

Bird Watching in the Macleay Valley Coast - Common Local Birds

RAPTORS

Osprey

The osprey is found throughout most of the world and in Australia is found right around the country close to water. Once the osprey sets up residence in an area it will generally live there for life.

The osprey will nest just about anywhere, tall dead trees, power poles, on cliff edges, on the ground occasionally, and even on the masts of yachts. They use the same nest for years just adding new material each season and as you can imagine over ten years or more the nests can become huge. They don't just add sticks either, they add seaweed or anything else they find on the beach or floating around.

The osprey, unlike some of the other raptors feeds almost exclusively on live fish as opposed to carrion, small animals etc. It hovers above the water till it spots a fish and then drops feet first onto its prey. It can hit the water with such force it will disappear over a metre below the surface. In the Macleay area the ospreys nest from March till September to coincide with the large schools of mullet travelling in the area at that time.

This species, once facing extinction, is now making a comeback worldwide thanks to conservation efforts.

Brahminy Kite

This is one of the most easily identified raptors you will see on the river with its snow white head, neck and breast contrasting drastically with its rufous (rusty) body colour.

It is nearly always associated with estuary areas only venturing inland on odd occasions. But this raptor is not just associated with Australia and can be found in a number of overseas countries, including India.

This species is much happier to take carrion than a lot of the other raptors and upstream at Jerseyville where the main fishing fleet is moored it is not uncommon to see them feeding on the frozen packages of chicken gut that the fishermen use in their fish traps. But they also feed on fish, frogs, crustaceans, reptiles and insects. However when it comes to feeding chicks in the nest fish either alive or dead are the main food.

Unlike some of the other raptors, nests are newly built each year and are usually found about 10 to 20 metres above the ground. Usually the eggs are laid between July and October.

Whistling Kite

Like the brahminy kite that can be recognised by its appearance, the whistling kite can be recognised by its call. A very distinctive whistle followed by 4 to 6 shorter ones with a rising inflection, leaves no doubt to its identity.

The adults feed on anything from insects to carrion, with their chicks the diet is more particular. Carrion is generally not fed to chicks. Their diet mainly consists of smaller birds, insects, rats, rabbits and fish, particularly mullet. The only exception is that during the calving period, the fresh placenta from the cow is feed to young whistling kites. Whistling kites use the same nest year after year.

White-Breasted Sea-Eagle

Also called the white-bellied sea-eagle this is our second largest raptor, the wedge-tailed eagle being the largest.

Like the whistling kite and osprey it uses the same nest each year and they can turn out as huge structures. There have been some found that are four metres (14 feet) deep, and contain half a ton of wood.

Unlike many of the other raptors, fish is the main diet, though it has been known to take tortoises, sea snakes, small mammals and occasional carrion. Other water birds are often fed to chicks along with the fish.

WATER BIRDS

Cormorants and Darters

Along with the darter there are four species of cormorant occurring in the Macleay area; black, little black, pied and little pied.

Cormorants, also known as shags, are long necked, long billed diving birds that primarily feed on fish. They can be found in all the river systems in the Macleay including freshwater bodies. They are also common in Trial Bay where they can be observed feeding on passing schools of fish.

After catching a fish they bring it to the surface where they flip it around so they can swallow it head first.

Because cormorants feed by swimming underwater they have a low level of waterproofing on their feathers to reduce buoyancy and allow them to stay submerged a long time with little effort. Because of this cormorants can often be seen sitting on a branch or rock with their wings spread to help dry them.

Pelican

Pelicans are found throughout Australia and is a common sight patrolling the waterways in search of fish and crustaceans. Pelicans have been in Australia for a long time and some of their fossil remains date back to 30 to 40 million years.

Although pelicans are adept fish catchers often herding the bait schools into the shallows for easier capture, they have also learnt to associate anglers with a free feed. Anywhere in the Macleay where anglers clean their catch a pelican won't be too far away.

Pelicans are unmistakable with the distinct bill and associated pouch which can hold 6 litres of water. They have a wing span up to 2.6 metres and can often be observed soaring high in the sky, up to 3000 metres.

