

# Australian Pelican

*Pelecanus conspicillatus*

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Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Australian Pelican in breeding plumage (Photo: Rebecca Citroni)

## Description

Pelicans are unmistakable – large birds with a massive bill, long neck and an otherwise horizontal profile. In flight they are majestic – moving seemingly effortlessly and sometimes soaring to considerable height. Large white wing patches are a distinct feature of a pelican in flight.

Males and females look similar although the males are slightly larger. In non-breeding plumage both sexes have whitish bare skin around the eye, pale-pink gular pouch and a yellow tip (hook) on the bill. In the breeding season the eye ring becomes yellow, the bill hook turns yellow-orange and the gular pouch becomes bright pink. They also develop long feathers on their nape, which form a tuft.

Juveniles have duller plumage; dusky brown where adults are black and dirty cream where adults are white. As young birds mature their plumage becomes progressively adult-like.

Pelicans are a gregarious species and it is quite common to see them together in large numbers. They are known to feed cooperatively – herding a school of fish into shallow water before engulfing them with their large bills. The gular pouch acts as a sieve, allowing water to drain away.

The main diet is fish but they opportunistically eat arthropods, crustaceans, birds and even small mammals.

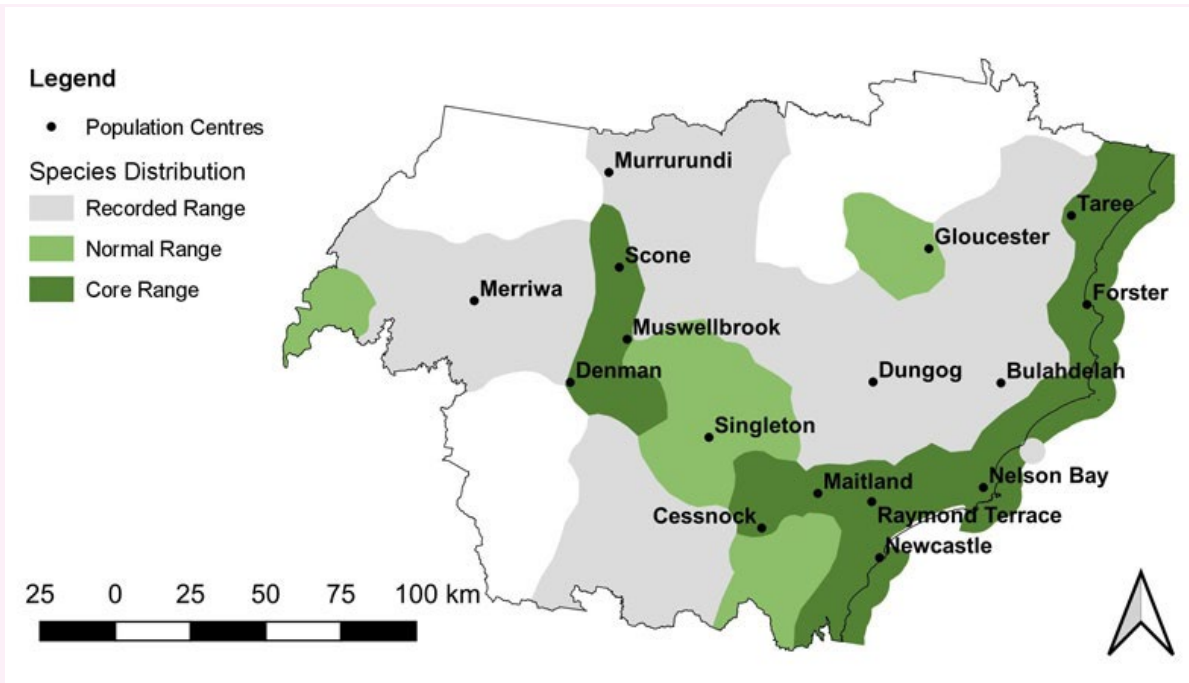


Pelicans in flight (Photo: Ray Burton)

### Regional Status

The Australian Pelican is a common bird wherever there are large bodies of water that can provide a bountiful source of fish. It is very common in estuaries and coastal lakes of our region, but also is regularly found at large inland lakes and dams.

There is only one known breeding colony in the Hunter Region, which uses some islands within Wallis Lake.



Australian Pelican distribution map (prepared by Dan Williams)

## The Wallis Lake breeding colony

Pelicans mostly breed at lakes in inland Australia. Prior to the 1970s there were no known coastal colonies but after a massive breeding event in the 1970s there was a general movement towards the coast. There now are three NSW coastal breeding colonies including one at Wallis Lake near Forster. That colony formed in 1983 and has been in regular use ever since.

The Wallis Lake colony involves at least 100 pairs. Breeding takes place almost all year although the peak egg-laying period is August-September. Birds prefer to use a low-lying bare island (imaginatively called Pelican Island) but when water levels in the lake are too high and that island is flooded, they relocate to nearby Snake Island and build their nests on trampled vegetation amidst trees (see *The Whistler* 2012).



A chick at the Snake Island colony in Wallis Island (Photo: Alan Stuart)

## About the name

### Australian Pelican

The distribution for this bird was considered to be limited to Australia (more recently there are some records from New Guinea). The term “pelican” derives from the scientific name.

### *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

The Greeks named the European member of the genus, now known as the Dalmatian Pelican, as *pelekan* (also *pelekanos*). The species name is from the Latin *conspicio* “to look at carefully”. Somewhat bizarrely, that alludes to the patches of bare skin around the eyes of this species, a feature which no other pelican species has. For the same reason, i.e. patches of bare skin, the bird at one time was called the Spectacled Pelican.



Non-breeding plumage birds (Photo: Jim Smart)

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