

Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps Aboriginal Values Food animals



The rich Fleurieu Swamp habitat provided Aboriginal people with plenty of food animals

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Fleurieu Swamps are rich habitat for birds, reptiles, rodents and fish/yabbies. The nests of larger birds such as ducks, swans, ibis and swamp hens yielded eggs in late spring and early summer. In addition, some birds such as Pacific Black Duck and Purple Swamp Hen were used for meat. Swamps also provided habitat for snake-necked turtles and water rats, which were used for meat, and the rats for skins, which were valued as an item for trade in post-European times. The pre-European methods of hunting birds recorded in the eastern Fleurieu and Lower Murray chiefly involved the use of nets, clubs and spears.



There are many Aboriginal stories about hunting for Swans and their eggs around the Fleurieu and Lower Murray wetlands

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A technique recorded earlier for hunting ducks involved a bunch of common reed (*Phragmites australis*) flower heads and throwing clubs. The practice of collecting swan (*Cygnus atratus*) eggs, known in Aboriginal English as "swan-egging", was a major activity for Aboriginal people in the Lower Lakes and eastern Fleurieu Peninsula throughout the twentieth century. Ngarrindjeri people recall collecting *kungari ngatjeri* (swan eggs) during August and September in the reeds and rushes growing around lakes and swamps where swans could find nesting materials. Other Fleurieu swamp species whose eggs were eaten included the masked lapwing (*Vanellus miles*), Australian coot

(*Fulica atra*), purple water hen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), grey teal (*Anas gracilis*) and black duck (*Anas superciliosa*). Such was the perceived value of eggs that certain birds like the black duck were not hunted during nesting time.



Eggs were an important source of food for Aboriginal people around Fleurieu Swamps and Lower Murray wetlands

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The indigenous biocultural knowledge for each food animal was crucial. For instance, Aboriginal informants described how they would carefully observe swan behaviour from late winter. Although the swan-breeding season is broad and variable, Aboriginal people claimed that in the eastern Fleurieu Peninsula and Lower Murray it occurred when the water levels in the swamps and lagoons were high. Men determined the general area where floating nests made from reeds were being built. To find the exact location, the collectors searched for tracks made by swans as they pushed through the reed beds (*Typhus*, *Baumea* etc.). Collectors generally obtained the eggs by wading out into the lagoons and swamps, putting eggs in a bucket of water to test their freshness: only the ones that sank were considered good for eating. Aboriginal people travelled long distances to obtain swan eggs. For example, Ngarrindjeri man Hector Rigney and his grandmother Marjorie Sumner used to row up Currency Creek in the southern Fleurieu Peninsula to collect swan eggs.

Ngarrindjeri people feel a close ecological relationship between the species of ibises and spoonbill, which would have been strengthened by the fact that these species were all hunted by spear and club at the beginning of summer along the swamps, and then cooked in the same manner in the ashes.

Text: John Fargher Images: Hills & Fleurieu Landscape Board

This post especially informed by many papers and advice from [Philip Clarke](#), Ethnobotanist and Anthropologist. A full list of references for this Post are available at [\[link to references\]](#)