

# The Best Time To See Shorebirds At SSS

Stockton Sandspit is famous for its shorebirds and for the fact that the shorebirds use it as a high tide roost. Its no wonder then, that many people believe the high tide is the time to go see shorebirds at Stockton Sandspit. I need to inform people that no matter what the tide is doing, high or low, rising or falling, shorebirds are reacting to it or taking advantage of it at SSS. The truth is that the sandspit is a dynamic habitat, forever undergoing change, influenced by tides, river currents, weather, seasons and even the time of day. This is the case for many other features of the estuary, of course, but the sandspit is so accessible that the comings and goings of estuary flora and fauna is easily observed there. Our particular interest, shorebirds, are very much a part of all that.

Mid-tide and rising is an exciting time for observers, as flocks of shorebirds start to leave the low tide foraging grounds and head downstream. From the vantage of the sandspit you can witness these squadrons flying down the river as they make their way to staging points prior to roosting. Lots of these squadrons are seen disappearing over the dykes where mud flats will still be exposed and some additional feeding time is available. Others make their way directly to the beach at Stockton Sandspit. During times when numbers of Red-necked Avocet are high (counts of several thousand have been recorded) the sight of these very visible birds streaming out of Fullerton Cove, flying so low over the river and rising in a final bank to land on the beach never fails to thrill. Depending on the numbers and the height of the previous low tide, this procession may last for 90 minutes as they arrive in groups of 50 to 250 birds. About this time it is also fun to watch the Pelicans being slowly forced off the sand bar as the tide rises to their bellies.

Up to an hour before the high tide many other shorebirds can be seen on the beach or coming over the top of the berm to take up some space on the sandspit proper. If you are attentive you will have already seen the first scouts of each species take a turn or two around the lagoon before flying back to report to their mates. Just about any species of shorebird that is in the estuary can be expected to turn up; curlew, godwit, knot, sandpiper and stint certainly make up the bulk of the numbers. Many assemble in the water of the lagoon, some will stand on open ground, while others will make for the salt marsh areas. This can be a busy time for any proportion of the shorebirds that go looking for further feeding opportunities around the margins of the lagoon. Also during this transition stage the shorebirds are often disturbed by raptors checking out the growing congregation and sometimes this leads to lots of rearranging between the sandspit and the dykes. A nervous time for shorebirds but a real spectacle for observers is quite often the result.

Over the high tide there will be a period when all is settled and most likely this is the least interesting time of all. It is now a good time for observers to go for a walk around to Fern Bay and see what those "grey birds" are doing. Either on the stone bank or out on the timber structures of the oyster lease you will find Terek Sandpiper and Grey-tailed Tattler. I don't know why they prefer to roost here, and not with the "brown birds" but it presents a convenient situation for wader survey types to easily count these birds. Also around at Fern Bay, you can always rely on finding several Whimbrel roosting in the mangroves and by the time you walk back things are starting to change again at the sandspit.

Two hours past the high tide there begins the movement of birds off the sandspit and onto the beach. The falling tide also calls birds from the dykes to join the others and follow the water's edge as it moves slowly off the beach and across the mud flats. The last birds to leave are usually the Eastern Curlew and this is a great relief to the ground nesting birds that choose to breed at the sandspit, that

now can relax for five or six hours before the next invasion. Out on the mud all the shorebirds are amassing and while most seem to be roosting still, several are getting an early start on the next session of feeding. Again this is an excellent time for observations and an opportunity to increase your skills at identifying shorebirds in flight.

By mid-tide and falling, the sand bar is exposed and lots of birds have migrated there. The total number of shorebirds has diminished as half of them have taken off in their squadrons for Fullerton Cove or wherever. Even at one hour prior to the next low tide there will still be scores of birds loafing; mostly godwit or knot and a hand full of avocet but at times hundreds of sandpiper types and stint. We have witnessed these birds "roosting" completely over the low tide after a short mid-tide feed.

Low tide the shorebirds that have chosen to stay are basically spread out over the mud flats and feverishly feeding. This is a terrific time to get close to some of these birds and the berm can be used as a very convenient screen to watch those feeding along the shoreline near the oyster reef. Usually there is a pretty good representation of the shorebirds seen over the high tide but look out for some extras. This will mean checking out every individual on the mud flats but quite often you'll get some high quality sightings.

Seasonally, it is probably the most rewarding time to see shorebirds at Stockton Sandspit from late July through to April. Shorebird numbers and range of species increase dramatically from September but ground-nesting birds have already begun breeding activities 6 weeks earlier. By April most of the migrants have left but winter still has its moments as the lives of the over-wintering birds continue to be controlled by the tides.

For the patient birdwatcher, it does not matter when you go to Stockton Sandspit; matter of fact, I think I'll go right now. Be sure to check the tides before you do, however, so that your observations carry more meaning and you will gain greater personal satisfaction from your birdwatching.

Tom Clarke