

South East of South Australia

WETLAND BIRDS

IDENTIFICATION GUIDE



Government of South Australia

South East Natural Resources
Management Board



Wetlands are areas of our land that are permanently or temporarily covered with water. The South East of South Australia contains many thousands of individual wetlands, about 6% of the regional land.

The region supports a wide variety of wetland types which are important, in their own ways, for different types of plants and animals.

Waterbirds are the most mobile of wetland animals, some of them migrating around the world seeking conditions suitable for breeding or visiting when conditions at home are unfavourable. The South East of South Australia, with its history of extensive wetland areas has long been visited by waterbirds from around Australia and abroad but is also home to a range of resident species that live here full time.

Waterbirds move around the region depending on what water is where. So, for example, the chestnut teal duck breeds in inland freshwater meadows, or 'puddles in paddocks' when they contain water but moves back to more permanent coastal wetlands when they dry out. Similarly many thousands of birds may be found in wetlands of the Upper South East in a wet year, or they may be found on permanent wetlands in the Lower South East during a dry phase.

To keep waterbirds in the landscape we need to manage our wetlands to conserve the full range of wetland types from the small temporary wetlands to the large permanent ones.

How to use this guide

This guide contains information on some, but not all, of the species of waterbirds that that you are likely to see in wetlands of the region.

Birds in the guide are presented in alphabetical order by common name with scientific, or Latin, names shown italicised in brackets alongside.

Along with a photo, each bird is described in a way that will make it easy for you to identify. The description contains a range of information about the habits of the bird such as what it eats or when and where it nests. This information can be useful when identifying birds that look similar but behave differently.

The calendar bar at the bottom tells you when birds are breeding in Australia.

Each description contains information about the types of habitat the bird prefers, which again might be helpful when identifying those birds that like specific types of habitats.

Please remember that this guide does not cover the wide diversity of waterbirds that visit the region and for more information consult one of the many excellent bird identification guides available.



AUSTRALASIAN BITTERN (*Botarus poiciloptilus*)

Steve Clarke



Secretive brown wading bird. Brown body, mottled black to rufous gold with long neck. Buff streaks on wings and underparts and short, pale green legs. Distinctive booming voice (heard more often than seen).

Nest and Nesting Period: Shallow saucer amongst rushes and reeds.

Conservation Status: Vulnerable

Habitat: Forages in shallow water, often among reeds in wet paddocks and drains.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary. Nomadic when dry.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

AUSTRALIAN PELICAN (*Pelicanus conspicillatus*)

David Paton



Large (1.5-1.9m) black and white bird, with large pink bill and bill pouch. Short grey legs, large webbed feet. Tail white with black terminal band. Flight feathers black.

Nest and Nesting Period: Ground scrape lined with sticks, grass or seaweed. In small to very large colonies.

Habitat: Large shallow water bodies, coastal or inland. Mudflats, sandspits, jetties and occasionally open sea.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Dispersive and highly nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

AUSTRALIAN SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadornoides*)

Dragos Moise



Large (55-74cm) boldly coloured duck with black head, white neck collar, chestnut breast and white forewing in flight.

Nest and Nesting Period: Nests in tree hollow lined with down.

Habitat: Grasslands, fresh and saline wetlands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Seasonal migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS (*Threskiornis molucca*)

Steve Bourne / Inset: Bryan Haywood



Mainly white ibis (65-75 cm) with a dark hood and a long down-curved bill. In breeding plumage head and upper-neck unfeathered black, lacelike black wing tips and pale yellow neck plumes.

Nest and Nesting Period: Nest Platform of sticks and twigs, generally lined with leaves or even human litter. Generally over or near water in winter, spring and summer.

Habitat: Wetlands including freshwater and saline wetlands, irrigated areas, mudflats, parks and gardens, rubbish tips, etc.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Generally adults are sedentary but seasonal movements are suggested for juveniles.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

BLACK SWAN (*Cygnus atratus*)

Bryan Haywood



Large (1-1.4m) black swan, yellow tipped red bill. White patches on wings, especially visible in flight. Legs and feet black.

Nest and Nesting Period: Large platform of vegetation, on dry land or floating in aquatic vegetation. Begins breeding after rains fill swamps.

Habitat: Large swamps and lakes with large amounts of aquatic vegetation up to 1 m. below the surface.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL (*Elseya melanops*)

Steven Bourne



Small (17cm) shorebird. Bill red tipped black and red eye-eyring. Distinctive Y-shaped black breast band.

Nest and Nesting Period: Nests on ground in shallow depression.

Habitat: Fresh or sometimes brackish wetlands, ponds, swamps.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*)

Rosey Pounsett



Medium sized (33-37cm) shorebird with long pink-red legs and long, fine black bill. Black on nape. Distinctive high pitched barking call.

Nest and Nesting Period: Nests on ground in shallow depression, constructed from aquatic plants, often in small colonies.

Habitat: Shallow freshwater or saline wetlands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

BROLGA (*Grus rubicundus*)

Rosey Pounsett



Tall (70-130cm) grey crane. Silver grey with scarlet red on back of head and nape. A bustle of feathers over rump.

