

Black Swan

Cygnus atratus

#9 SEPTEMBER 2025



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A close-up of the head of an adult Black Swan (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

General Comments

Black Swans are unmistakable – large birds with a long neck and bright red bill (which is tipped white) and a red or pink iris, and with all-black plumage except for prominent white primaries, outer secondaries and primary coverts. There is no sexual dimorphism in plumage, but males are significantly larger than female. Both sexes incubate.

Cygnets are downy grey, with a black bill; they fledge at about 24 weeks. Juveniles have dull grey feathers, which progressively darken to black until they reach full adult plumage at around three years.

After their breeding season, Black Swans undergo a lengthy moult, of up to a month in duration. During that time they cannot fly, and so they take refuge on large bodies of water, which allows them to paddle a long way from danger when necessary. Usually, large groups of swans mass together during the moulting period.

Black Swans are almost entirely herbivorous, feeding mainly on aquatic plants but sometimes on pasture. Insects and molluscs are occasionally ingested, probably by accident. Adults in suitable habitat are sedentary, but young birds are known to disperse over long distances as do adults when local conditions become unfavourable.

The Black Swan has a limited immune response (unlike, for example, Mallards and Mute Swans), making it highly susceptible to infectious diseases particularly those from which Australia has been largely shielded. The consequences of avian flu arriving in Australia may be severe for Black Swans.

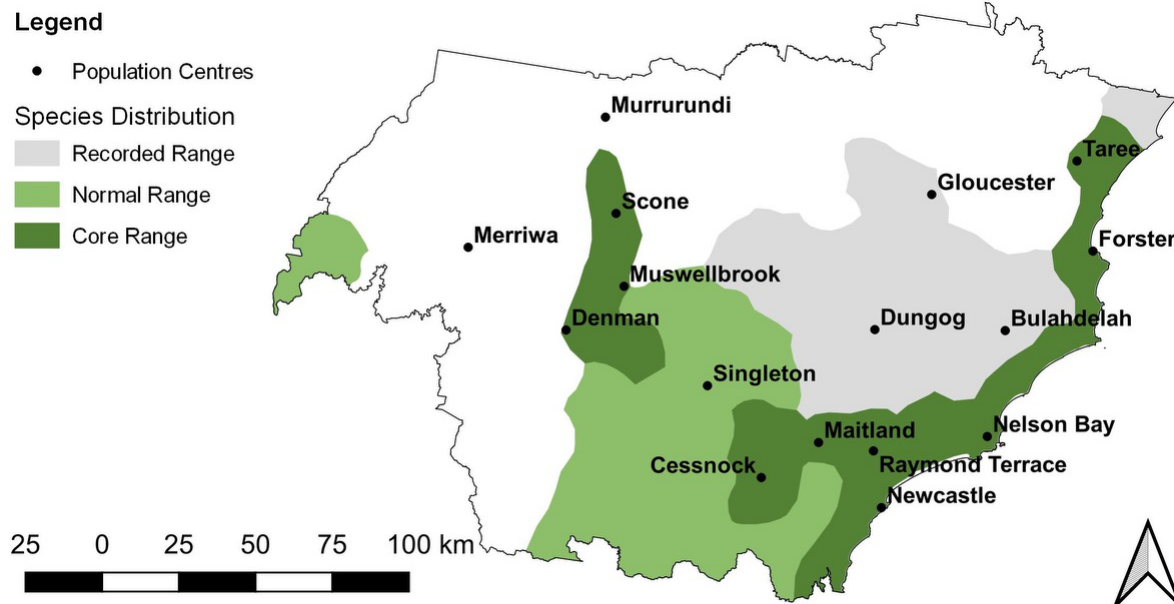


An adult Black Swan in flight (photo: Jim Thomson)

Regional Status

Black Swans are breeding residents in the Hunter Region. Their strongholds are the region's coastal lakes and estuaries but they can also appear at any sizable inland waterbody that has enough aquatic vegetation available

(including sometimes at dams near Ulan, as the map shows).



Distribution of the Black Swan in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Not an Australian endemic

Black Swans were deliberately introduced into New Zealand in the 1860s although it is thought that some birds may also have arrived naturally from Australia at around that time. The introduction was successful, such that by the 1960s the New Zealand population was estimated at 100,000 birds. A major storm in 1968 killed many birds and eutrophication of some important wetlands has also had an impact, but the population is still estimated to be about 50,000 birds. Black Swans are also recorded in New Guinea sometimes, as vagrants – despite their being rarely recorded in Cape York or Arnhem Land.

About the name

Black Swan

The word *swan* has been around for a very long time, as the Old English term for the northern hemisphere Mute Swan. Our swan is black – it is the only all-black swan of the world's seven swan species.

Cygnus atratus

Cygnus comes from the Greek word *kuknos*, swan, via the Latin *cycnus*. The Latin word *atratus* means “clothed in black (as in someone in mourning) – a reference to the bird's plumage.



A pair of Black Swans with two cygnets (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhurst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London.

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