

Waterbirds & Raptors of Coastal SEQ



Image:

Robert
Inglis

An Identification Guide

Trevor Ford

Map of Coastal SEQ



Waterbirds & Raptors of Coastal SEQ



R Inglis

An Identification Guide

Trevor Ford

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The photographs of the Australasian Grebe on the front cover and the roosting Royal Spoonbills on the back cover were taken by Robert Inglis. The photograph on page one is of an Eastern Osprey. The photograph below is of a mixed flock of ducks and geese.

The Coastal SEQ map (inside front cover) identifies the five funding councils.



W Jolly

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Introduction

This booklet provides an introduction to the waterbirds and raptors of coastal South East Queensland (SEQ), detailing conservation challenges and providing an outline of some easily-accessible sites where many of these species can be seen. The main section of the booklet is an identification guide, describing the waterbirds and raptors that are most likely to be encountered in the region. Hopefully, by raising the general awareness of these special birds and the problems that they face, actions will be taken to help them survive.

Waterbirds

The waterbirds covered in this booklet come from a diverse range of bird groups that includes grebes, cormorants, herons, spoonbills, ibises, ducks, geese, swans, cranes, gallinules, rails and crakes. Shorebirds, gulls and terns are covered in a companion booklet.

Grebes, cormorants, ducks, geese and swans can be found on most bodies of fresh water in the region. Some species may favour a marine environment, such as Pied Cormorants. Grebes and swans can be somewhat reluctant to take flight but others are often seen airborne, displaying useful identification features. Herons, spoonbills and ibises are mostly found along the edges of freshwater wetlands, although some species are equally content in marine locations. Australian White Ibises are often found in urban areas, where they frequently become pests. Gallinules (swamphens, moorhens and coots) are commonly seen on most freshwater lagoons, whereas rails and crakes are possibly best observed at dawn or dusk on exposed muddy margins.

Raptors

Raptors are diurnal birds of prey. They typically have keen eyesight and hearing, large powerful feet with sharp claws for catching prey and large hooked bills for tearing prey. Most species are truly spectacular when seen in flight. Those described in this booklet include hawks, eagles, kites, harriers and falcons.

Raptors are highly dependent on the habitat that satisfies their feeding requirements. For example, Eastern Ospreys, Brahminy Kites, Whistling Kites and White-bellied Sea-Eagles favour coastal environments, Collared Sparrowhawks, Brown Goshawks and Grey Goshawks require forested areas and most falcons need open areas over which to hunt.

Conservation

The destruction of wetlands is reducing waterbird numbers considerably. As ever-increasing demands are placed on land, important areas are lost forever. Wetlands are subject to many threats: they can be drained for development or to become farmland, polluted by chemicals or sewage or used for recreational purposes such as boating, fishing or shooting. Even preserved wetlands can face subsequent challenges if their source of inflowing water becomes polluted or diverted. The degradation of a wetland can often be a gradual process that may not be noticeable for many years, possibly until it is too late to be reversed. Wetlands are fragile parts of an ecosystem and once they are fractured, the whole ecosystem is at risk. Note that Australia is a signatory to several international agreements promoting the conservation of wetlands.

Raptors provide an excellent indication of the health of the environment, being at the top of many food chains and ingesting potentially contaminated prey from lower down the chain. High population numbers and a good variety of species suggest that all is well. However, pesticides, metals such as mercury and lead and persistent synthetic organic chemicals can build up in their systems over a period of time. It is therefore essential that population trends are monitored carefully, especially for those species known to be threatened or in decline, and effective management plans put in place and actioned if we are to conserve these species effectively. Most disturbances to raptors are caused by human activity, mainly through the destruction of habitat for development. Hopefully, egg-collecting and illegal falconry are now things of the past.

Birding locations

The following is a selection of locations that are attractive to a variety of waterbirds. Raptors can be seen almost anywhere, so are only mentioned if an area is especially good for them. There are, of course, many other locations to find and explore.

Sunshine Coast

Between Cooroy and Noosa, **Lake MacDonald** holds an interesting selection of waterbirds, including grebes, cormorants and ducks, and there are good walking paths. **Ewen Maddock Dam** near Landsborough has a similar range of waterbirds and the chances of seeing raptors are good. Paths through botanical gardens lead to the water. **Baroon Pocket Dam** near Maleny is also good for waterbirds and has walks around the lakeside. A visit to **Maroochy Wetlands** at Bli Bli, which has an information office and boardwalks, may be productive.

Moreton Bay

In Caboolture, the **Centenary Lakes** are worth checking for grebes, cormorants and ducks. **Buckley's Hole Conservation Park** on Bribie Island attracts many waterbirds, including occasional rarities. Grebes, ducks, swamphens and moorhens are plentiful and, when the water level is low, rails and crakes often appear. A hide overlooks the lagoon. Also look for waterbirds and coastal raptors in nearby **Pumicestone Passage**. South of Dayboro is the excellent **Lake Samsonvale**. A wide variety of waterbirds and raptors can be seen in good numbers in this large area, and scarcer species occur regularly.

