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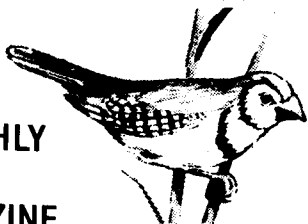
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Swamp Birds Along the Murray

by
Bill Ludbey
New South Wales, Australia

Australia's largest river, the mighty Murray, slowly makes it way along 1,600 miles from its source to the sea. As the little creeks and streams merge, the Murray slowly widens and deepens and becomes a very beautiful river. It passes through a great variety of country as it meanders toward its mouth in South Australia.

The Murray is an important resource also as its water is used by all the towns along its course. Fruit, sheep, wheat, rice, tobacco, citrus, cattle, and all the agriculture along the Murray use its water for drinking and irrigation.

The swamp birds and other wildlife also depend upon the Murray. When the river floods its banks all the low areas become a huge swamp covering some 300,000 acres with the Murray flowing through its middle. At the little town of Barmah the river banks are high and only about 250 yards wide. This bottle-neck backs the water up into the low areas and keeps the swamps from draining too quickly.

During times of flood (the Murray doesn't flood every year) all kinds of water birds come to the swamps to breed. The environment is suitable for all their requirements. There are great areas of reed beds, vast marshy plains of grasses, and plenty of trees both large and small to nest in. There are also a number of high places that become temporary islands sometimes nearly ten miles long. The ground animals tend to congregate on the islands when they are flooded from their normal homes.

To really study and enjoy the wildlife it is necessary to travel through the swamp by boat. I used a sixteen foot boat that was pushed along by pole. I camped each night on one of the many islands.

Birdlife became evident as soon as I entered the swamp. Ducks were plentiful with the black duck (*Anas superciliosa*) and grey teal (*Anas gibberifrons*) being the most common. It was not uncommon to see one fly out of a hole high up in a tree. Other ducks nested low to the ground in a stump where the eggs were sometimes visible. If the duck was not on

the nest her ten to fifteen eggs could be seen covered with feathers and down. Several clutches of little balls of fluff tried to hide in any cover that was on hand while the mother duck feigned a broken wing and tried to lure me away from the babies.

Almost as plentiful as the ducks were the bald coots (*Fulica atra*), the dusky moorhens (*Gallinula tenebrosa*), and the eastern swamp-hens (*Porphyrio melanotus*). Most of these birds nested in the reed-beds where they made the reeds into very neat nests. Some individuals, however, had forsaken the reed-beds and nested under logs or in small saplings.

The second small island I camped on was already occupied. The rising water had squeezed a few kangaroos up onto the island and they didn't seem to like the idea of company. They didn't like the water either but they compromised by going out into the shallow water just a little ways. There they just sat and looked at me as I sat near my campfire and listened to the night noises.

The frogs make an incredible amount of noise. It sounds like a million different voices each trying to outdo the other. Another rather noisy creature is the beautiful black swan (*Cygnus atratus*). The swans make a very noisy ritual of their mating. Much honking and flapping goes on all night. The displays were obviously effective, though, for during the next few days I saw nests in all stages of construction, eggs in various stages of incubation, and finally a few babies or cygnets. Nothing is so beautiful as the sight of a graceful swan swimming along with five or six little white bits of fluff following in her wake.

The swans are very adept at building nests of whatever material is at hand. Some build out of bark, sticks and debris found two or three feet under water, others bend the dense reeds into tight nests, still others use cat-tails or grass. Once when I climbed a large tree near the reed-beds I had a good view over a large area and saw three or four swan nests per acre.

Deeper into the swamp I found crested grebes (*Podiceps poliocephalus*). They are very shy birds quite hard to see. Their nest is a flat affair right at water level, in fact they often float. Sometimes the nest is anchored to sticks or debris. The center of the nest is piled with leaf-mold which has a heat of its own and seems to help incubate the eggs.

