Wetland Birds *of the Central Riverina, New South Wales*

An Identification and Habitat Management Guide

Wetlands of the Central Riverina provide habitat for many wetland birds including threatened species and some that migrate from the northern hemisphere. **Ephemeral (or temporary) wetlands** occurring across the region are productive because organic matter decomposes in the drying cycle, 'fuelling' the wetland once it refills. A broad range of habitats is created which changes over cycles of flooding and drying. **Permanent wetlands and waterways** provide important year-round habitat and drought refuges for itinerant wetland birds. Both permanent and ephemeral wetlands are critical for biodiversity and ecological productivity. About 30% of the Central Riverina's bird species are dependent on wetlands. These wetland systems are also breeding areas for native fish, insects, crustaceans, reptiles and amphibians – essential food sources for wetland birds.

Unfortunately, vast areas of wetlands have been drained or cultivated causing wetland birds to decline. The worst affected species are those that nest close to the ground as they have lost key habitat attributes and are highly susceptible to predation. However, on-ground work has already begun to protect and restore wetland habitat in the region through environmental watering, fencing, predator control and appropriate management. Conservation of wetland habitats is critical to support populations of wetland birds now and into the future.

YOU CAN HELP

Ensure wetland areas receive and hold water

Flooding is the driving factor responsible for the existence and productivity of wetland birds. Wetlands in this region have variable flooding cycles depending on whether they are on a major waterway floodplain (e.g. Murray River) or from rainfall runoff. It is important to develop a strategy to ensure that every wetland receives adequate water (e.g. banks do not interfere with the flow).

Provide different layers of habitat

The diversity of birds occurring at a site can be increased by: providing different wetland and fringing vegetation layers; maintaining and enhancing shrubs in wetlands (e.g. lignum and goosefoot); retaining standing live and dead trees and fallen timber; and having trees and shrubs adjoin wetlands to create habitat diversity.

Respect your wetland areas

Cropping – avoid cropping in wetlands so soil structure is maintained.

Grazing – minimize the impact of stock on fringing wetland vegetation and pugging soil when wet.

Control pest animals

Spring-Summer is the peak breeding season for wetland birds and many species nest on or near the ground, so they are highly vulnerable to predation. Foxes and feral cats are major predators of wetland birds and need to be eradicated by baiting or trapping. Domestic cats and dogs can also be a problem. Localised rabbit populations can overgraze native vegetation and adversely affect plant recruitment and survival.

Get involved in wetland bird conservation initiatives

Consider getting involved in pest animal eradication around wetlands (e.g. spring fox drive), participate in bird surveys (e.g. Australian Painted Snipe and Bittern survey), submit records of birds you have seen to the Atlas of Australian Birds (BirdLife Australia), or join or support a community group or conservation organisation such as Landcare, BirdLife Australia or the Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group.

For further information
Contact Corowa District Landcare: corowalandcare@bigpond.com

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All bird photography: Chris Tzaros,
except for Australian Little Bittern (Andrew Silcocks).

Habitat photography: Matthew Herring.

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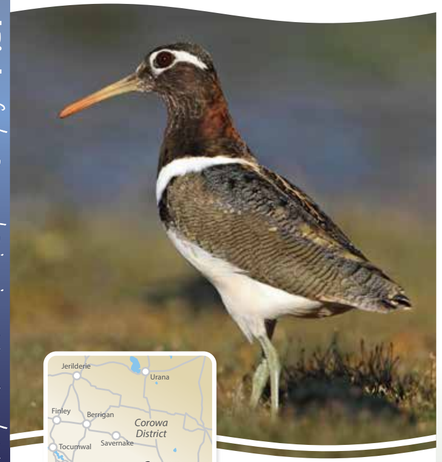

COROWA DISTRICT LANDCARE

Australian Government | NSW Local Land Services Murray | Corowa Shire | Murray Darling Wetlands

Shrubby wetlands (lignum and goosefoot dominated)

