

# Wild about wetland birds

Let's get to know the birds who live in and around our wetlands, plus those who like to visit each year!



In loving memory of  
**Maxwell Douglas O'Sullivan**  
25 May 1942—21 August 2022





# Wild about wetland birds

**This booklet is a starting guide for those who would like to know more about wetland birds in the Riverina, and how to better identify them.**

The birds in this collection are found in wetlands and waterbodies across the Riverina. Keep an eye out for them and learn how to identify them using some key physical features.

Wetland birds are very beautiful and form a crucial part of the region's biodiversity. Although these species are common, living in other parts of our state, country and even around the world, they like to call the Riverina home. Some of these species hang out for part of the year, while others are locals and don't go too far from home.

The best time to see the birds is in the spring and summer when many of the migratory birds head to the Riverina for varying times, some only for a day or two while others have a longer stopover. Some of them, such as the sharp-tailed and marsh sandpipers, travel from the other side of the world, including Japan and Siberia. It's hard to believe these small

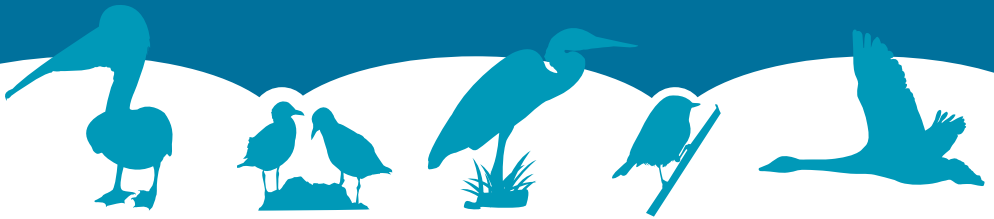
migratory birds can fly that far. Mind you, they do have breaks along the way. These birds are called migratory waders and like shallow water and mudflats. Other wetland birds, such as ducks, Australasian darters, cormorants and pelicans, like deeper water. Although most of the migratory birds arrive in summer, there are some who visit in the winter, like brolgas, and often stay until late summer.

Some like to nest in trees, like the little black cormorant, while others have floating nests, such as black swans. Buff-banded rails and crakes like to find a home in the cumbungi, reeds and other water plants. We all like a certain style of home!

Finding a home that suits these birds is very important. It's called their habitat and we need to make sure that we understand the type of habitat each of them likes and the food they like to eat so that we can provide the right environment for them. A bit like providing the right type of motel and restaurant for those who come to stay for a while, or the right town for those who call themselves locals.



**NSW Riverina Region**



## Looking after wetland birds

Getting to know their requirements and looking after them is super exciting; we can all play a part in that. The first step is getting to know the birds' names so you can learn more about the way they nest, what they eat and how we can help protect them.

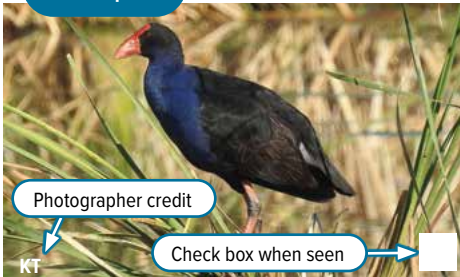
Landholders and community members are all playing a part in making this world a better place for all of us to live. Keep an eye out on farm dams, wetlands, rivers and creeks in the Riverina. All these waterbodies play a huge role in providing habitat for wetland birds.

## Using this guide

This booklet starts with the **BIGGEST BIRDS IN THE FRONT** and moves its way through to the **SMALLEST BIRDS IN THE BACK**. This is so they are easier to find without initially knowing their name. We start at the Australian pelican and finish with the little golden-headed cisticola. Even though they are not wetland birds, the white-fronted chat, purple-backed fairywren and superb fairy-wren are often seen in the surrounding wetland areas, so they have been included too.

For more details on each of the birds, head to [birdlife.org.au](http://birdlife.org.au). If you would like to download and print this brochure to take with you the next time you visit a wetland, visit [mli.org.au](http://mli.org.au).

### Example



### Purple swamphen

*Porphyrio porphyrio*

45–50 cm

Bird size

Robust scarlet bill and forehead shield. Deep blue head and breast. Breast has a turquoise centre. White under tail. Long reddish legs.

Bird description



## Australian pelican

1.6–1.8 m

*Pelecanus conspicillatus*

Massive bill. Breeds in colonies. Circles in thermals at great heights. Head tucks back in flight giving a tubby appearance. Webbed feet already lowered for splashdown.



