

Herons – do you know the difference? ... Kaye Traynor

Three Heron species occur in Victoria and they are all seen throughout the year in this area. A few years ago, Pauline Reilly was a regular contributor to the ANGAIR Newsletter with a segment, 'Bird of the Month'. I have included here some of the content used by Pauline in her articles to describe the Rufous, White-necked and White-faced Herons.

Rufous Night Heron, *Nycticorax caledonicus*



Rufous Night Heron

Rufous better describes the colour of the back of this bird rather than the original name of 'nankeen' which refers to the colour of a yellow or pale buff cotton cloth originally made in Nanking China. This bird lives in all parts of Australia apart from inland, arid areas, as well as in New Zealand, New Guinea and other Micronesian islands.

The Rufous Night Heron feeds nocturnally on small water animals (frogs, fish, insects) on wetland borders. They roost by day in trees, often exotics, such as willow and pine.

They breed throughout the year depending on availability of food. Their nest is built of sticks, usually in trees and bushes, but also on the ground, in colonies with other waterbirds. They lay up to five eggs, but usually two or three.

White-necked Heron, *Ardea pacifica*

Previously known as the Pacific Heron, the White-necked Heron appears on local wetlands at irregular intervals. Usually the birds are alone and feed alongside White-faced Herons and Great Egrets, in shallow water or wet grasslands.

Occasionally, they have appeared in greater numbers. After heavy rains, when the wetlands are in flood, large numbers of these birds appear together. It's a mystery as to how they know there is a short-lived feast available. Their diet consists mainly of insects, crustaceans, fish and amphibians. In flight, like other herons, it flies with its neck folded and head held close to its body.

They perch, roost and nest in trees in loose groupings rather than in colonies. The nest is a loose platform of sticks in a tree near or over water with usually four to six eggs.



White-necked Heron

White-faced Heron, *Ardea novaehollandiae*

The heron seen most often over most of Australia is the White-faced Heron, sometimes called Blue Crane in error, as it is not a crane. It is quite distinctive with its blue-grey plumage and white throat and face. When breeding, plumes appear on the breast and back and in a crest from head to nape.



White-faced Heron

Standing about 66cm tall, it stalks slowly along the edges of the water in wetlands, creek estuaries and flooded places. After heavy rains these herons often fly up with a slow deep wingbeat from the flooded sides of roads where they feed on the invertebrate life displaced by the water.

At low tide, they feed on rock platforms and mud flats. Though usually alone or in company with a mate and young, they sometimes appear in flocks. This they did in October 1994 when the sandbar at the mouth of the Painkalac Creek burst wide open and 66 White-faced Herons appeared to exploit an abundance of food, and then dispersed within a few days.

It is strange to see such a large terrestrial bird building a flimsy nest high up in a tree, and its call, a rather guttural sound, is not at all in keeping with its elegant appearance.

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