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WHERE TO WATCH WATERBIRDS ON THE VASSE-WONNERUP WETLANDS

The Birdlife

The Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands of Busselton, Western Australia, support a great abundance and variety of waterbirds. Surveys have revealed more than thirty thousand birds of sixty species inhabiting the wetlands each year. The total number of species recorded in all surveys to date is now almost 90. Waterbirds are present in greatest numbers during the hot, dry months of summer and early autumn, when both 'over-wintering' transequatorial migrants and many resident birds gather to feed on abundant plant and animal life that becomes more accessible as nutrient-rich waters recede. Several species - notably the Black Swan - also breed on and around Vasse-Wonnerup. At the peak of breeding, during spring, thousands of swans and cygnets may at times be seen spread out across the wetlands' shallow expanses.

Most of the Vasse-Wonnerup wetland system is listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the 'Ramsar' Convention on Wetlands. Australia is a Contracting Party (together with 159 other nations) to this global wetlands treaty and has special obligations to conserve its listed sites and to wisely manage wetlands generally.

Despite the significance of the site and its close proximity to Busselton, many of Vasse-Wonnerup's waterbirds are not commonly observed by the public at large. This is due, in part, to a scarcity of readily available information about where and when to see them.

The purpose of this information sheet, therefore, is to provide advice on where, when and how to see the waterbirds of Vasse-Wonnerup.

For a list of 86 native waterbird species recorded to date, readers are referred to the companion information sheet – 'A List of the Waterbirds of the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands'.

Where and When to See Waterbirds

The following sites are recommended as they are accessible to the public and cover a wide range of waterbird species and, at the right time of the year, large concentrations. The sites are listed in sequence, following a roughly circular route (by car or other transport) commencing in central Busselton. Access maps are provided. Use of a Busselton Street Guide is also recommended. These may be obtained from the Busselton Tourist Bureau, some fuel stations, newsagents and elsewhere.

It is recommended that at least 30 minutes be spent at each site in order to be confident of seeing all, or at least most (some secretive species can be hard to spot) of the birds present, as well as signs of breeding and a range of other behaviours. For maximum enjoyment it is suggested that only 1-2 sites be visited per day; thus it may take several weeks or months to visit all 12 locations listed. If time in the district is limited, a selection of the following sites - 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 (see below) - is recommended. Note that bird use of sites is seasonal; check descriptions below for optimal months.

While some species of waterbirds, notably some ducks, coots and gulls, habituate to some forms of disturbance, many species do not. In general the waterbirds of Vasse-Wonnerup are more sensitive to disturbance than those of other wetlands. Special care should be taken, therefore, to avoid disturbing birds when approaching them, particularly during summer and autumn when large numbers congregate on receding waters.

1. *Vasse River (Busselton Museum)*

Park at the Busselton Museum (Peel Terrace) and walk through the museum to the rotunda at the edge of the river. Likely species include ducks, cormorants, heron, egret, swamphen, moorhen, coot and gull. An all year site, accessible when the Museum is open (currently 10am-4pm every day, except Tuesdays, Christmas Day and Good Friday). A museum entry fee (per head) is payable.

2. *Lower Vasse River Wetlands (Pioneer Cove).*

Turn off Peel Tce into Pioneer Cove and drive to the first bend. Park and walk 80 m along a concrete footpath to the edge of the river. This is a waterbird roosting and loafing area with permanent water. Likely species include ducks, cormorants and spoonbill. Approach cautiously to avoid disturbing the birds. An all year site. Taylor Close is nearby and also has a right-of-way to the wetlands. A bird hide and a walk trail connecting this site to the Busselton Museum are planned.

3. *Lower Vasse River Wetlands and Vasse Estuary (Ford Road).*

Turn south at end of Peel Tce (where it becomes Layman Rd) onto Ford Rd (currently a track) and drive 0.2 km to the Vasse River (don't attempt to cross the river by vehicle). Likely species include ducks, swan, heron, egret, ibises, spoonbill, harrier, swampheaven, moorhen, waders, chat and warbler. Usually dry in autumn.

4. *Vasse floodplain wetland (Layman Road)*

This is a small seasonal wetland with paperbark (*Melaleuca*) trees and rushes in a paddock on the south side of Layman Rd, 100 m east of junction with Avocet Boulevard. View without entering the paddock. August-November recommended to see nesting ducks, swan, grebe, moorhen, coot. Other species likely to be seen are cormorants, heron, egret, ibises and spoonbill. This is one of only two wetlands of its type on the Vasse-Wonnerup floodplain.