Brisbane

At Fisherman Islands, the **Port of Brisbane Visitor Centre** (open weekdays) overlooks wetlands that hold many waterbirds, and viewing facilities are excellent. Many common waterbirds can be seen at **Metroplex Wetlands**, just south of the Gateway Bridge, and bitterns, rails and crakes have all been recorded. Walkways border the lagoons. Further south are the lagoons of **Minnippi Parklands**. Whilst not containing large numbers of waterbirds, the walk around the lagoons can be productive. **Sherwood Arboretum** in southwest Brisbane has two small lagoons that hold the familiar waterbirds and, occasionally, bitterns, rails and crakes. Nearby, **Oxley Creek Common** is good for waterbirds that favour marshy areas.

Redlands

Near Capalaba, at the **Leslie Harrison Dam**, pelicans, grebes, swans and a wide variety of ducks including Plumed Whistling-Ducks can be found. The area near the bridge over Tingalpa Creek is particularly good. **Crystal Waters Park** in Thornlands has two lagoons that are attractive to waterbirds such as grebes, breeding Magpie Geese, ducks, herons, egrets, ibises

and spoonbills. Pathways lead around the lagoons. At Victoria Point, the **Egret Colony Wetlands** is excellent for breeding Magpie Geese, herons, egrets, ibises and spoonbills. A variety of ducks can also be seen. The **Geoff Skinner Reserve** at Wellington Point holds cormorants, pelicans, herons, egrets, spoonbills and a variety of ducks. There is a bird hide available.

Gold Coast

Just south of the Emerald Lakes golf course in **Carrara** is a shallow wetland that is good for egrets and spoonbills. This site has good access via sealed pathways. The golf course itself has fairly deep lakes that can hold a variety of ducks. The **Robina Lakes** are good for grebes, cormorants, egrets and ducks and there is a breeding colony of Pied Cormorants. **Lake Lomandra** to the south of Robina is quite small but holds a good variety of waterbirds, especially ducks, and there are pathways and viewing platforms. **Eagleby Wetlands** near Beenleigh is good for both waterbirds and raptors.

Species identification

The main points to consider when identifying waterbirds and raptors are:

Size and shape - Note the overall size and shape, comparing this with any familiar birds nearby.

Colour - Note the colour above and below and whether there is any obvious pattern.

Bill and legs - Note the size, shape and colour of bill and legs.

Behaviour - Note as many of the bird's actions as possible, such as how it feeds and how it flies.

Habitat - Note the bird's favoured habitat types.

When identifying ducks, note the wing patterns in flight or while stretching their wings. For example, see the following flight views of Chestnut Teal (left) and Australasian Shoveler (right).



N Bowman



W Jolly

These males can look similar when swimming, especially if their heads cannot be seen clearly, but they look very different in flight. Also note whether a duck feeds by upending or by diving, and be aware of any differences between the sexes.

When identifying rails and crakes, it is especially important to note the bill and leg colour and whether there is any pattern under the tail.

When identifying raptors, note the underwing and undertail patterns (whether plain, barred, banded, etc.), the wing shape (whether broad, long, kinked, etc.) and the tail shape (whether rounded, square-tipped, wedge-shaped, etc.). Also note the bird's hunting strategy and whether it is soaring, hovering, gliding, etc.

Identification guide

The following pages contain detailed accounts of over fifty waterbird and raptor species that are seen regularly in the region, together with brief overviews of over twenty scarcer species. There are pages dedicated to comparisons of cormorant and egret bills and a page of photographs depicting some immature raptors.

