just how important the Kimberley coast is for over two million feathered tourists who arrive each year in late August from the northern hemisphere. These migratory birds are protected along their flyways by bilateral agreements between countries.

Once in the Kimberley over forty species of shorebirds or ‘waders’ as they are called, double their body weight by feasting on the rich variety of food provided by the tidal mudflats.

After a six month stay in Australia, the wading birds begin to change colour in March, a sure sign that they are about to fly back to such places as China and Siberia to breed. The journey of 6 000 kilometres takes about 4 days and is aided enormously by the change in wind direction at this time of the year. Interestingly, the departure of these large flocks of birds have been tracked by weather radar.

One of nature's miracles, the red necked stint, is the smallest migratory wader. It is tiny enough to fit into a teacup, yet in its lifetime it flies further than the distance between the earth and the moon.



Red-Necked Stint (photo – Kevin Roberts)

The team at the Broome Bird Observatory has learnt much in the last 20 years about the migratory waders by its cannon netting programme and from the tagging of thousands of birds. Birds play a major role in our ecosystems and we would do well to ensure their protection for the future.

Further information: BK's Kimberley nature web site:

<http://www.stmarysbroome.wa.edu.au/home/nature/aaopen.html>