

New Australian White Ibis rookery at Salamander Bay

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Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis moluccus* have established a new rookery at Salamander Waters Estate, Salamander Bay, NSW (32°43'33.48"S, 152°04'48.65"E). The new location is approximately one kilometre from a long-established colony in the Wanda Wetlands (32°43'50.85"S, 152°04'48.65"E). Whether the new colony is the result of over-population at the Wanda Wetlands site or an influx of new "urban ibis" to the area is unknown. Accurate assessment of both sites is hampered by difficult access and restricted visibility.

The Wanda Wetlands site was colonized in the early 90s. The location, which is roughly equidistant (~1km) from two sports grounds, the Port Stephens Estuary and the Salamander waste disposal and recycling facilities, provides easy access to terrestrial and aquatic dietary preferences, with the added opportunity to forage among a constant source of urban waste. Irregular site checks since 2007 estimate the population of

the Wanda Wetlands colony at around 50 birds and relatively stable in numbers.

The new rookery is located in the first of two catchment ponds designed to drain the Salamander Sports Complex (**Figure 1**), which is built on saltmarsh reclaimed by infill generated by the neighbouring waste disposal facility. The site is part of a BirdLife Australia atlassing route (Site ID 267484-5; Fixed Route 1-2hrs). Australian White Ibis have been recorded on 92% of the monthly bird surveys conducted since January 2007 (**Figure 2**). Surveys between 2007 and 2009 recorded the presence of one to five ibis foraging in the pond, but from July 2009 numbers have slowly increased, although no evidence of colonization was observed. Surveys in February and March 2010 recorded consecutive high counts of 123 and 56 ibis foraging on the waste heaps, playing fields and ponds within the count area. It's possible that these anomalies may represent birds gathering in response to the end of the Millennium Drought.



Figure 1 – Salamander Sports Complex with two catchment ponds to the east (New colony) and south (2nd Pond)

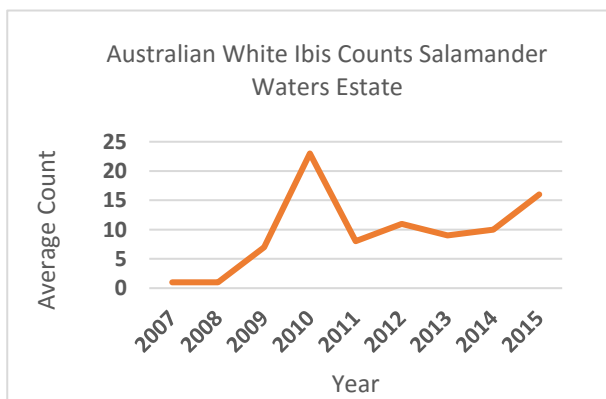


Figure 2 – Annual average counts of Australian White Ibis at Salamander Waters Estate

Colonization activity at the new site was first noted in early July 2015 when approximately 20 birds occupied a group of flooded *Melaleuca quinquenervia* and began noisily constructing nests.

In November 2015, nine juveniles were seen feeding on some small islands adjacent to the rookery. One week later 14 juveniles were observed feeding around the pond, playing fields and waste heaps.

Establishment of the new colony was undeterred by the presence of heavy-duty, earth-moving equipment clearing and landscaping a large area adjacent to the rookery in preparation for a new housing subdivision. It's possible that the

increased noise and activity were acceptable to the ibis and other species frequenting the area, because they have adapted to similar, ongoing disturbance by heavy-duty equipment at the nearby waste disposal and recycling sites. During the day there is a constant flow of both light and heavy vehicles along a road bordering the site. Sporting events generate a significant increase in both noise and traffic.

Prior to the ibis colonisation event, Royal Spoonbills *Platalea regia* and Nankeen Night-Herons *Nycticorax caledonicus* roosted in the same location. There are no site breeding records for either species, but lone juvenile night herons and spoonbills have been seen on occasion (**Figure 3**).

Royal Spoonbills continue to co-habit with the ibis, but night-herons are currently scarce. During the December 2015 atlas survey one Nankeen Night-Heron was found at the second pond, located approximately 300m southwest of the new ibis colony.



Figure 3 – Royal Spoonbill foraging with Australian White Ibis at Salamander Waters

Development of the planned housing estate may have a bearing on the colony's future. Objections to noise, odour and scavenging may be raised by new residents, particularly if the colony expands. Currently, both catchment ponds, which are connected by a narrow canal, have aeration systems. Whether these systems have the capacity to cope with the inevitable increase in pond eutrophication is not known.

REFERENCE

Martin, J., French, K. and Major, R. (2010). Population and breeding trends of an urban coloniser: the Australian White Ibis. *Wildlife Research* 37(3): 230-239.