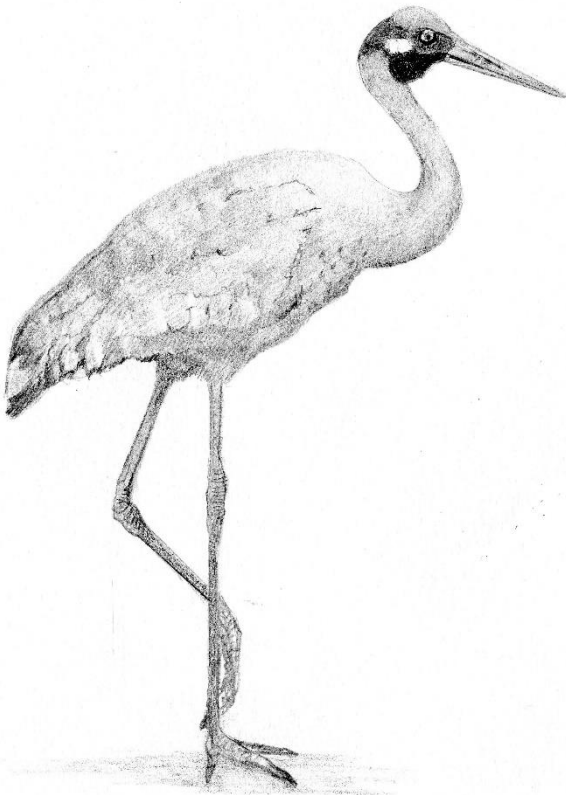


## BIRDS WITH BIG BILLS - Cranes, storks and shorebirds

Ellinor Campbell. (Drawings of Brolga and Eastern Curlew by Kaye Traynor)

There are 17 species of storks in the world, but only one of these is found in Australia. This is the Black-necked Stork or Jabiru. The latter is the generic name for the world's largest stork, which is native to South America. The Black-necked Stork is a huge bird with a massive black bill. It is found mainly on freshwater wetlands, associated grasslands, and tidal flats in tropical and sub-tropical areas. The bills of storks are longer and heavier than cranes.



Of 14 species of crane in the world there are only two in Australia — the **Saurus Crane** and **Brolga**. The Saurus Crane is found only in Northern Queensland, such as the Atherton Tablelands and the Gulf of Carpentaria lowlands. The Brolga, though rare, may be seen in several parts of Victoria, such as around Lake Connewarre north of Breamlea.

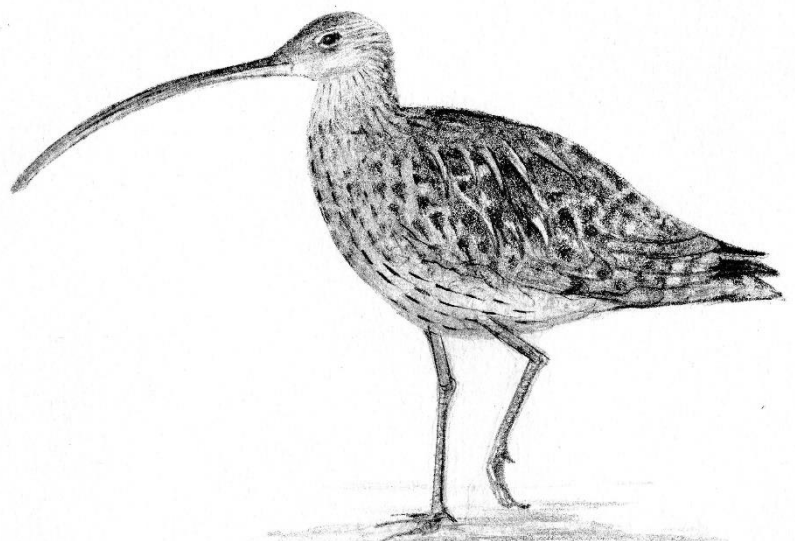
### **BROLGA**

**(Other names are Australian Crane, Native Companion)**

This stately, elegant, smoky-grey bird, is dull-red at the back of the head with a grey oval over the ear opening, and has a small dusky dewlap under the chin. It feeds on plant materials and small animals in grassland or shallow water. It is always a delight to see, especially its spectacular dancing display. In aboriginal legend the Brolga is said to be a famous dancer who did not reciprocate the attention of a wicked magician and so was turned into a Brolga. Farmers near Hospital Swamp report having regular seasonal visits by families with chicks.

### **EASTERN CURLEW**

The world's largest shorebird has not been previously described in our fact sheets. Between September and March it is often seen at low tide on the sandbanks in the Barwon Estuary. This huge and wary bird, usually solitary, has a speckled dark-brown body with no distinctive features. However, its profile is unmistakable, with the improbably long, strongly down-curved beak, which is nearly half the length of the body. It carefully stalks large prey, such as crabs, shrimps and worms. The beak, up to 20 cm long, is highly sensitive and has a rubbery tip which can be opened under pressure far below the surface of the sand.



