

Hooded Plover population of Yalgorup National Park: steep declines and other insights from a 30-year dataset

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Abstract. The Western Hooded Plover *Thinornis cucullatus tregellasi* is a threatened shorebird inhabiting southwestern Australia and has received limited research attention compared with the eastern subspecies. We analysed a 30-year dataset (1996-2024) from Yalgorup National Park, a stronghold of the western subspecies, to assess local population trends, flocking behaviour, breeding activity and movements. The findings show a 75% decline in the adult abundance, from 76 individuals (95% CI: 56-101) in 1996 to 18 (13-24) in 2024. Declines were observed at ten of 12 sites, with Lake Preston North experiencing the steepest reduction (99%). Seasonal patterns showed peak adult abundance and flock sizes in summer (December-February), with flocks progressively decreasing in size through autumn to winter. Across 219 breeding events, hatching and fledging success averaged 0.29 chicks/egg and 0.15 fledglings/egg, although uncertainty remained due to unknown nest fates and unassigned juveniles. Banding data revealed high mobility of juveniles and adults between lakes, limited local recruitment of fledglings and two long-distance movements (>160 km) between Yalgorup and inland lakes. While the drivers of the local decline are unclear, interacting factors likely include habitat degradation at inland lakes linked to increased salinity, reduced rainfall and predation, compounded by pressures on Yalgorup's feeding and nesting habitats. These findings highlight a substantial, ongoing decline in a key population of Western Hooded Plover, suggesting that local breeding success is not the primary driver, but rather regional habitat and predation pressures. Our study provides crucial baseline data, supporting the reassessment of the subspecies' national conservation status and informing targeted research, monitoring and management strategies.

Key words: *Thinornis cucullatus tregellasi*, long-term monitoring, flocking, colour banding, shorebird