## Black Swan

1.1–1.4 m

*Cygnus atratus*

Large elegant black bird. Red eye and beak with a white spot. White flight feathers. Builds a large nest in shallow water.



## Brolga

0.8–1.3 m

*Grus rubicunda*

Tall elegant grey bird with scarlet on rear of head. Has a bustle of dense feathers down to the rump. Known for its dancing displays and loud bugling call.



## Eastern great egret

0.85–1.05 m

*Ardea alba*

Large white bird. Its long neck has a kink and is usually 1.5 times the length of the body. Bill usually black, facial skin is green when breeding and yellow in non-breeding season.



## Pacific heron

0.75–1.05 m

*Ardea pacifica*

Also known as the white-necked heron, this large bird has a long white head/neck and slate-black wings and body. The neck may have rows of spots. Legs and bill are dark grey. Turquoise tint at the top of the bill.







### **Australasian darter**

85–90 cm

*Anhinga novaehollandiae*

Large straight yellow bill with a snake shaped head. Wings are dark grey to glossy black with cream streaks. Often seen drying its wings.



### **Great cormorant**

80–85 cm

*Phalacrocorax carbo*

All black with yellow facial skin and throat pouch. When breeding, feathers are glossy black with a blue sheen plus white on flanks and face. Nests in colonies on a rough platform.



### **Yellow-billed spoonbill**

75–90 cm

*Platalea flavipes*

White plumage, long flat bill is shaped like a spoon and yellow to flesh-white in colour. Legs dull greenish or creamy white. Fine black plumes from underwing in breeding plumage.



### **Magpie goose**

59–90 cm

*Anseranas semipalmata*

Large black and white goose. Black neck, head has a distinctive knob or crown and pinkish facial skin. Long orange legs with partially webbed toes.



### **Royal spoonbill**

75–80 cm

*Platalea regia*

White bird with a distinctive wide-tipped black spoon shaped bill. During breeding season it has a red forehead spot and white flowing head plumes.

## Australian white ibis

65–75 cm

*Threskiornis moluccus*

White with black flight feathers and a bare black unfeathered head. Long, downturned bill typical of Ibis. When breeding has sparse, stiff pale yellow plumes hanging from the lower neck and a pink mark at the back of neck.



## Australasian bittern

65–75 cm

*Botaurus poiciloptilus*

Heron-like bird with a large stocky body. Feathers are dark brown, black and buff like old leaves. Underparts are streaked brown and buff. Breeds in heavy, densely vegetated swamps and in suitably managed rice crops.



## Australian shelduck

56–73 cm

*Tadorna tadornoides*

Mostly black plumage with bold white collar and chestnut markings, which are deeper in the female. Female also has white around the eye and the base of the bill.



## Straw-necked ibis

60–70 cm

*Threskiornis spinicollis*

Long downturned bill. Bare grey-black skin on the head. Straw-like spiny feathers partly cover a black neck band. Upper body is iridescent black with green and violet sheen.



## Intermediate egret

55–70 cm

*Ardea intermedia*

White feathers. Smaller and daintier than eastern great egret. Extended head and neck about equal to body length. During courtship the long fine filamented plumes hang in a lacy veil from breast to back.





## White-faced Heron

66–69 cm

*Egretta novaehollandiae*

Pale grey brown with a white face and throat and yellow legs. Rufous grey plumes on lower neck. Wades in shallow water and farm dams.



## Little black cormorant

55–65 cm

*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*

Body is black with a glossy sheen. Bill is dark grey with black facial skin and a dark grey narrow bill. Bright jade green eyes.



## Nankeen night heron

55–65 cm

*Nycticorax caledonicus*

Stocky, stooped heron with a large head and short neck. Upper body rich cinnamon; underparts a washed buff. Black cap. Yellow eyes become blue in courtship. Legs are thick and yellow, turning pink in breeding season.



## Musk duck

55–65 cm

*Biziura lobata*

The male has a large broad and dark leathery flap, or lobe, under the straight triangular bill. The female does not have this flap. Both have overall sooty grey body with fine buff lines and a darker head. Bluish white tip on the bill.



## Great crested grebe

47–61 cm

*Podiceps cristatus*

Fine sharp slender daggerlike bill. Black crest and dark edged rufous neck frill more prominent in breeding plumage. Silvery white neck. Body brown above and white to buff below.



## Pacific black duck

48–60 cm

*Anas superciliosa*

Body plumage is brown with pale feather margins. Black line along head is widest through the eye. Under wing has a purple green speculum.



## Hardhead

45–60 cm

*Aythya australis*

Rich-mahogany diving duck with a largish high crowned head and white eyes. Bill is blackish with a blue-white band. White under-tail visible in shallow water or when standing.