Our 55 species of shorebirds or waders also have a range of interesting, and often long, beaks. Many of these birds, 37 species, are regular migrants that may fly more than 10,000 kilometres in spring and autumn to and from their breeding grounds in Siberia. The best place to see them in Victoria is Mud Islands in Port Philip Bay. It is an amazing sight to see scores of them here, and thousands in their stopover locations in the Yellow Sea (between China and Korea) actively running about and, mostly

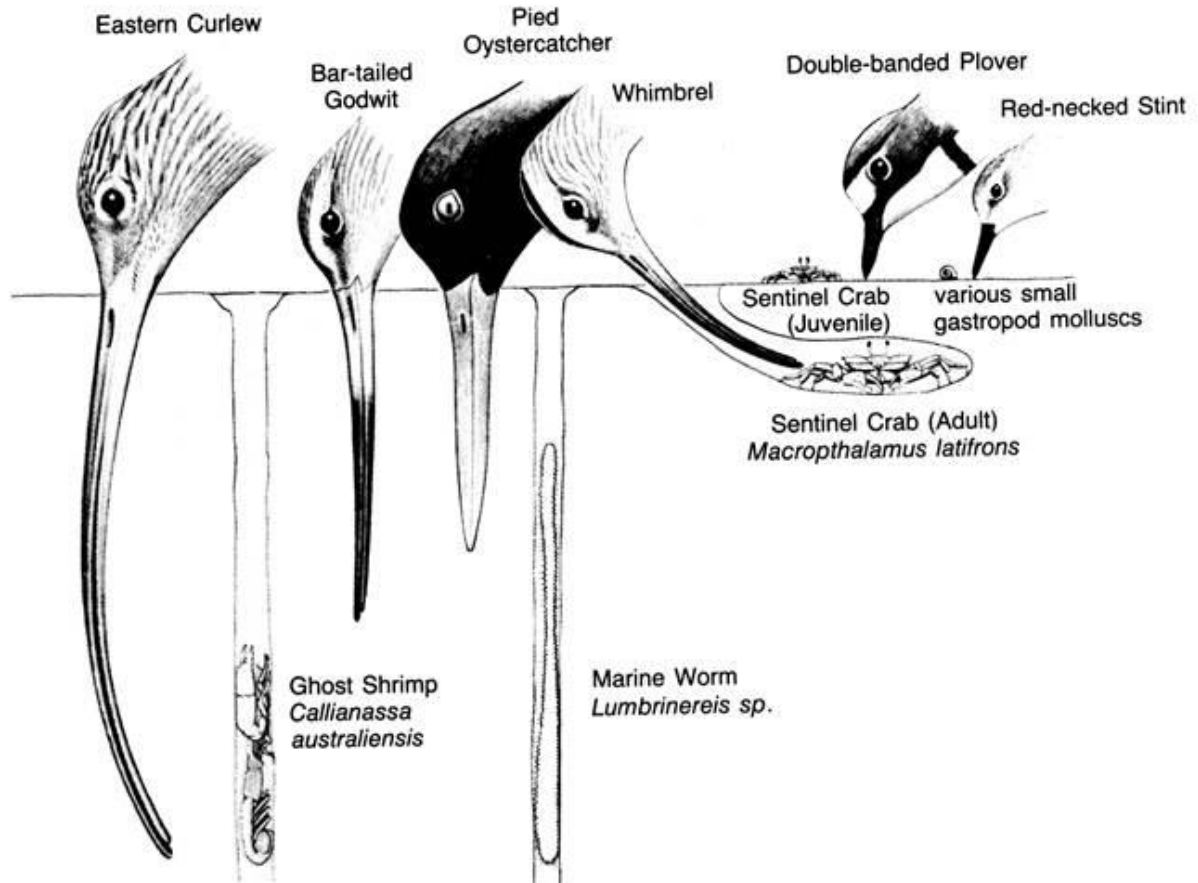


FIG. 3.10. The bill lengths of some intertidal shorebirds in relation to the typical depths of their main prey.

harmoniously, feeding on the exposed intertidal sea flats. This is very different from most land birds, such as honeyeaters, that aggressively chase each other away from favoured food sources such as flowering eucalypts. The reason is that each species of shorebird eats a different food. As the diagram shows, the beaks are a very different lengths and shapes, and so are perfectly adapted to digging in the sand and locating their particular food source.

**Ref: *Shorebirds in Australia* Brett A. Lane Illustrated by Jeff N Davies. Nelson 1987**

Most of our shorebirds are not normally noticed or known by the normal beach visitor. Birders call them LBJs or 'Little Brown Jobs' as, without a telescope and identification chart, they are hard to identify in their drab non-breeding plumage. However, on leaving our shores they develop striking new breeding plumage, often in shades of red. We have described most of the more common ones in previous newsletters which can be found on the ANGAIR website under: *Knowledge bank /Factsheets/ Shorebirds Feb. 2016, Herons Oct 2016, Elegance on Mudflats Feb. 2018.*

Ref: *The Field Guide to Birds of Australia* Graham Pizzey & Frank Knight.  
*Australian Waterbirds*, a Field Guide Richard Kingsford.  
*The Australian Field Bird Guide* Peter Menkhorst et al.  
*Waders. The Shorebirds of Australia* David Holland & Clive Minton.  
*Australian Waterbirds* Richard Kingsford