5. *Vasse estuary (Estuary View Drive)*

At Wonnerup Townsite, turn off Layman Rd into McCormack Rd, then left into Estuary View Dve. Walk across grassed area to edge of estuary. Likely species are ducks, swan, darter, cormorants, heron, osprey and stilt. When water level is low in summer-autumn, note the many 1-3 m diameter 'islands' - actually colonies of polychaete tube worms (Family Serpulidae). An all year site, with birds most abundant in summer.

6. *Vasse estuary floodgates (Layman Road)*

1.7 km east of McCormack Rd (Wonnerup Townsite), turn into carpark on beach side of Layman Rd. Walk across road to the floodgates. These were first built in 1908 (and replaced in 2004) to prevent seawater from entering the estuary and destroying summer pastures. The floodgates also reduce the risk of flooding of Busselton during storm surges and following heavy rains. Likely species include ducks, cormorants, darter, heron and egret. An all year site particularly good for photographing and sketching individual birds close-up.

7. *Vasse estuary (Webster Road)*

0.25 km after crossing the Layman Road bridge over Wonnerup Inlet, turn right into Lockville Rd. Then turn right into Ballarat Rd and (eventually) left into Webster Rd. Drive to the end of the road, near the edge of the estuary. Likely species include ducks, swan, grebe, cormorants, pelican, heron, egret, spoonbill and coot. An all year site.

8. *Wonnerup estuary floodgates (Forrest Beach Road)*

0.25 km after crossing the Layman Road bridge over Wonnerup Inlet, turn left into Forrest Beach Rd (instead of right into Lockville Rd). Continue 0.6 km to the Wonnerup estuary floodgates - also first built in the late 1920s to protect summer pasture from sea water intrusion. Likely species include ducks, pelican, cormorants, egret, heron, ibises, sandpiper and stilt. An all year site; most attractive at dusk and dawn.

9. *Wonnerup estuary (Forrest Beach Road)*

2.7 km north-east along Forrest Beach Rd from Wonnerup estuary floodgates and near a cluster of buildings is the inconspicuous entrance to a straight, 15 m wide, 250m long, public laneway (fenced and gated but undeveloped; grass usually long) leading to the edge of Wonnerup estuary. Likely bird species are ducks, cormorants, pelican, heron, egret, ibises, waders, gull, terns and chat. Swans and cygnets most numerous August-November. Other species abundant during summer. Usually dry in autumn, but check anyway.

10. *Malbup Creek bird hide (Layman Road)*

On Layman Rd, 0.25 km south of the Wonnerup House entrance and almost directly opposite the Layman Picnic Area, turn right into the car park for the Possum Trail and Waterbirds Walk. Park and walk to the interpretive shelter and then 400m along a crushed limestone path and raised boardwalk to the Malbup Bird Hide at the edge of Malbup Creek. At high water levels this creek connects the Vasse and Wonnerup estuaries. Likely species are ducks, swan, cormorants, heron, egret, ibis, spoonbill and stilt. Most birds in summer.

11. *Vasse estuary (Rushleigh Road)*

Turn off Tuart Drive into Rushleigh Rd 1.6km towards Busselton from the Laymen Rd intersection. Follow the road (partly sealed) for 0.6km and then turn right into a straight, 20m wide, 350m long, public road / laneway leading to the edge of Vasse estuary. Likely species include swan, grebe, ducks, heron, stilt and avocet. Swans and cygnets most numerous August-November. Other species may be abundant November-March.

12. *Vasse estuary (Tall Tree Crescent)*

Turn off Tuart Drive into Tall Tree Cres 2.3 km towards Busselton from the Laymen Rd intersection. Drive 0.7 km along Tall Tree Cres to reach the entrance (on the left) to a 10m wide, 300m long, public laneway leading to the Vasse estuary and the eastern end of the Sabina Nature Reserve. Likely species include swan, ducks, heron, stilt and avocet. Swans and cygnets most numerous August-November. Other species may be abundant November-March.

There are also public laneways leading to the southern edge of the Vasse estuary from the junction of Inlet and Barracks Drives and from the end of Osprey Drive in the locality of Reinscourt. These provide opportunities to view waterbirds when water level are high in winter and spring however access may be difficult. They are therefore not currently recommended.