Much easier to find were the comorants. They nest in huge rookeries in which there were three species, the yellow-faced comorant (*Phalacrocorax varius*), the little pied comorant (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*), and the black comorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*). Scattered about in these rookeries were lots of herons, egrets, and two species of spoonbills. It is not pleasant to be in or near these large rookeries as the smell is terrible. Dead fish, dead birds and the comorant's vomit tend to pollute the area. I put my boat very near a huge rookerie and sat for awhile. When alarmed the comorants rise to the sky in a panic and circle. When they calm down they all drop slowly down to the rookerie and fight and squabble until each bird finds its own nest. The big black comorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) seems to have much different habits. This species prefers to nest in small colonies of twelve to fifteen nests out in the open or in large trees. The very tops of the large trees, however, were quite often occupied by wedge-tailed eagles (*Aquila audax*).

There were many pelicans in the area and it was very interesting to watch them fish. They had a good system. They would fly some distance out toward the deeper water then light on it in a staggered line. They then swam toward the shallows driving great schools of small fish before them. The pelicans (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) swam with their lower beak or pouch under water and when the water became only about one foot deep one could see how many fish the pelicans were catching—sometimes from fifty to eighty tiny carp per fishing trip.

Day by day as I poled by boat from one island camp to another I saw a great variety of ducks including musk duck (*Biziura lobata*) which dove and swam very well but almost never flew; blue winged shovellers (*Anas rhynchos*); white-eyed ducks (*Anthya australis*) which made a very neat reed nest complete with roof; pink eared duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*); maned goose (*Chenonetta jubata*); chestnut breasted shelduck (*Casarca tadornoides*); plumed tree ducks (*Dendrocygnae*); and some whistling tree ducks along with a number of freckled ducks.

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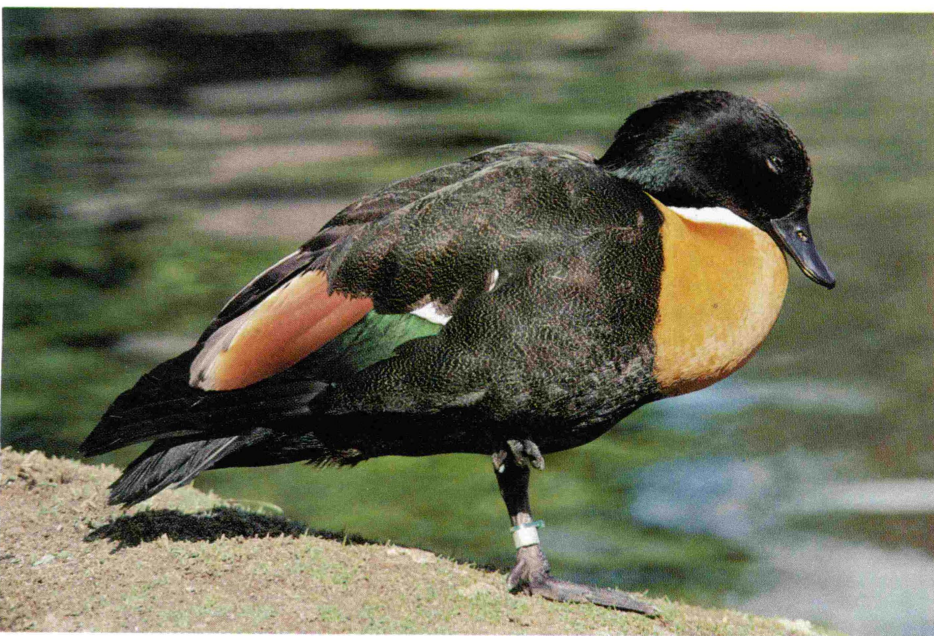
The black duck was a very numerous species easily spotted.

Photo by Bill Ludbey



A well made black swan nest.

Photo by San Diego Zoo



The Australian shelduck is one of the most beautiful ducks in Australia.

Barman Lakes track through the vast reed-beds.