## Australian wood duck

45–60 cm

*Chenonetta jubata*

Very delicate pattern on chest when seen up close. Graze on damp pastures close to lakes and dams.



## Plumed whistling duck

40–60 cm

*Dendrocygna eyton*

Pale brown duck with upswept pale cream plumes. Sides of chest are reddish and finely barred. It has a patchy pink bill.



## Freckled duck

50–59 cm

*Stictonetta naevosa*

Dark grey, freckled plumage. Strongly concave slate grey bill that is red at the base when breeding. Slight crest.







KT

### Little pied cormorant

57 cm

*Microcarbo melanoleucos*

Smallest of the Australian cormorant species. Yellow sided bill. White face extends past the eyes.



KT

### Glossy ibis

50–54 cm

*Plegadis falcinellus*

Reddish brown body with purple and green iridescent wings that shine in the light. Olive brown bill and legs.



KT

### Cattle egret

48–53 cm

*Ardea ibis*

Small sociable egret who likes to hang around cattle and horses. In breeding plumage it has extensive spiky orange-buff plumes. Posture is often hunched.



KT

### Red-necked avocet

40–48 cm

*Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*

Elegant native wader. Deep chestnut head and neck. Bill is strongly upturned and tapers to a fine point. Body is white with two black wing-bars, noticeable in flight.



KT

### Purple swamphen

45–50 cm

*Porphyrio porphyrio*

Robust scarlet bill and forehead shield. Deep blue head and breast. Breast has a turquoise centre. White under tail. Long reddish legs.

## Chestnut teal

38–48 cm

*Anas castanea*

Iridescent green head, chestnut underparts with a white flank. No band around the neck like an Australian shelduck.



## Grey teal

42–45 cm

*Anas gracilis*

Body plumage is brown with grey-brown mottled appearance. Lower part of the face and the neck are off-white. Has red eyes. Female chestnut teals look similar to the grey teal but have a darker neck.



## Pink-eared duck

38–45 cm

*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*

Dark brown patch over the eye with a pink spot behind it that is hard to see. Square tipped grey bill with strongly barred flanks.



## Silver gull

38–42 cm

*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*

Under parts are white with a pale silver-grey back. Tail is white. Bill and legs are red. Eyes are white.



## Blue-billed duck

36–44 cm

*Oxyura australis*

Small rich chestnut duck with a black head and scooped blue bill. Tail is black with pointed feathers that are cocked and raised in a fan. Female is mottled grey with a black bill.





KT

## Dusky moorhen

35–40 cm

*Gallinula tenebrosa*

Bright red shield and bill. Bill has a yellow tip. Body slate grey, wings and rump are browner and tail is black. White sides to undertail. Swims jerkily.



KT

## Masked lapwing

35–39 cm

*Vanellus miles*

Crown and back of neck is black. Brown upper body and white underparts. Yellow facial wattles. Small black cap. Spurs on wings. Aggressive habits.



KT

## Eurasian coot

35–38 cm

*Fulica atra*

Bill and shield white. Bright red eyes. Head black with a plump dark slate grey body. Legs are dark grey.



PT

## Black-winged stilt

33–37 cm

*Himantopus himantopus*

Back and wings are black. Head, neck and underparts are white. Slender, elegant wader with long rich pink legs. Bobs its head as it struts. Long thin bill.



KT

## Black-tailed native-hen

32–38 cm

*Tribonyx ventralis*

Dark, fleet-footed native-hen. Green shield over a red bill. Black tipped upright tail. Pink legs. Yellow eyes.



## Buff-banded rail

28–32 cm

*Gallirallus philippensis*

Colourful with a chestnut eye streak. Heavy barring on the chest with a deep buff-orange band mid-chest. Emerges from dense cover at dusk and dawn.



PT

## Hoary-headed grebe

30 cm

*Poliiocephalus poliocephalus*

Head has a brushed-back grey feathers that are more streaked when breeding. Buffish-white foreneck and breast. Greyish flanks. Eyes are silver.



PM

## Latham's snipe

27–30 cm

*Gallinago hardwickii*

Long straight bill with broken barring scallops on the chest. Dark eye stripe and cheek stripe. Body is mottle black, brown and buff. Olive-grey legs.



PM

## Australian painted-snipe

23–26 cm

*Rostratula australis*

Crown and nape dark olive green. Breast cut off with a creamy horse collar. Long slightly drooping bill. Female brighter than male. Long cream or white eye patches. Rarely seen, very secretive.



