

Spoonbills on the lake

February 2005

On a recent Saturday morning, members of the Hamilton Field Naturalists' Club were thrilled to see spoonbills on Lake Linlithgow. The Club visits the Lake every February to conduct an early morning count of waterbirds. This census has been running for eighteen years, but this is the first year we have seen spoonbills.

Spoonbills are handsome white birds, about 80 centimetres tall, with long, spoon-shaped bills. The birds we saw were in two groups feeding in shallow water. They feed by swinging their bills sideways through the mud in the shallows and filtering out any small animals they come across. Some were Yellow-billed Spoonbills and eight were the less common Royal Spoonbills: a species which has black legs and bill and is more often found closer to the coast. Some of these were in breeding plumage, with long graceful head plumes.

This year we counted only 70 swans, compared to 2700 last year. This is typical of how the number and mix of species vary from year to year. In the recent drought years, when the Lake was dry, we often recorded only a few dozen water birds representing only a handful of species. This year the water is covering a large area but it is not deep enough to support diving birds such as grebes or coots, and we saw none of these. On the other hand, there were large numbers of wading birds such as Masked Lapwings and a few Red-necked Stints.

Another highlight this year was a pair of Brolgas, which we spotted on the edge of Harnath Swamp near the lake. The numbers of these majestic birds are down to a few hundred in this part of Australia, and they may be facing serious decline. This is because of the destruction of many of the areas where they used to breed, and because foxes take their eggs and nestlings.

We also counted 18 birds of prey, representing 6 species. These included a pair of Whistling Kites that were perching on the cypresses near the boat ramp.

Photos:

Surveying waterbirds at Lake Linlithgow – Rod Bird, DaveMunro, Glenys Cayley (obscured), Dianne Luhrs & Janeen Samuel

Brolgas on a nearby wetland – a wary pair.

Royal & Yellow-billed Spoonbills on Linlithgow