Australasian Grebe

Tachybaptus novaehollandiae

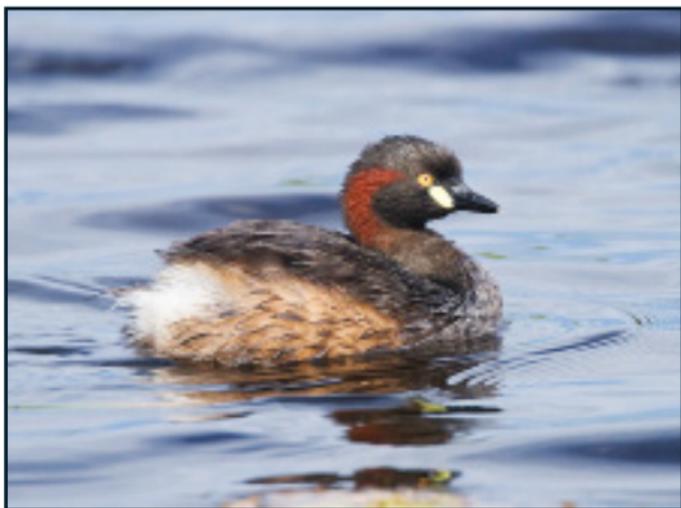
Very common resident

23-26 cm

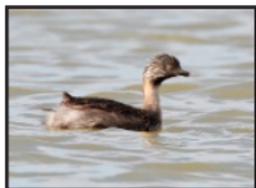


R Inglis

Greyish-brown above and pale below. Plump and buoyant. In breeding plumage, has black head with chestnut stripe on side and yellow patch at base of bill. In non-breeding plumage, has pale face and dark cap. Rufous flanks in both plumages. Often gives far-reaching trilling call.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Similar species: The rare **Hoary-headed Grebe** *Poliiocephalus poliocephalus* is larger with streaked head in breeding plumage (compare with stripe-headed young Australasian Grebe).

Great Crested Grebe

Podiceps cristatus

Uncommon resident

48-61 cm



R Inglis

Greyish-brown above and white below. Long neck and long slender bill. In breeding plumage, has black crown with distinctive black crests, and chestnut-and-black cheek frills that can be expanded to become a ruff. When immature or not breeding, crest and frills absent or reduced.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Pair in their courtship display. Note their raised crests and expanded cheek frills.

Australian Pelican

Pelecanus conspicillatus

Very common resident
160-180 cm



R Inglis

Unmistakeable and huge. Black and white with large pink bill and massive pink bill-pouch. Male is larger than female. In flight shows white wing panels and white "V" on rump. Flies with neck unextended and soars on flat wings, circling in thermals. Dispersive, influenced by climatic conditions. Sometimes fishes co-operatively.



R Inglis

Australasian Darter

Anhinga novaehollandiae

Common resident

86-94 cm

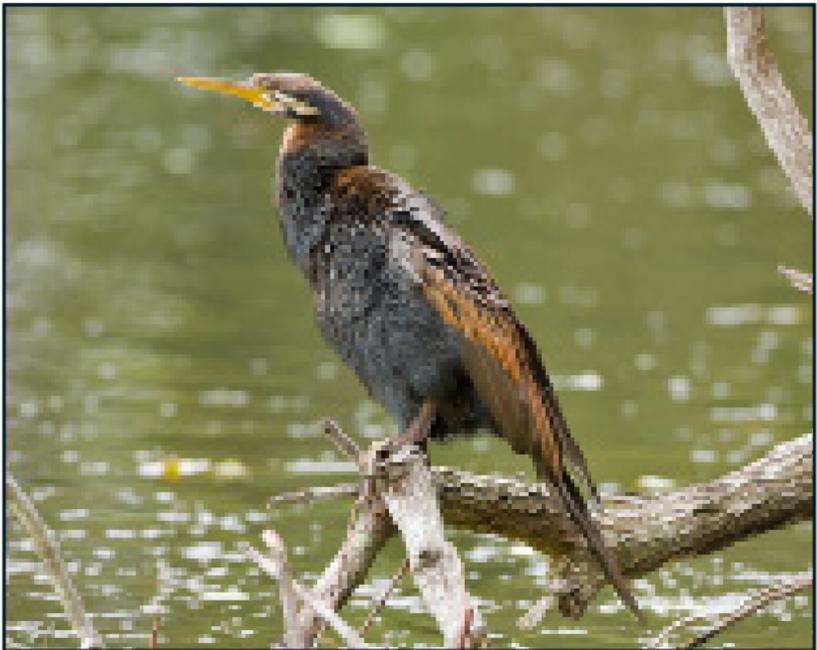


R Inglis



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Male (below and above right) black with white on face and chestnut neck markings. Female (above left) paler with white underparts. Long snake-like neck, sharp pointed bill and long rounded tail. Often swims partially submerged with only neck visible. In flight has cross-shaped silhouette with tail fanned. Often spreads wings to dry. Distinctive rattle-like call.



