

MARCH 2020 #3

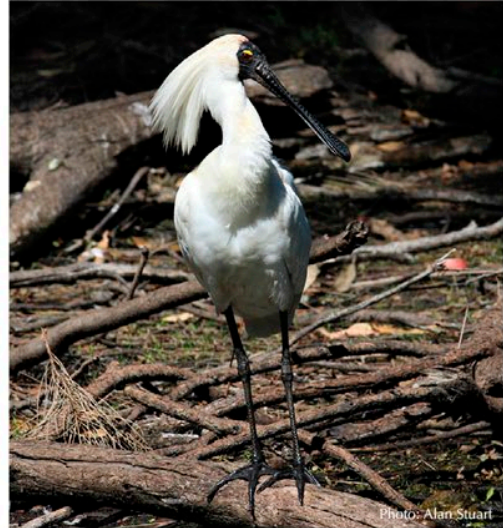
## Featured Bird Series

### Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*

## Description

A large (75-80 cm) white bird with long black legs and a distinctive black spoon-shaped bill. Adults have a small red mark on their forehead and a rich yellow mark above each eye; immature birds lack these features. In the breeding season, which occurs in spring in our region, adults also develop conspicuous white head plumes and the breast becomes a light buff colour.

Males are slightly larger than females but this is not easy to pick in the field. Juvenile birds have a somewhat shorter bill and the tips of their flight feathers are black. Also, their iris is dark brown whereas for adults it is red-brown.



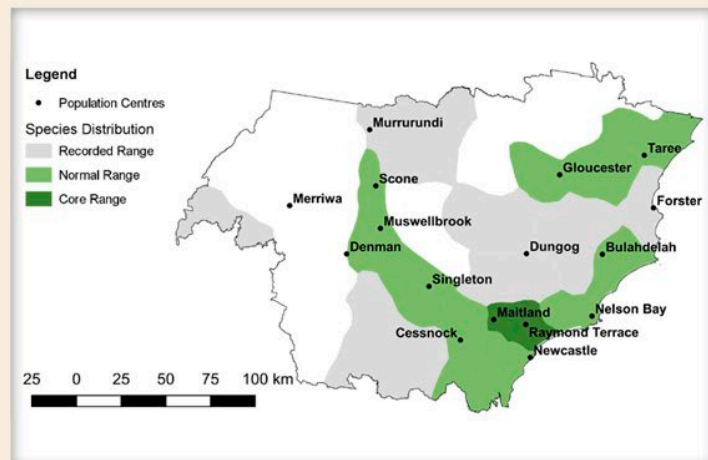
Royal Spoonbill in breeding plumage (note red mark on forehead)

## Regional Status

Although nomadic (as with most waterbirds) the Royal Spoonbill is a breeding resident of our region. It is found at any medium to large wetlands but particularly in the Hunter and Manning valleys and at coastal or near-coastal locations (see distribution map). Spoonbills at farm dams are more likely to be its close cousin, the slightly larger Yellow-billed Spoonbill.

There are many breeding records, some involving single pairs but more often as small colonies (of ten pairs or less) in trees near freshwater wetlands. Both sexes incubate.

The long-term trend suggests a stable population.



Distribution of the Royal Spoonbill in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams).



Photo: Alwyn Simple

Immature Royal Spoonbill and a bird in non-breeding plumage

## Sub-species

No sub-species are recognised. Of the six spoonbill species in the world, four species including the Royal Spoonbill are very similar in appearance and behaviour and they constitute what is called a superclade. The other three species are the African and European spoonbills and the endangered Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* found in parts of eastern Asia.



Photo: Di Hatfield

Royal Spoonbill with juvenile on left (note the black on the flight feathers)

## About the name

### Royal Spoonbill

Spoonbill was introduced as a name in 1678 by John Ray, a British naturalist who translated an ornithological work originally written in Latin. The term Royal appears to have been bestowed by Gould in 1838, perhaps to reflect the bird's natty breeding plumage.

### *Platalea regia*

The first mention of *platalea*, a Latin word meaning spoonbill, was by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum* in 45 BC. The term *regius/regia* means "royal" in Latin. It is unclear which specific name came first, the English name or the scientific name.

Design: Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters Text by Alan Stuart based on information sourced from:  
• HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series; • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds); • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series);  
• Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club



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