BUSH BIRDS

Most of the birds you will hear are bush birds. They are not very big or easy to see but if you look closely you will see them fluttering from tree to tree. Many of the birds are honeyeaters - feeding on the pollen and nectar of the flowering shrubs and trees. There are also quite a few wrens including the well recognised blue wren.

Grey Fantails

Grey fantails seem to be in constant motion, fluttering and hopping from branch to branch. This constant movement is accompanied by non stop chattering. Although only small birds they are aggressive towards other birds in their area.

Willie Wagtail

The name willie wagtail comes from the birds constant swaying of its body and wagging of its tail. Theory has it that this action flushes insects from the grass. It is related to the grey fantail and behaves similarly.

Brown Thornbill

Easier to hear than see, this tiny 10 cm bird is constantly on the move in the lower bushes. Associating with other species, the brown thornbill seeks insects and seeds.

Sacred Kingfisher

An attractive species of the forests and mangroves, the sacred kingfisher belongs to the same family as the kookaburra. Prey consists mainly of reptiles and insects. The bird can be difficult to see and is often only noticed when it moves from one area to another. Its flight is swift and direct. The bird excavates its breeding hollow in a termites nest generally high in a tree.

Rufous Whistler

Usually seen alone or in pairs, this colourful species is known for its rich and explosive calls. Loud noises such as thunder or the slamming of a car door usually invokes a whistling response. Frequenting forests and scrubs they feed on insects, berries and fruits.

Yellow-Faced Honeyeater

Yellow-faced honeyeaters are one of the more vocal honeyeaters and can be seen in large numbers in the Macleay area from March through October. Outside of this time they migrate south to breed. Their main habitat is coastal shrubs and open woodlands.

Yellow-faced honey eaters are very active birds and arboreal foragers taking insects from twigs and foliage. They also feed on nectar from eucalypts, banksias and grevilleas.

Egrets

The four egrets found in Australia are all residents of the Macleay area. The cattle egret is the smallest followed by the little egret, then plumed egret, up to the large egret. All are very similar in appearance and difficult to tell apart for the unskilled eye as they are all white in colour.

These graceful birds are usually found alone or in small numbers, except for the cattle egret which follows feeding cattle. The remaining three species can be seen feeding on insects, fish, or invertebrates in shallow waters, mudflats, or paddocks.

White-Faced Heron

An attractive bird similar in appearance to the egrets, but with grey plumage and white face. This species feeds on crustaceans, fish, insects, snails and worms in a variety of habitats ranging from mudflats and swamps to paddocks and lawns. It usually nests high in a tree.

Waders

Waders are made up of a large number of different species of birds that have some similar characteristics. All are shore birds of some type, many have long bills which have evolved to aid feeding in the shallows and mudflats of estuaries.

Many of the wader species are migratory birds who travel to Australia from China, Japan and Siberia to escape the severe winters in those countries. By spending spring and summer in Australian estuaries and flying north to Asia and Siberia during our autumn these small birds travel vast distances in search of perpetual warm seasons which support increased food availability.

Black Duck

A common bird of lakes, estuaries, swamps and rivers, this species feeds on plants and insects, and breeds from July to October. Black Ducks congregate in vast numbers when conditions are favourable, such as after floods.

Chestnut Teal

This attractive duck frequents swamps and estuaries of southern Australia and feeds on plants, insects and crustaceans. In contrast to the male, the female is plain brown in colour.

Wood Duck

Wood ducks are more closely related to geese than ducks. They much prefer to walk around than swim and usually only enter the water to bathe, copulate or for refuge.

Wood ducks mate for life. They nest in tree holes and ducklings jump out of the nest hole soon after hatching, called out by their parents from below. Young can feed almost as soon as they hatch feeding on green herbage, grains and insects. It takes about 50 days before they can fly and during this time both parents care and protect the young. However, the young wood ducks are much preyed upon by hawks, eagles and harriers who view them as an easy catch.

Jabiru

Also known as the Black-necked Stork, these huge birds stand 1.2 metres high and have a wingspan of 2 metres. This attractive and distinctive species mainly inhabits northern Australia becoming scarcer further south. There are a number of these birds around the Macleay area and they can be seen feeding on fish, reptiles, and carrion along the mudflats.