R Inglis

Pied Cormorant

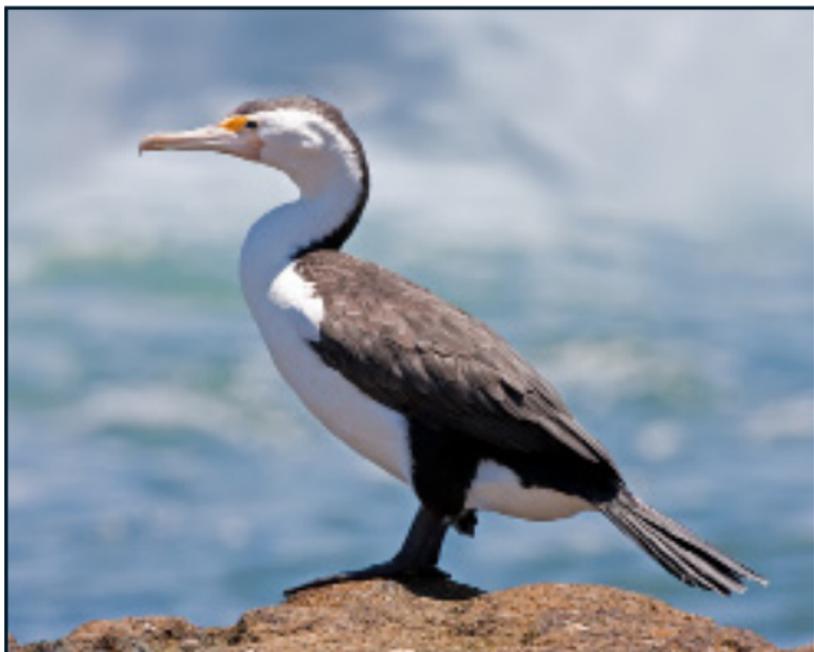
Phalacrocorax varius

Very common resident
65-85 cm



R Inglis

Black and white with long slender horn-coloured bill. Blue eye-ring when breeding, facial skin yellow between eyes and bill and pinkish on chin. White on face extends to just above eyes; flanks show wide black patches when perched (compare with Little Pied Cormorant). Often spreads wings to dry. Refer to page 18 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis

Little Pied Cormorant

Microcarbo melanoleucos

Very common resident
55-65 cm



C Barnes

Black and white with stubby yellow bill. White on face of adults extends above eyes to bill, and flanks of adults lack black patches (compare with Pied Cormorant). Note that white on face of immature birds does not extend above eyes and that they have black flank patches. Often spreads wings to dry. Refer to page 18 for bill comparisons.



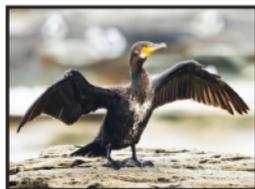
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Great Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

Uncommon resident

80-85 cm



R Inglis

Mostly black with yellow on face and throat. Long and slender greyish bill. In breeding plumage, glossier black with brighter and more extensive white on face, white flank patches and short black crest. Non-breeding and immature birds are duller. Often spreads wings to dry. Refer to page 18 for bill comparisons.



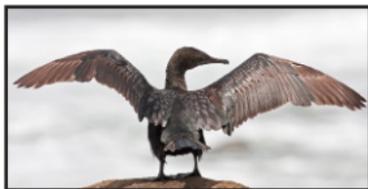
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Little Black Cormorant

Phalacrocorax sulcirostris

Very common resident

55-65 cm



R Inglis

Wholly black with greenish-bronze sheen; never with any unbroken white markings. Slim with slender grey bill. Adults have bright bluish-green eyes. In breeding plumage, more bronze with white flecks on head and neck. Often spreads wings to dry. Refer to page 18 for bill comparisons.

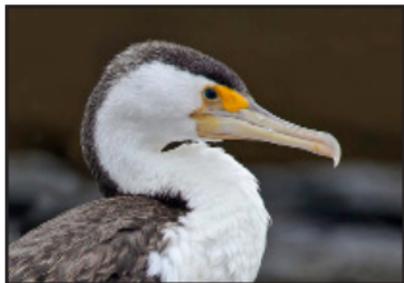


R Inglis

Cormorant bill comparisons

Different bill lengths, shapes and colours, and facial patterns and colours, are distinguishing features of each species of cormorant that can help with identification.

Pied Cormorant (left) has long horn-coloured bill and white of face extends to just above eye. Yellow patch between eyes and bill. Little Pied Cormorant (right) has short yellow bill and white of the face extends over eye to forehead.

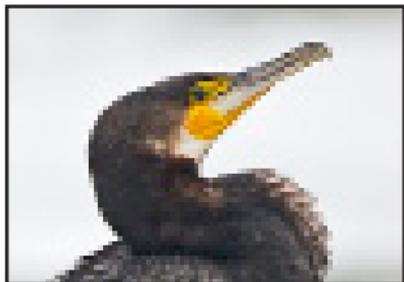


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R Inglis

Great Cormorant (left) has long dark horn-coloured bill and yellow throat and face. When breeding has white on face. Little Black Cormorant (right) has shorter and narrower dark grey bill.



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Black-necked Stork

Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus

Uncommon resident

110-137 cm



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Unmistakeable and strikingly elegant. Black and white with glossy dark green, blue and purple head and neck. Massive long and pointed black bill and long red legs. Male eyes blackish-brown, female eyes golden-yellow. Immature birds brownish above and pale buff below with grey legs. Adults spectacular in flight with black panels in long white wings and red legs extended.



