

White-faced Herons fledge two broods in one season

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During October-November 2010 a pair of White-faced Herons *Egretta novaehollandiae* built a nest in an ironbark in my neighbour's garden on the northern edge of Gloucester, New South Wales (32° 00' 04" S 151° 57' 59" E) in good view from my back deck, so I was able to follow progress. However, after hatching two chicks in January 2011, one of the herons went missing and the remaining parent deserted, with the nest empty by 22nd January. Possibly one parent is not sufficient to feed two chicks.

In October 2011 I noted the presence of White-faced Herons nearby, but being away for much of that month, it was not until 3rd November that I could confirm nesting activity. On that date I saw a pair in the same tree on the same horizontal forked branch as last season's nest. This could be the surviving bird from the previous nesting attempt with a new partner. One heron was sitting tight on the rebuilt nest and the other attending and bringing more twigs. I was again away until 16th December and on return found the herons still present with one sitting tight during the day. The view of the nest from my back deck this year was

hidden by regrowth, and observation was only possible from below, making it difficult to check progress. First sighting of chicks was on 11th January 2012 when two could be seen over the nest edge. On the 14th I watched them being fed, with the larger chick scramble-flying from the nest to the next tree to meet the parent. They fledged on the 23rd or 24th January 2012.

On 4th February a heron was back standing on the nest rearranging twigs, and on the 6th was observed sitting tight in high wind and rain, presumably on eggs. On the 7th one was observed standing on the nest, then sitting. On the 11th the presumed male arrived with a twig, making soft *graaw graaw* calls (Marchant & Higgins 1990) before pressing the twig into the nest; the female stood and moved her bill around in the nest, maybe rearranging eggs. On the 23rd one heron was seen standing on the nest after rain at 5.15pm, with no indication of chicks being present.

Increased activity at the nest on 1st March suggested eggs had hatched. However, the herons were very discreet attending the chicks and it was

not until 7th March that I saw two heads peering over the edge. By the 11th both adults were leaving the chicks alone or standing nearby and I could hear soft begging calls when an adult returned to the nest. By the 14th they were being left for long periods and begging calls were considerably louder. On 20th March an Australian Magpie *Cracticus tibicen* flew at the chicks aggressively as they stood beside the nest, making them duck, but did not persist in its attack, perching nearby for a minute. On 12th April both chicks were standing with necks retracted, near the nest, one being slightly larger than the other. During this time I only saw adults fly in to feed late in the afternoon, but I presume they also fed in the early morning before observations commenced. On arrival the adults made low *graaw* calls. On 17th April only one chick was present, perched away from the nest, and on the 18th it too was gone.

The breeding behaviour of the White-faced Heron is little known and there are no detailed studies (Marchant & Higgins 1990). The incubation and nestling periods are thought to be about 24 and 43 days respectively, with the fledged young noted in the vicinity of the nest for a further 18 days (Marchant & Higgins 1990).

The chronology of events described above is consistent with two broods of White-faced Heron being successfully fledged from the same nest

during the 2011-2012 breeding season. Based on a requirement of 67 days for the incubation and nestling periods, the second clutch would have been completed on 10th February, 17 or 18 days after the first brood fledged.

This is the first documented instance of two broods of White-faced Heron being successfully fledged from the same nest in one season, although it has been suspected that this may occur (Marchant & Higgins 1990). It is assumed that the same pair was involved in both broods. The 2011-2012 breeding season was exceptionally wet, being the second of two successive years of La Niña conditions, which may have allowed breeding to occur over an extended period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mike Newman and Max Maddock for encouragement and assistance in publishing this note.

REFERENCE

Marchant, S. and Higgins, P.J. (Eds) (1990). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds Volume 1: Ratites to Ducks'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne)