

Movements of an immature Black-necked Stork taken into care and later released

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In 2017 a pair of Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* nested on wetlands at Tomago, NSW. A single chick which fledged on 7 August was first seen in the nest in May. The fledgling remained in the vicinity of the nest for over a week with its parents feeding it several times a day. This is the first confirmed, successful breeding event south of Bulahdelah, NSW (Lindsey 2019). An immature bird, presumably the fledgling, was subsequently seen with adult(s) foraging on wetlands at Tomago within Hunter Wetlands National Park (HWNP) in September 2017 and January 2018.

On 19 May 2018, N. Fraser, L. Huxtable and I were about to commence the regular, monthly waterbird survey at Tomago in HWNP when we came upon an immature stork just near the site known as Smart Gates. The bird was so ill and emaciated that we were able to catch it easily. We did this by slowly approaching and when close enough, threw a towel over its head and shoulders. It was weak, sitting on its hocks and its plumage was dirty and uncared for. It partially extended its wings but did not put up any real struggle. L. Huxtable nursed it during the fifty-minute drive to Sugarloaf Animal Hospital at West Wallsend.

On arrival at hospital the bird weighed only 2.7 kg, a little more than half of the expected weight of a bird of its size. Examination revealed that it was not injured and subsequent tests found that it was suffering from starvation. After a week in the care of Sugarloaf Animal Hospital it recovered to a point where it could stand alone and would show some aggression when approached.

It was then sent to Native Animal Trust Fund carer, A. Williams, where it remained for the next two months in a large, outdoor aviary. Each day it was eating a kilo of fish and/or prawns and squid thrown into a dish of water from a distance to avoid its perceiving humans as a food source. It was also hunting and catching insects of its own accord. By 4 June it had put on 500 gm and on 22

June it weighed 3.85 kg (A. Williams pers. comm.). I arranged to have the stork banded whilst it was in captivity so that it could be identified post release. This was done on 21 June by Dr Greg Clancy who placed a blue band on its left tibia and a yellow band on its right tibia (see **Figure 1**). On 25 July, weighing 4 kg (A. Williams pers. comm.), it was released on Hexham Swamp, near Newcastle, NSW, where it remained for the rest of that day and all the following day. It did not stay in the open water area, but moved and stood in reed beds where it was less obvious. From time to time it seemed to be pecking at the ground but was not seen to swallow any items of food. There were no reports of it fishing in open water and it was not seen on Hexham Swamp after 28 July.

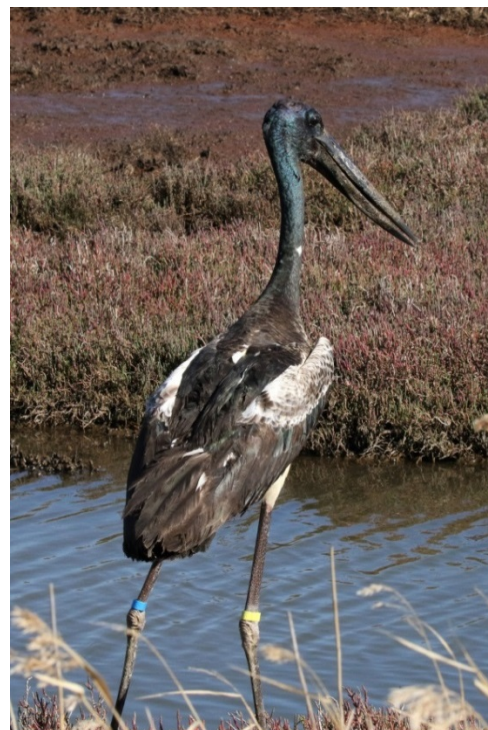


Figure 1. Colour-banded Black-necked Stork.

It is believed that YellowBlue, as this young stork has been named, is a 2017 Tomago fledgling which hatched in May of that year (Lindsey 2019).

YellowBlue was estimated to be around 12 months old when taken into care; its plumage progression was less advanced than that of a known 14-month-old bird from Harwood on the north coast (G. Clancy pers. comm.). This, coupled with its having been found only 2 km from the nest site and 2 km from where the Tomago 2017 fledgling was twice seen foraging with adults in late 2017 and early 2018, suggests that YellowBlue is the same bird.

The first sighting post the Hexham release was on 5 August at 10.40 am when V. Stevens saw it on Horizons Golf Course, Salamander Bay. On the same day, two pictures of an immature stork, one showing it standing on a footpath and the other flying over the roof of a house, were posted on Facebook on the Tea Gardens Hawks Nest Community Noticeboard (TGHNCN). The images are not sharp and the blue band is not visible but the yellow band is present. J. Connors and L. Wooding spent the next few days searching the shores of Port Stephens but failed to find it.

An image posted on 26 August on TGHNCN showed it in a backyard at Myall Quays, just north of Tea Gardens, with the comment that it had been “in the area for over a week before flying to the other side of the river (Myall River) for a few days”. Further comment was that “it appeared not to be able to self-feed”.

Two images clearly showing the bands were posted on 3 September, the bird having flown into the photographer’s backyard. J. Connors continued to search for the stork and found it again at 8.30 am on 13 September at Myall Quays. The area is adjacent to the Myall River. When it was found it was sitting on its hocks and he was able to get as close as 2 m. This lack of fear was probably due to its being hand-fed mince by the resident into whose backyard the bird had flown. John commented that its droppings were extremely runny and he expressed his reservations about its being encouraged to associate humans with food (J. Connors pers. comm.).

On 19 September an image was again posted on TGHNCN with the request not to feed it anything but raw fish and preferably not to feed it at all. The bird looked well with its feathers in place, clean and not skinny. Another person commented that they had been lucky enough to see it “fishing their pond”. On 21 September, N. Fraser searched for it around the Tea Gardens area without success.

The next reported sighting was by D. Bertram who photographed it on 19 October again at Myall

Quays. A. Stuart and I drove there on 20 October and we saw the bird in the same spot at about 12.30 pm in warm humid conditions. It was sitting on its hocks with bill open. It seemed wary and walked slowly off as we tentatively approached. This behaviour was contrary to earlier reports of its being easily approached and even hand-fed. We watched it for perhaps ten minutes before it flew. As we were leaving at 2.15 pm we found it again a short distance away, sitting on its hocks near a different pond. Local resident, B. Saillard, with an excellent view of the site, told us that she had seen the bird many times and that it often came there to drink from the freshwater pond. Most of the ponds in the area are saltwater.

YellowBlue was seen foraging once in November and twice in December around Myall Quays/Tea Gardens, the last time being on 30 December 2018. Then on 6 January 2019 at 9.00 am, N. McNaughton saw it on Ash Island on Swan Pond where it walked south along the eastern shore before flying off. I rang B. Saillard to tell her that it had flown “home” to the Hunter Estuary. N. McNaughton and I searched Ash Island for over an hour and then I drove over to Hexham Swamp but failed to locate it. We did not find it because, much to our amazement, it had returned to Myall Quays that very same day. B. Saillard rang me at 3.15 pm to say she was watching it at its usual place around the ponds. At the time of writing, April 2019, the bird continues to live and forage in the Tea Gardens/Myall Quays area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks to M. Simpson and staff of Sugarloaf Animal Hospital; without their intensive care and treatment, the bird would have died. Thanks to A. Williams of Native Animal Trust for rehabilitating the bird over two months and thanks to HBOC members for financially supporting its food requirements. We are grateful to Dr Greg Clancy for travelling to the Hunter to band the bird. The majority of sightings were reported by local resident, B. Saillard and HBOC member, J. Connors. Their efforts have contributed to overall knowledge of this species. Very little is known about its post-fledging movements. Thanks to other contributors V. Stevens, N. McNaughton, D. Bertram, L. Wooding, N. Fraser and L. Parashou.

REFERENCE

Lindsey, A. (2019). Observations of Black-necked Stork breeding in the Hunter Estuary at Tomago, NSW. Manuscript submitted for publication.