Nest and Nesting Period: Large mound (1m diameter) of sedges and aquatic plants in open water. Locally August to November.

Conservation Status: Vulnerable

Habitat: Forages in dry to wet paddocks, potato crops and shallow wetlands

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

BUFF-BANDED RAIL (*Gallirallus phillippensis*)

Rosey Pounsett



Medium sized (30cm) with white eyebrow and chestnut eye stripe. Buff and black upperparts, underparts black and white striped with buff band. Flicks tail incessantly.

Nest and Nesting Period: On ground in a slight depression. Will nest at any time after rains mostly during Spring and Summer.

Habitat: Mostly wetlands, swamps, but may be found in gardens and on roadsides.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Not well known, likely seasonal migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

CHESTNUT TEAL (*Anas castanea*)

Dragos Moise



Small (40-48cm) dabbling duck. Males have bottle green head and chestnut body. Females mainly scalloped dark brown with dark head.

Nest and Nesting Period: Generally in tree hollows in spring. Will nest at any time if conditions favourable.

Habitat: Freshwater and saline wetlands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Seasonal migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

DUSKY MOORHEN (*Gallinula tenebrosa*)

Dragos Moise



Medium (35-40cm) sized, common waterhen with slate grey body, browner wings and rump, red bill and shield with yellow bill tip. White patch under the edge of the tail. Legs are red with greenish toes.

Nest and Nesting Period: A saucer or bowl shape made of dry vegetation just above water level, usually in rushes or other aquatic vegetation.

Habitat: Deeper wetlands. Open fresh water.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

EASTERN GREAT EGRET (*Ardea modesta*)

Steve Clarke



Large (83-103cm) all white long-necked egret, bill usually black, although yellow in non-breeding plumage, legs dark grey to black. Flat forehead and with the gape extending behind the eye.

Nest and Nesting Period: A thin but wide platform of sticks with a shallow bowl in the top, placed in a fork of a tree standing in water.

Habitat: Wetlands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Migratory.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*)

Rosey Pounsett



Medium sized (35-40cm) waterbird with prominent white bill. Slaty-grey to black in appearance, with white bill and shield, grey legs and lobed toes.

Nest and Nesting Period: A saucer or shallow bowl made of fine grasses or waterweed. Usually placed in rushes and reeds but can be in the base of a tree.

Habitat: Deeper wetlands. Open water, fresh to saline.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary/nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

HARDHEAD (*Aythya australis*)

Dragos Moise



Medium sized (45-60cm) rich brown, fast flying diving duck. White on belly and under tail. Broad white wing bar in flight. Bill black, blue bar near tip. Legs and feet grey.

Nest and Nesting Period: Woven cup of vegetation, down lined, often with canopy. In waterside plants.

Habitat: Deep swamps and lakes with abundant vegetation.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary/nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

HOARY-HEADED GREBE (*Poliocephalus poliocephalus*)

Dragos Moise



Small (30cm) mostly grey (and brown on wings), and white to buff below on the neck and upper breast. Breeding plumage has white streaks on head and face.

Nest and Nesting Period: A small raft of water plants amongst other emergent vegetation, usually on large deep wetlands.

Habitat: Fresh water lakes, brackish and saline wetlands and sheltered coastal bays.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Nomadic to dispersive during wet seasons.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

LATHAM'S SNIPE (*Gallinago hardwickii*)

Rosey Pounsett



Medium sized (29-33cm) shorebird. Cryptic buff and brown plumage with black markings. Long and straight bill, short wings.

Nest and Nesting Period: Breeds in northern Japan and nearby east Asian mainland during Australian winter.

Conservation Status: Rare (SA), Vulnerable (SE SA)

Habitat: On edges of freshwater, permanent and ephemeral wetlands, marshes, rank grasslands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Migratory.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

MASKED LAPWING (*Vanellus miles*)

Bryan Haywood



Spur-winged Plover (35cm), brown above and white below with a black cap and nape, extending down to the edges of the breast. Legs dull red, bill and prominent facial wattles yellow.

Nest and Nesting Period: A scrape on the ground in very open situations where the bird has clear views around it.

Habitat: Open habitats, preferring areas with short grass. Often seen on sport fields or other urban grass.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary/nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

PACIFIC BLACK DUCK (*Anas superciliosa*)

Rosey Pounsett



Medium sized (50-60cm) dark brown duck, pale feather margins. Pale face and throat, black stripes through eye and from chin. Iridescent patch on wing. Grey bill, feet and legs greenish. White underwing in flight.

Nest and Nesting Period: In stump or tree hollow, down lined. Also a scrape on ground, or woven cup in grass or reeds. In deserted nest of other waterbirds.

Habitat: Any lake, swamp, pool, stream or lagoon. Farm dams, parks and gardens.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary/nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

PURPLE SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)

Steve Clarke



Large (44-48 cm) waterhen with heavy scarlet bill and forehead-shield. Deep purple-blue head and breast. White undertail coverts. Long orange-red legs.

Nest and Nesting Period: Grass or reed platform containing saucer or oval shaped nest lined with dry grass.