N Bowman

Eastern Great Egret

Ardea modesta

Very common resident

83-103 cm



R Inglis

Wholly white plumage. Tall with extremely long neck. Most often seen in non-breeding plumage when bill and facial skin are yellow and legs and feet are olive-grey or blackish. In breeding plumage, bill becomes black, facial skin becomes bluish-green, upper legs become reddish-brown and plumes develop on lower back. Gape line extends past eye. Refer to page 28 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Eastern Great Egret has black bill during its brief time in breeding plumage.

Intermediate Egret

Ardea intermedia

Common resident

56-70 cm



T Tarrant

Wholly white plumage. Medium height with long neck. Most often seen in non-breeding plumage when bill and facial skin are yellow and lower legs and feet are blackish, upper legs are browner or more yellow. In breeding plumage, bill becomes red with yellow tip, facial skin becomes green, legs become red and plumes develop on back and breast. Gape line does not extend past eye. Refer to page 28 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Bright red legs and colourful bill are features of Intermediate Egret during its brief time in breeding plumage.

Cattle Egret

Ardea ibis

Very common resident

48-52 cm



R Inglis

Shorter-necked than Intermediate Egret, with squat, hunched appearance. In wholly white non-breeding plumage, has yellow bill and black legs. In breeding plumage, head, back and breast become orange-buff and bill and legs briefly become reddish before turning yellowish. Sociable. Habitually feeds in fields close to livestock. Refer to page 28 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis



Cattle Egret is bright and colourful in breeding plumage.

R Inglis

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

Very common resident
55-65 cm



R Inglis

Wholly white plumage. Delicate and sleek with long neck. Slender black bill with pale yellow on lower mandible, and black legs with yellow soles of feet. In non-breeding plumage, has yellow facial skin. In breeding plumage, facial skin briefly becomes pink, two ribbon-like plumes grow on head and further plumes develop on back and breast. Refer to page 28 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis



R Inglis

White plumes develop as Little Egret attains breeding plumage.

White-faced Heron

Egretta novaehollandiae

Very common resident

66-68 cm



R Inglis

Light blue-grey with long neck and distinctive white face. Greyish bill and yellow legs. In breeding plumage, grey plumes develop on nape and back and pale brown plumes develop on breast. In flight, dark flight feathers contrast with paler grey of rest of underwing and underparts.



R Inglis



N Bowman

Similar species: The rarer **White-necked Heron** *Ardea pacifica* is larger with white head and neck and black spots down foreneck. Slate-black body and wings with maroon sheen on breeding plumes. Conspicuous white patches on forewings.

Striated Heron

Butorides striata

Common resident

43-51 cm



R Inglis

Stocky with short neck, large bill and short legs. Dark blue-grey above and paler grey or buffish below. Black cap extends onto nape. Has line of black and white markings down foreneck. Grey bill, yellow lower mandible, and yellowish legs. Immature birds are dark brown above with whitish flecks on wings and bold streaking below.



R Inglis

Similar species: The rarely-seen **Black Bittern** *Ixobrychus flavicollis* is larger and darker; immature (left) and adult (right).



C Barnes



P Gregory

Distinctive yellow patches down sides of neck. Compare with immature Striated Heron.

Eastern Reef Egret

Egretta sacra

Uncommon resident

60-65 cm



R Inglis

Stocky, long-necked and short-legged. Has two colour morphs. Both white and dark morphs have robust yellow and grey bills and yellow legs. Dark morph has thin whitish streak on throat. In breeding plumage, bill and legs can become brighter and plumes develop on head, back and breast. Refer to page 28 for bill comparisons.



R Inglis



Dark morph is dark slate-grey.

T Siggs

Nankeen Night-Heron

Nycticorax caledonicus

Uncommon resident

55-65 cm



R Inglis

Stocky with short neck and short legs. Rich cinnamon above and whitish-buff below. Black crown, blackish bill, greenish-yellow facial skin and yellow legs and feet. In breeding plumage, develops two or three white nuptial plumes at back of head. Immature birds are brown above with white streaks and spots and white below with brown streaks.



R Inglis



T Tarrant

Similar species: **Australian Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus dubius* is much smaller. Male has chestnut face and neck, black cap and back, and buff wing patches. Female duller. Immature birds are browner and more streaked. Rare and very secretive.

Egret bill comparisons

Eastern Great Egret, breeding (left) and non-breeding (right).
Note that gape extends behind eye.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Intermediate Egret, breeding (left) and non-breeding (right).
Note that gape does not extend behind eye.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Cattle Egret non-breeding (left), Little Egret non-breeding (centre) and Eastern Reef Egret (right).