Grey Teal
Anas gracilis

Pink-eared Duck
Malacorhynchus membranaceus

Freckled Duck
Stictonetta naevosa

Yellow-billed Spoonbill
Platalea flavipes

Australian Spotted Crake
Porzana fluminea

Black-tailed Native-hen
Gallinula ventralis

Australian Painted Snipe
Rostratula australis

Shrubby wetlands

Lignum and goosefoot dominated wetlands provide an important habitat for exciting birds such as Australian Painted Snipe and Australian Spotted Crake. These hard to spot birds use shrubs for shelter and roosting, and forage in the surrounding shallow muddy areas. Red-kneed Dotterel, Black-tailed Native-hen and Freckled Duck nest on the marginally elevated areas at the base of lignum and goosefoot bushes. Areas of slightly deeper water between patches of bushes are the favoured feeding ground of Freckled and Pink-eared Ducks and Yellow-billed Spoonbill. Shrubby vegetation surrounded by water is where Little Grassbird, White-fronted Chat and Superb Fairy-wren prefer to feed and nest.

Black-fronted Dotterel
Elseyornis melanops

Red-kneed Dotterel
Erythrogonys cinctus

White-fronted Chat
Ephthianura albifrons

Little Grassbird
Megalurus gramineus

Superb Fairy-wren
Malurus cyaneus

Shallow open marshes (canegrass, low rushes, nardoo and grassy meadows)

Swamp Harrier
Circus approximans

White-necked Heron
Ardea pacifica

Australian Shelduck
Tadorna tadarnoides

Glossy Ibis
Plegadis falcinellus

Straw-necked Ibis
Threskiornis spinicollis

Brolga
Grus rubicunda

Latham's Snipe
Gallinago hardwickii

Shallow marshy wetlands

Shallow open marshes occur as low lying depressions in flood prone areas and are not often recognisable as 'wetlands' except following rainfall or flood. Once marshes are flooded, wetland plants establish quickly and birds colonise. As water levels recede, shallow marshes are habitat for species that forage on insects on the water's surface, emergent foliage and areas of damp ground. Brolga breed almost exclusively in large open shallow marshes that are only flooded for 2-6 months at a time. Species such as Black-winged Stilt and Whiskered Tern commence breeding in these wetlands 3 months after inundation and require water for a further 6 months for success.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
Calidris acuminata

Black-winged Stilt
Himantopus himantopus

Masked Lapwing
Vanellus miles

Whiskered Tern
Chlidonias hybridus

Golden-headed Cisticola
Cisticola exilis

Timbered wetlands and watercourses (River Red Gum, Grey or Black Box)

Australian Wood Duck
Chenonetta jubata

Pacific Black Duck
Anas superciliosa

Chestnut Teal
Anas castanea

Australasian Shoveler
Anas rhynchotis

Darter
Anhinga melanogaster

Little Pied Cormorant
Phalacrocorax melanoleucos

Little Black Cormorant
Phalacrocorax sulcirostris

Treed wetlands

Large trees growing in wetlands and along watercourses are a significant ecological asset. Red Gums in particular offer an enormous range of habitat resources – shelter, feeding areas, resting perches, sticks for nest building, nesting sites in branches and hollow limbs. Tree-lined watercourses act as corridors for birds to forage and move through the landscape. Wetland birds associated with Red Gum, Grey and Black Box wetlands, include Nankeen Night-Heron, Pacific Black Duck, Darter and Cormorant. Living and dead trees provide essential habitat and maintaining flows to waterways is vital.