How to Watch Waterbirds

General guidance on birdwatching methods and equipment may be obtained from Slater's "Australian Birdwatcher's Notebook" (see reference list), from quality 'field guides' (to bird identification), from the WA Office of BirdLife Australia, Peregrine House, 167 Perry Lakes Dve, Floreat WA 6014. Ph (08) 9383 7749. Fax 9387 8412, and from the Department of Environment & Conservation, Busselton. The following suggestions relate specifically to birdwatching on Vasse-Wonnerup.

Binoculars or a 'spotting' telescope are essential for observing waterbirds. Binoculars with 8x or 10x magnification and front lens diameters of at least 30 mm (with 8x magnification) or 40 mm (with 10x magnification) are most suitable. A spotting scope with 20x magnification (some prefer without zoom) is recommended. A *sturdy* tripod is needed to minimise shake caused by wind.

Numerous field guides to the identification of Australian birds have been published and may be purchased from book stores in Busselton. A pocket notebook for recording observations in the field is recommended. Satellite images and aerial photographs are excellent aids to navigation when exploring wetlands on foot.

Personal Safety

Tiger snakes *Notechis scutatus* are common on and around the wetlands and their venom is deadly. Care should be taken to avoid close encounters as they are not always timid. Closed footwear and long trousers are recommended. It is also a wise precaution to carry a compression bandage on extended walks (to apply to bitten limb), to be familiar with first aid procedures for snake bite, to walk with a responsible companion and to carry a mobile phone.

Mosquitoes may be abundant on and near the wetlands. Precautions should be taken to avoid being bitten as mosquitoes transmit debilitating illnesses such as Ross River virus. Keep exposed skin to a minimum and consider using a personal mosquito repellent. Avoid times when mosquitoes are most active. Further advice on mosquitoes may be obtained from the City of Busselton, Shire of Capel and WA Health Department.

Potentially toxic algal blooms occur from time to time in parts of Vasse-Wonnerup and some muds may emit unpleasant and potentially toxic odours. Do not enter water or mud and avoid areas where smells seem potentially overpowering.

Further Reading

Jaensch, R, Vervest, R and Hewish, M (1988). *Waterbirds in nature reserves of south-western Australia 1981-1985: reserve accounts*. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Report 30. 290 pp.

Government of Western Australia (1990). *Wetlands nominated by the Government of Western Australia for inclusion on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, Ramsar Convention*. Nominating document prepared by Department of Conservation & Land Management, Perth. 43 pp. Includes Vasse-Wonnerup.

- Lane, J (1990). *Swamped with birds*. 'Landscape' 5(2), 17-22.
- Jaensch, R (1991). *Vasse-Wonnerup wetland system*. Pages 10-91 to 10-94 in *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia*. Australian Nature Conservation Agency, Canberra. The *Directory* is also accessible via the 'web'.
- Bamford, M & A (1995). *Waterbirds of the floodplains of the Vasse and Wonnerup estuaries; patterns of usage and the effect of disturbance*. Unpublished report to Department of Conservation & Land Management. 57 pp.
- Slater, P (1995). *Slater's Australian Birdwatcher's Notebook*. Landsdowne, Sydney.
- Lane, J (1997). *A list of the waterbirds of the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands*. Department of Environment & Conservation pamphlet. 2 pp. Revised in April 2010.
- Government of Western Australia (2000). *Wetlands nominated by the Government of Western Australia for inclusion on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, Ramsar Convention*. Nominating document prepared by Department of Conservation & Land Management, Perth. 48 pp. Includes extensions to Vasse-Wonnerup.
- Lane, J, Clarke, A, Pearson, G and Winchcombe, Y (2007). *Waterbirds of the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands in 1998-2000, including Ramsar status and comparisons with earlier data*. Department of Environment & Conservation report 51 pp.
- Lane, J. (2009). *Monitoring conservation values of a Ramsar wetland: Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands system, Busselton*. Department of Environment & Conservation, Science Division Information Sheet 2 / 2009.
- Lane, J. (2009). *Management of the Ramsar-listed Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands*. Department of Environment & Conservation, Science Division Information Sheet 28 / 2009.

Further information about the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands may be obtained from the WA Department of Environment & Conservation, 14 Queen Street, Busselton WA 6280. Ph (08) 9752 5555. Fax (08) 9752 1432. The Department's website is www.dec.wa.gov.au