R Inglis



R Inglis



R Inglis

Royal Spoonbill

Platalea regia

Common resident

74-81 cm



C Barnes

Mostly white. Tall with black facial skin, black spatulate bill and black legs. Yellow marks above eyes and small red patch on black forehead of adults. In breeding plumage, develops yellowish-buff breast patch and white plumes behind head. Has characteristic flat profile in flight.



R Inglis



R Inglis

Similar species: The rarer **Yellow-billed Spoonbill** *Platalea flavipes* is slightly larger with pale yellow bill and legs. In breeding plumage, develops buffy breast plumes and dark lacy plumes appear on inner wings.

Australian White Ibis

Threskiornis molucca

Very common resident

65-75 cm



C Barnes

White body with bare black head and neck. Long downcurved black bill and greyish-pink legs. Bare pink skin on underwing, black wing-tips and lacy black wing plumes. Flies with neck extended. In breeding plumage, develops yellowish-white breast plumes and pink marks on nape and hindneck.



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The bare pink skin on underwing becomes scarlet in breeding plumage.

Straw-necked Ibis

Threskiornis spinicollis

Common resident

60-70 cm



T Tarrant

Iridescent black with green and violet sheen above and on sides of breast; white below. Black head with white nape and sides of neck, with straw-like plumes on foreneck and breast. Long downcurved black bill and reddish legs. Flies with neck extended and shows white tail and wing linings.



R Inglis



R Inglis

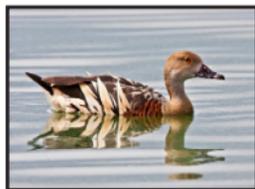
Similar species: The rarer **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* is smaller with overall dark appearance. In good light and at close quarters, the glossy iridescent sheen of bronze, green and violet can be appreciated..

Plumed Whistling-Duck

Dendrocygna eytoni

Fairly common resident

40-60 cm



R Inglis

Tall, upright and long-necked. Pale brown, including crown and nape, with feathers of upper back edged buff. Very long cream flank plumes edged black, with sides of chest rufous-chestnut, finely barred black. Pink bill patchily mottled black. Pink legs and feet. Congregates in large numbers on margins of farm dams, lagoons, creeks, etc. Feeds on grasslands. Whistling calls.



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Wandering Whistling-Duck

Dendrocygna arcuata

Fairly common resident
55-60 cm



W Jolly

Body posture typically lower than Plumed Whistling-Duck. Rufous-brown with dark crown and nape contrasting with pale face, front of neck and upper breast. Brown wing feathers edged rufous-buff. Short cream flank plumes and brown scalloping on chest. Black bill, legs and feet. Congregates in large numbers on margins of swamps and rivers. Feeds on aquatic vegetation. Whistling calls.



R Inglis

Magpie Goose

Anseranas semipalmata

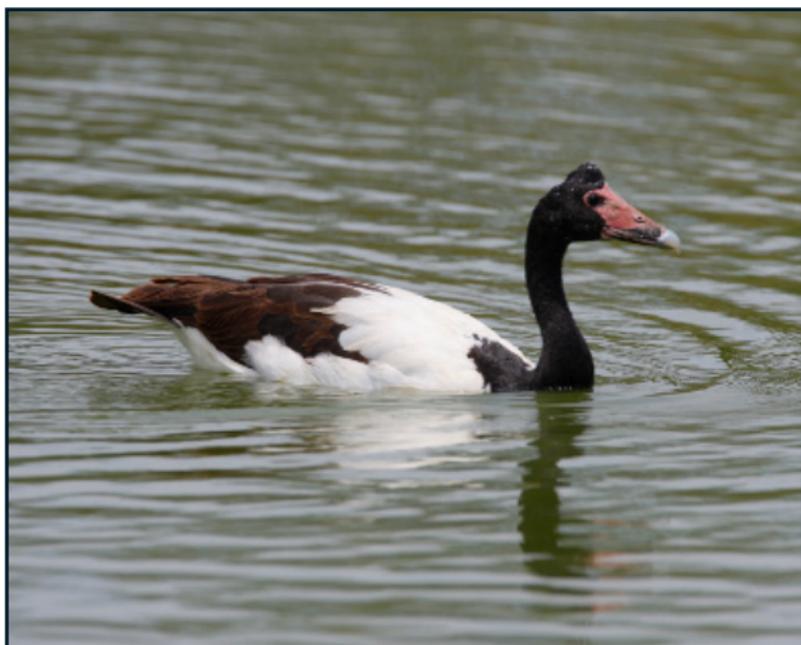
Fairly common resident

70-90 cm



R Inglis

Distinctive and ungainly. Black neck, head and shoulders with distinctive knob on crown (larger in males). White body with contrasting black flight feathers and tail. Bill and facial skin pink, legs and feet orange. In flight, shows white body and underwing with black trailing edges to wings and black wingtips. Often congregates in large numbers.



