

# White-faced Heron

*Egretta novaehollandiae*

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Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

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Adult White-faced Heron in breeding plumage (photo: Alan Stuart)

## Description

This is a distinctive grey bird with a white face and yellow legs (occasionally reddish), often seen foraging in shallow wetlands (both fresh and saline) and tidal flats, and also seen regularly in paddocks, ovals etc quite some distance away from water. Males and females appear identical and there are no subspecies. Adults in breeding plumage develop prominent long grey plumes on their mantle and scapulars, and shorter plumes at the base of their foreneck. In non-breeding plumage the plumes are sparser and less obvious. Juvenile birds have only a small area of white on their face, which does not extend beyond the eye.



Adult in non-breeding plumage displacing an immature White-faced Heron (photo: Steve Merrett)

## Regional Status

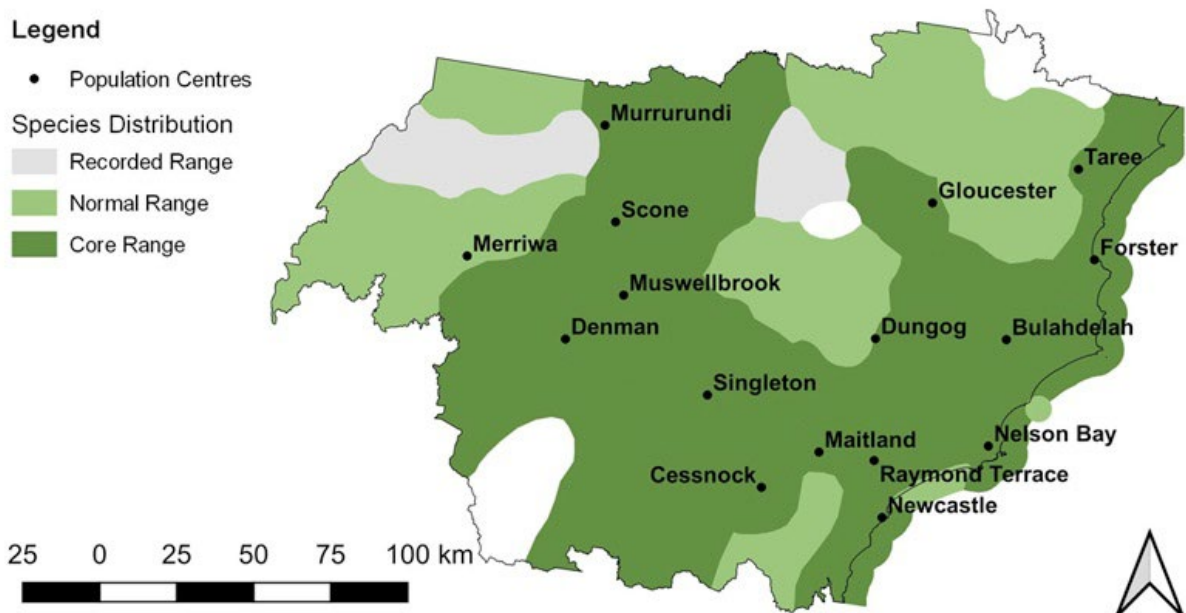
The White-faced Heron is a common breeding resident of our region. It is typical to find up to 20 birds around larger wetlands, while 50-100 birds often are recorded in the Hunter Estuary during monthly surveys.

### Legend

- Population Centres

### Species Distribution

- Recorded Range
- Normal Range
- Core Range



Distribution map for White-faced Heron (map prepared by Dan Williams)

## Distribution outside of Australia

In the early days of European settlement, the species was generally considered to be an Australian endemic but it had vagrant status in New Zealand, where there were 23 records during 1868-1905. Over 1906-1937 there were no NZ records, and then there were occasional ones for several years. The first confirmed breeding record in NZ was in 1941. Spread and population increase in NZ was slow in the 1940s, accelerated in the 1950s and became rapid by the early 1960s.

White-faced Heron has also been recorded as vagrant on many Pacific Ocean islands (and occasionally in the Cocos-Keeling island group in the Indian Ocean). There even are some records from Macquarie Island.



Adult White-faced Heron in breeding plumage – note the reddish legs of this bird (photo: Marg Clarke)

## About the name

### White-faced Heron

White-faced is descriptive. The word “heron” comes from the French word *hayroun* which apparently is onomatopoeic for the grunts made by the Grey Heron. The classification of birds as herons or egrets is somewhat arbitrary, but herons which have white plumage tend to be called egrets and the rest of them mostly are called herons.

*Egretta novaehollandiae*

The genus comes from Latinisation of the word “egret” – which in essence means “little heron” (the Old Provençal word for “heron” was *aigron*, which eventually morphed into “egret”). The species name is from the Modern Latin *Nova Hollandia*, an early name for Australia. However, as noted above, our bird is no longer restricted to Australia.



Immature White-faced Heron – note the small area of white on its face and absence of plumed feathers (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 HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • 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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