Photo by Bill Ludbey

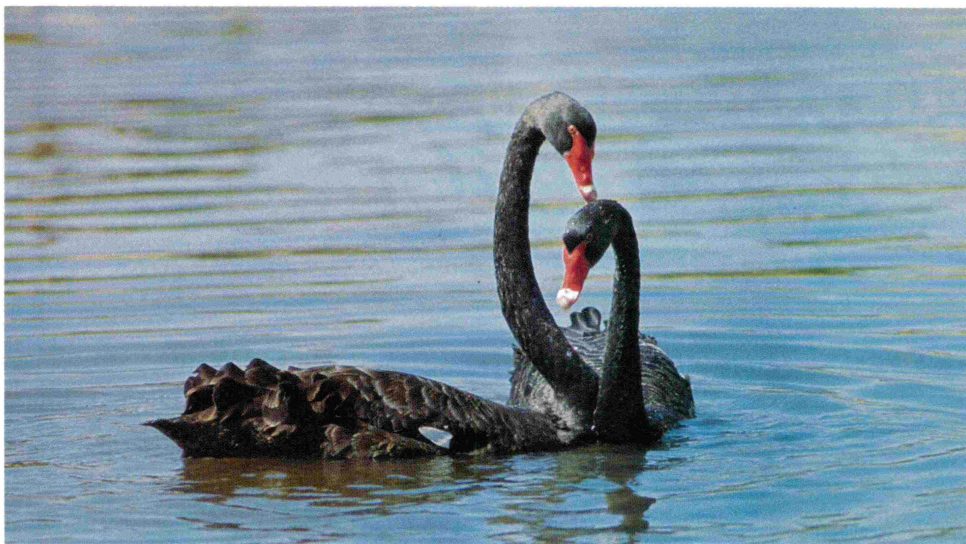


island in the area, hove into sight. Because it is a large island a great abundance of land animals and forest birds inhabit it when the water rises. I saw two species of ibis and some laughing kookaburras which served as an alarm clock each morning. Among the forest birds were thrushes, jays, shrikes, larks, honeyeaters, and a few parrots including red-rumped parrots, white cockatoos, rose-breasted cockatoos, and two or three species of rosellas. Around the shores of the island were found the azure kingfisher and the sacred kingfisher.

I hoped for a lucky day in which I would see the almost invisible tawny frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*). They sit so still and blend into the background so well that they seem to be part of their tree. I found a tree under which were tawny frogmouth droppings and I finally located the bird in the branches.

While on the large island I really wanted to see emus and kangaroos. The emus are very wary and have excellent eyesight. If they spot a man they bolt. If, however, you spot the birds first, it is easy to draw them quite close. They are very inquisitive and all one has to do is lie on the ground and wave an arm or a piece of rag. This I did and the curious birds slowly came up to within thirty yards of me.

One area of the island had about a twenty acre clearing with a tall tree in the middle of it. At four in the afternoon I climbed the tree and waited for the kangaroos to come out. They did—about two hundred of them, bucks, does, and little joeys still in the mothers pouch. I watched them standing up sniffing and wondering where I was. They had a slight scent of me but with their poor eyesight they couldn't locate me. The joeys popped out of the pouches and played on the grass like lambs. When I tired of watching



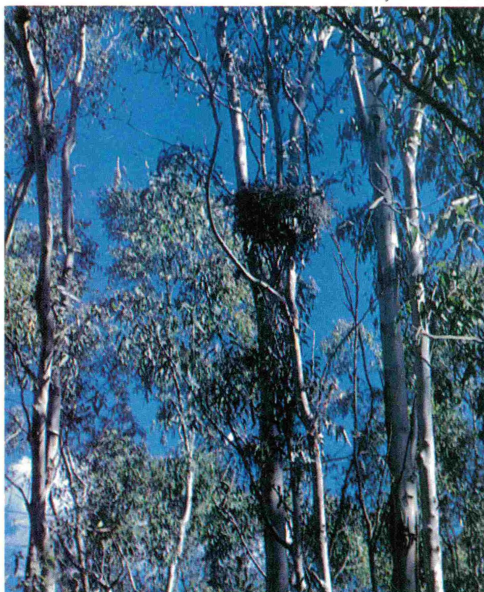
The black swans are the most graceful nesters in the swamp.

them I climbed down the tree. At my first motion the joeys nose-dived into their mothers pouches and all the roos disappeared in an instant.

Eventually I left the large island and headed my boat toward home. All along the way the river was beautiful and the wildlife plentiful. Sometimes when the river floods it causes damage to some of the towns along the banks but the floods are a real blessing to the water birds because of the vast swamps that are created.

I have made many trips through these swamps over the years and it is very rewarding to watch the various species of birds go about their differing ways of nesting. No matter how many times one travels in the swamps there is always something new and fascinating to see. ●

Photo by Bill Ludbey



The bulky nest of a white crane.

The emu is a very cautious but curious bird.



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