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Black Swan

Cygnus atratus

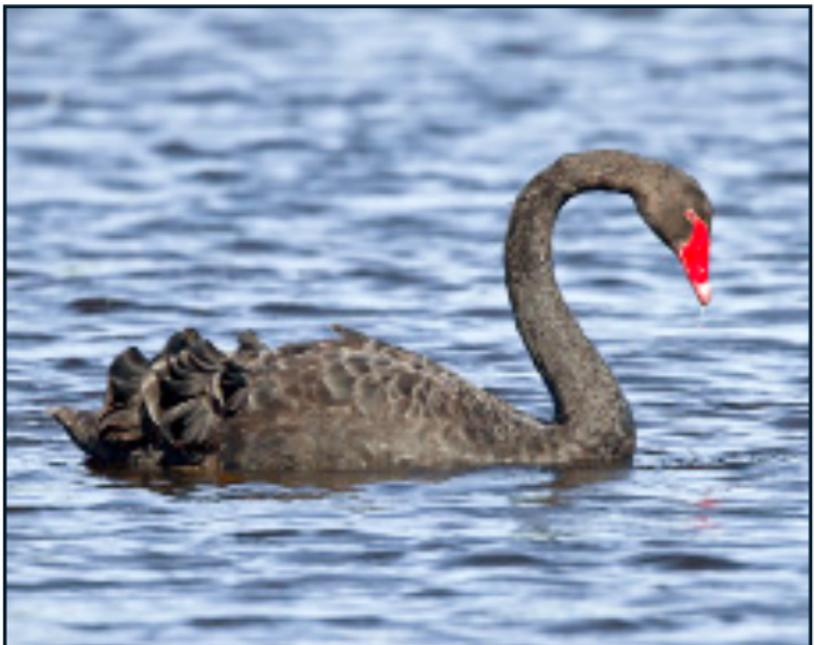
Very common resident

110-140 cm



R Inglis

Unmistakeable. Graceful on water. Black body, neck and head, with white in wings sometimes visible when at rest but mostly when in flight. Red bill with white spot. Male has neck and bill longer and straighter than female. In flight, shows black body and underwing with contrasting broad white wingtips. Often congregates in large numbers.



R Inglis

Australian Wood Duck

Chenonetta jubata

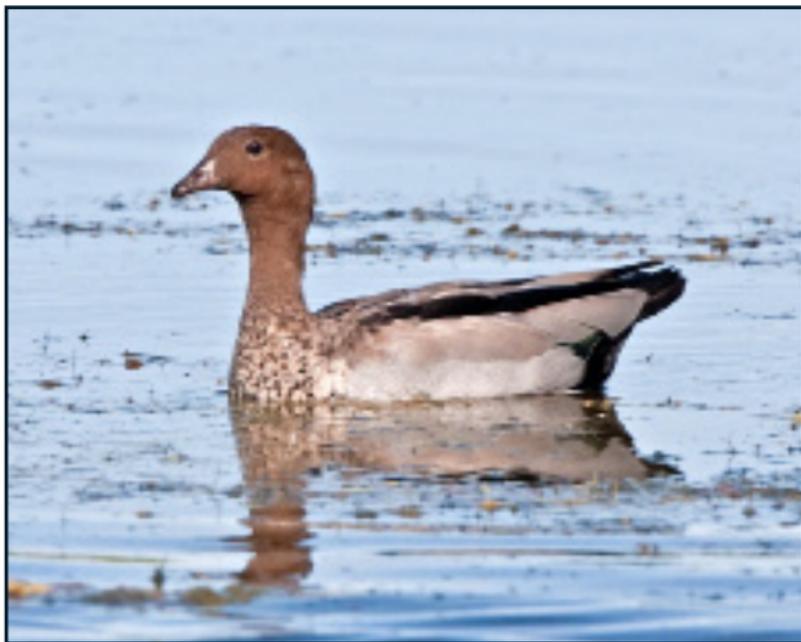
Very common resident

46-51 cm



R Inglis

Goose-like appearance. Dark brown head and neck and pale grey body with two black stripes along back. Male (below) has black 'mane' and mottled breast. Female (above) has paler brown head with pale stripes above and below eyes and mottling that extends onto flanks. Stubby dark grey bill. In flight, shows grey underwings with dark wingtips and white trailing edges. Dark iridescent wingbars. Nasal calls.



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Australasian Shoveler

Anas rhynchos

Uncommon resident
45-55 cm



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Low-floating and distinctive. Massive dark bill blends to sloping forehead. Male has grey-blue head with vertical white crescent on face, dark-spotted chestnut sides, white flank patches and bright orange legs. Male in eclipse plumage duller. Female brownish with duller legs. In flight, shows dark outer wings and pale blue, white and green on inner wings.