PM

## Australasian grebe

23–25 cm

*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*

Head and neck are black with a chestnut stripe at the back of the neck. Yellow bare skin spot on cheek. Found in lakes swamps and often farm dams. Dives under the water with few ripples.



KT



## Marsh sandpiper

22–26 cm

*Tringa stagnatilis*

Small, pale, elegant wader with a straight needle-like bill. Feathers are grey on top and white below. Long green/grey legs resemble a mini stilt.



## Whiskered tern

23–25 cm

*Chlidonias hybrida*

Head has a black crown with white cheeks. In breeding plumage, the underparts are dark grey to black with a red bill.



## Wood sandpiper

20–22 cm

*Tringa glareola*

Dainty slender sandpiper. Dark line from bill to eyes under a white eyebrows. Medium straight black bill. Dark grey-brown above, with light flecks or spots, and a white underbody. The breast has some mottling.



## Australian spotted crake

19–22 cm

*Porzana fluminea*

Dark crake with streaked black freckles and white edges on olive brown upper parts. Dark, dull blue grey underparts with a white undertail. Flanks are barred black and white. Green legs when not muddy.



## Sharp-tailed sandpiper

17–22 cm

*Calidris acuminata*

Bill straight or slight down curve, no longer than the head. Crown is a dull chestnut colour. Legs are olive or yellow. Feathers are pointed. It is difficult to distinguish between the sandpipers.

## Spotless crane

17–20 cm

*Porzana tabuensis*

Black bill with bright red eyes. Plain rufous brown. No freckles like the Australian spotted crane. Underparts are dusky blue-black. Under-tail is heavily barred. Pinky-red legs.



## Red-kneed dotterel

17–19 cm

*Erythrogonys cinctus*

Black hood and wide breastband with a white throat and bib. A white line separates the wings from a chestnut flank.



## Black-fronted dotterel

16–18 cm

*Elseyonis melanops*

Upper parts are brownish with a dark chestnut shoulder bar. Bold black 'Y' on a white breast. Red-ringed eyes in a broad black band. Dull pink legs.



## Australian reed warbler

16–17 cm

*Acrocephalus australis*

Upper body is a deep walnut brown; underparts are off-white with a buff or fawn tint. Faint fawn eyebrow. Outstanding singer on summer reeds.



## Baillon's crane

15–16 cm

*Porzana pusilla*

Pale brown with dark streaks. Barred under-tail coverts. Greeny yellow bill. Shy secretive bird found in wetlands with a muddy edge.







### Little grassbird

13–15 cm

*Megalurus gramineus*

Grey-buff body streaked with black. Off-white underparts with a long, white brow line. Underparts also have a distinctly dark streak.



### Superb fairy-wren

13–14 cm

*Malurus cyaneus*

Male has a pale blue cap and back, blue-black throat and chest, and dark, dull blue tail. Pale grey-white underparts. Tail is dark dull blue. Grey brown sides.



### Purple-backed fairy-wren

13–14 cm

*Malurus assimilis*

Large bright blue crown and pointed, bright blue cheek patches. Shoulder patch is a chestnut colour. Lores, throat and chest are jet black. Fawn-white underparts.



### White-fronted chat

11–13 cm

*Epthianura albifrons*

Moonface with a baldy-head. Underparts are white with a broad black breast. Back and rump silvery grey. Wings and upper tail are dark brown. Flies with bouncing undulations.




### Golden-headed cisticola

9–11 cm

*Cisticola exilis*

Golden buff head in summer. Upper parts cinnamon brown to rufous with black streaks. Underparts paler gold. Likes to sit on tall grass stems.



## REFERENCES

Iain Campbell, Sam Woods and Nick Leseberg (2015). *Birds of Australia – A photographic guide*. Princeton University Press, USA.

Michael Morcombe (2000). *Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Steve Parish Publishing, Australia.

Graham Pizzey and Frank Knight (2012). *The Field Guide to the Birds of Australia (9th Edition)*. Published by Harper Collins, Australia.

*The Michael Morcombe eGuide to the Birds of Australia* (2011).

*Pizzey and Knight Birds of Australia, Digital Edition V1.5* (2014-2017).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr Keith Hutton and Max O’Sullivan for their expert knowledge and input on wetland birds. Compiled by Kathy Tenison. Graphic design by PeeKdesigns.

© 2022 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc.

## PHOTOGRAPHERS

KT Kathy Tenison  
PT Phil Tenison  
PM Peter Merritt  
ED Ed Dunens



This initiative made possible by the NSW Landcare Program. A collaboration of Local Land Services and Landcare NSW Inc. supported by the NSW Government.