Habitat: Wetlands and urbanised lands including swamps, lakes, reeds, town lakes, golf courses, etc.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Partial migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

ROYAL SPOONBILL (*Platalea regia*)

Steve Clarke



Large (80cm) white wading bird with large black spoon-like beak and long black legs.

Nest and Nesting Period: Shallow platform of sticks in trees, usually over water.

Conservation Status: Rare

Habitat: Large shallow wetlands, drains, tidal mudflats, estuaries and salt marshes.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary to dispersive.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER (*Calidris acuminata*)

Steve Clarke



Small to medium-sized (17-21cm) shorebird. Generally brownish with buff and black markings. Pale eyebrow widening towards rear. Short, slightly down-curved bill.

Nest and Nesting Period: Breeds in Siberia during Australian winter.

Habitat: Wetlands and beaches. Prefers shallow fresh or saline water with low vegetation.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Migratory.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

STRAW-NECKED IBIS (*Threskiornis spinicollis*)

Steve Clarke



"Farmers Friend" (60-75cm), glossy iridescent black wings, back and collar. Long downturned bill. White neck, underparts and tail. Straw-like tuft of neck feathers in adults. Head bare black skin. Upper legs red, lower leg and feet black. Often feeds on pests that would otherwise eat farm crops.

Nest and Nesting Period: Trampled platform of sticks, reeds and rushes over water in paperbarks or reeds.

Habitat: Often in shallows of wetlands, irrigated pastures, crops.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

STRIATED FIELDWREN (*Calamanthus fuliginosus*)

Bryan Haywood



Small (14cm) olive brown bird with streaked chest, wings, back and head. Prominent eye stripe. Males sing continually during breeding season.

Nest and Nesting Period: Dome made of coarse grasses and fibres, lined with feathers and down. Hidden under tussock/bushes.

Habitat: Wet heathland, coastal swamp heath, tussocky paddocks including bracken.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

SWAMP HARRIER (*Circus approximans*)

David Paton



Large (50-60cm) raptor with prominent white rump and V-shaped glide. Mainly brown with marked fascial disc and streaked breast.

Nest and Nesting Period: Mound of sticks, grasses, sedges containing softer material on ground, often in swamps.

Habitat: Agricultural, pastoral land, open and vegetated wetlands.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Partial migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*)

Bryan Haywood



Small (24cm) tern with slightly forked tail and long broad wings. White cheeks in all plumages. Belly dark grey in breeding plumage.

Nest and Nesting Period: On a mound or platform in inundated vegetation. Breeding not common in South East.

Habitat: Mainly shallow freshwater wetlands or sometimes over dry paddocks.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Seasonal migrant.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

WHITE-FACED HERON (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

David Paton



A white faced crane (60-75cm) with light green legs. Body blue-grey.

Nest and Nesting Period: Platform of sticks placed in tree or near water.

Habitat: Estuaries to freshwater wetlands, farm dams, drains and wet grassland and paddocks.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Locally nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

WOOD DUCK (*Chenonetta jubata*)

Bryan Haywood



Medium-sized (47cm) 'goose-like' duck with a dark brown head, a speckled breast, and nasal 'mew' call. Often seen grazing near open fresh water.

Nest and Nesting Period: In tree hollow preferably over water, often high up, lined with down.

Habitat: Margins of swamps, lakes and rivers. Flooded pastures, ponds, farm dams, town parks. Lightly timbered and grassy areas, sometimes far from water.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary to regionally nomadic.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

YELLOW-BILLED SPOONBILL (*Platalea flavipes*)

Steve Clarke



Large (80cm) white wading bird with large yellow spoon-like beak and long yellow legs and feet. Often seen dabbling in paddock swamps, easily frightened. (Shown centre between two Royal Spoonbills).

Nest and Nesting Period: A large nest made of sturdy sticks on trampled rushes/sedges in trees.

Habitat: Sheltered paddock swamps, dams, drains, fresh water wetlands, roadside pools.

Season of Occurrence / Movement: Sedentary to dispersive.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

The SE NRM Board plays an active role in the management of the region's soil, pest plants and animals, water, ecosystems, coast and marine environments. It is also about individuals, communities and industries caring for their own environment - finding a social, economic and environmental balance now and into the long term future.

Natural Resources Management projects are currently being undertaken all over the South East region, so keep exploring and visiting the website to find out what's happening in your local area.

Right: Black Winged Stilt Nest (Bryan Haywood)
Back image: Purple Swamp Hen (Rosey Pounsett)



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Disclaimer

This publication may be of assistance to you to identify common wetland plants in the South East. While all due care has been taken in compiling this information, contributors to this publication we do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw and therefore disclaim all liability for any errors or omissions, loss, damage or consequence which may arise from any information given in this publication.

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References and Further Reading



<http://se.nrmSPACE.com.au/nrmFAUNA/> gives you a unique database of birds, fish, frogs, mammals, insects and reptiles native to the South East. It is searchable by either bird name or geographic spread, and provides both full colour pictures and detailed descriptions of each animal and their characteristics.

Tangible benefits of native vegetation - Restoring the balance and saving a dollar, Crouch, C. (Wimmera CMA, 2005)



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