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Grey Teal

Anas gracilis

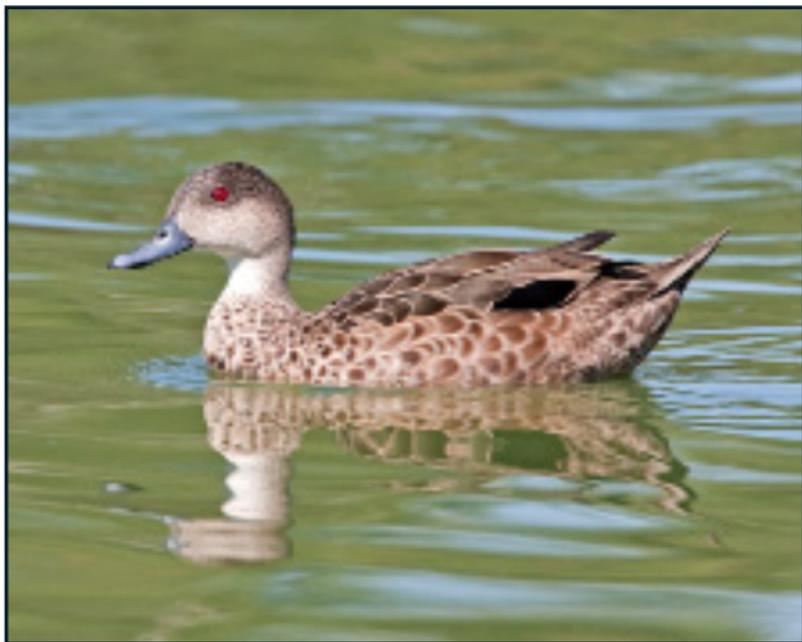
Common resident

42-44 cm



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Compact and elegant. Plain, being mostly greyish-brown, with body feathers edged pale buff, giving overall mottled appearance. Red eyes and black bill. Distinguished from female Chestnut Teal by white face below eye, giving capped appearance, white throat and foreneck and generally paler plumage. Sexes similar.



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Chestnut Teal

Anas castanea

Common resident
38-46 cm



R Inglis

Compact and elegant. Male colourful, with bottle-green head, chestnut body and white flank patches. Female plain and brownish with body feathers edged dark buff. Red eyes and black bill. Female distinguished from Grey Teal by darker crown, browner face below eye, browner throat and foreneck and generally darker plumage.



R Inglis

Pacific Black Duck

Anas superciliosa

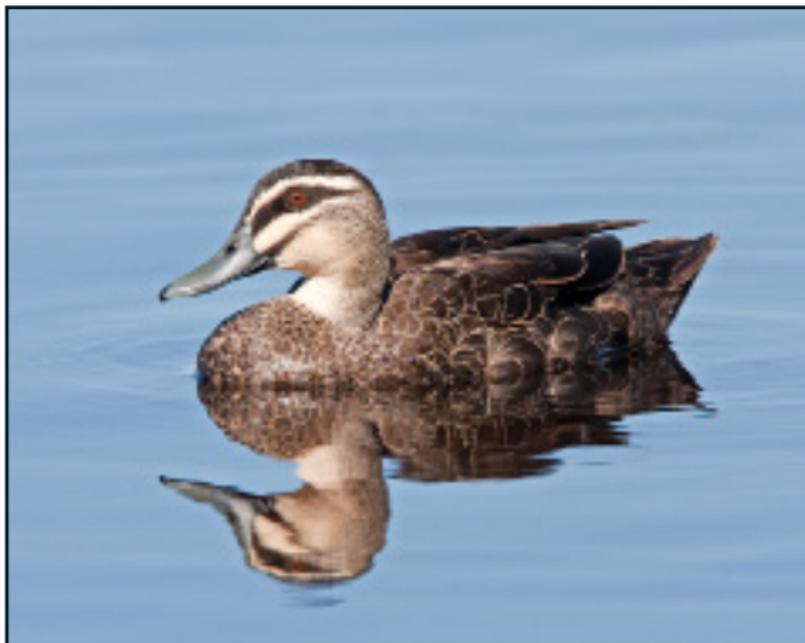
Very common resident

47-60 cm



R Inglis

Distinctive and striking head pattern. Dark brown plumage with buff edges to feathers. Face and throat buffy-white with black crown and two black stripes across face, one going through red eye. Dark grey bill and yellowish legs. In flight, shows dark green or purple in wings. Quacking calls, especially by female. Sexes similar.



R Inglis

Hardhead

Aythya australis

Fairly common resident
45-60 cm



R Inglis

Compact diving duck. Chocolate-brown plumage with white on belly and under tail. Male has richer colour, with white eyes and blue-white band on black bill. Female is browner with brown eyes and band on bill less distinctive. In flight, shows prominent white wingbars along rear of wings. Often mistaken for Blue-billed Duck because of colour of band on bill.



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