Great Cormorant
Phalacrocorax carbo

Australian Pelican
Pelecanus conspicillatus

Great Egret
Ardea alba

Nankeen Night Heron
Nycticorax caledonicus

White-faced Heron
Egretta novaehollandiae

Reedy wetlands (tall reed beds, spike rush dominated)

Black Swan
Cygnus atratus

Australasian Grebe
Tachybaptus novaehollandiae

Hoary-headed Grebe
Poliocephalus poliocephalus

Australian Little Bittern
Ixobrychus minutus

Australasian Bittern
Botaurus poiciloptilus

Buff-banded Rail
Gallirallus philippensis

Baillon's Crake
Porzana pusilla

Reedy wetlands

Wetland margins that support emergent clumps of cumbungi, reeds and tall spike rush provide habitat that is useful to a suite of wetland birds; those that prefer to live in deep shelter (Bittern and Rail), those that use 'ribbons' of aquatic vegetation for nesting material or platforms to forage (Swan, Grebe and Crake), and those that forage in deeper water close to fringing reed beds (e.g. Swamphen, Moorhen and Coot). The Australian Reed-Warbler, whose lovely song can be heard bursting from the reed beds during spring and summer, occurs exclusively in this habitat where it attaches its nest to stems of reeds and tall rushes. Spike rush responds quickly to shallow flooding (5-50cm) and the underground tubers are a favoured food source of Brolga. Cumbungi and reeds prefer deeper, more permanent water, especially over summer.

Spotless Crake
Porzana tabuensis

Purple Swamphen
Porphyrio porphyrio

Dusky Moorhen
Gallinula tenebrosa

Eurasian Coot
Fulica atra

Australian Reed-Warbler
Acrocephalus stentoreus

Locally significant wetland birds

Australian Painted Snipe
Rostratula australis

- Endangered – Australia's rarest and most threatened resident wetland bird, recorded at only a few sites per year across the country. Corowa district is one of the best sites for this species.
- Recorded in lignum-goosefoot wetlands and shallow canegrass-rush marshes. Striking and highly secretive species that relies on shallow mudflats for foraging and low dense cover for shelter and breeding.
- Occurs in small groups of 3-10 birds.

Brolga
Grus rubicunda

- Has declined dramatically across south-eastern Australia (less than 1000 pairs) due to habitat loss and predation.
- Central Riverina supports a significant population.
- They forage in paddocks and crop stubble and breed on large (>10ha) shallow (< 30cm) marshes with low cover (<100 cm). Many breeding attempts fail due to chick predation by foxes.

Freckled Duck
Stictonetta naevosa

- Australia's rarest waterfowl, threatened throughout its range.
- Occurs in inland wetlands but disperses widely during droughts to regions such as the Riverina, occurring spring- summer. Prefers freshwater wetlands and creeks with heavy lignum or reeds.
- Feeds dawn, dusk and night on algae, seeds, aquatic grasses and invertebrates. During day, rests on logs, branches or small islands.

Australasian Bittern
Botaurus poiciloptilus

- Endangered – one of the rarest and rarely seen wetland birds, recorded frequently in low numbers in the central Riverina.
- They are nocturnal, nomadic and occupy dense reeds and rushes. They 'freeze' when seen, blending with reeds, only flushing when approached.
- Feeds on frogs, tadpoles, fish and yabbies, stalking prey slowly in shallow vegetated water. Has distinctive 'booming' call, thought as that of the Bunyip by Aboriginal clans.

Creating a wetland from your farm dam

Most existing farm dams have insufficient habitat to support wetland birds, but species such as the Australian Wood Duck, Yellow-billed Spoonbill and Australasian Grebe do occur. Simple changes to farm dams can improve their habitat value. Creating shallow margins (<50cm) to part of a dam will allow sunlight to penetrate and promote aquatic plant growth for a wider range of wetland species. Fencing these areas from grazing will encourage vegetation to flourish, providing excellent habitat for birds such as Great Egret, White-necked and White-faced Heron, Australian Spotted Crake, Black-winged Stilt and Red-kneed Dotterel. Consider restoring your farm dam into a wetland oasis when next re-digging or desilting.

Australian Wood Duck and Yellow-billed Spoonbill commonly occur on basic farm dams.

Shallow vegetated margins of improved farm dams provide habitat for Plumed Whistling Duck and nesting conditions for Black-winged Stilt and Australian Painted Snipe.

Seasonally flooded muddy areas around farm dams provide ideal foraging conditions for waders such as Red-kneed Dotterel and migratory Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.