

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. Present numbers are uncertain, however surveys conducted during the mid 1980s 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 more than 80. 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 nearly 100 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 rapidly growing residential areas of Busselton - Vasse-Wonnerup’s birdlife is relatively little known to the general public. This is due, in large part, to a scarcity of readily available information about the birds and where to see them.

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

For a list of the 84 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 locations are recommended as they are accessible to the public and cover a range of waterbird species. They are listed in sequence, following a roughly circular route (by car or other transport) commencing in central Busselton. A road map covering the Busselton-Ludlow area is necessary and may be obtained from the Busselton Tourist Bureau, some petrol stations, newsagents and elsewhere.

It is recommended that at least 30 minutes be spent at each location 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 locations be visited per day; thus it may take several weeks or months to visit all 14 locations listed. If time in the district is limited, a selection of the following locations - 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12 (see below) - is recommended. Note that bird use of locations is seasonal; check descriptions below for optimal months. Locations 13 and 14 are for determined enthusiasts.

Once at the location, minimum walking distances (one way) vary from a few to 500 metres. In some places, having reached the water’s edge, it is possible to continue walking around the margins of the wetland system. This can be strenuous, as long grass and sedges, samphire, mud and varying depths of water may be encountered. However, it can also be very rewarding as most birds are usually found in least disturbed areas.

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 are congregated on receding waters.

1. Vasse River (Butter Factory Folk Museum)

Park at the Butter Factory Folk 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, gull. An all year site, accessible when the Museum is open (2-5pm every day except Tuesdays, Christmas Day and Good Friday). An entry fee (per head) is payable.

2. *Vasse River (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, spoonbill. Approach cautiously to avoid disturbing the birds. An all year site. Taylor Close is nearby and also has a right-of-way to an adjacent area of the river.
3. *Vasse River (Ford Road).*
Turn south at end of Peel Tce (where it becomes Layman Rd) onto Ford Rd (actually a sand 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, warbler. Should be 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. Park in the Boulevard and view on foot from Layman Road. August-November recommended to see nesting ducks, swan, grebe, moorhen, coot. Other species likely to be seen are cormorants, heron, egret, ibises, spoonbill. Usually dry in late summer and autumn. This is one of only two (and the best) of its type remaining 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, 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 built in the late 1920s to prevent seawater from entering the estuary and destroying summer pasture. The floodgates also reduce the risk of flooding of Busselton following heavy winter rains. Likely species include ducks, cormorants, darter, heron, 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 left into Webster Rd. Drive to the end of the road, at 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 built in the late 1920s to protect summer pasture from sea water intrusion. Likely species include ducks, pelican, cormorants, egret, heron, ibises, sandpiper, 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 20 m west of a "tunnel house") park car on verge and walk 250 m down a 15 m wide public laneway (fenced but undeveloped; grass usually long) to edge of Wonnerup estuary. Likely bird species are ducks, cormorants, pelican, heron, egret, ibises, waders, gull, terns, chat. Swans and cygnets most numerous August-November. Other species abundant during summer. Usually dry in autumn, but check anyway.
10. *Malbup Creek (Layman Road)*
Malbup Creek is a broad, shallow channel winding through farmland on either side of Layman Rd, 0.2 km towards the coast from Wonnerup House (historic site) entrance. It connects (via culverts under Layman Road) the Vasse and Wonnerup estuaries when the water level is high during winter and spring. Dries to pools, or completely, in summer-autumn. Likely species are swan, ducks, herons, ibises, stilt. Birds most abundant in summer. A further 0.4 km towards the coast the Creek winds close to Layman Rd, on the east side. This is also a good waterbird site.

11. *Malbup Creek (CALM bird hide off Layman Road)*

On Layman Rd, 0.2 km south of the Wonnerup House entrance, is the Layman Picnic Area. Park car here, cross to opposite side of road and pass through a pedestrian gate. Walk 500 m in a roughly NW direction, passing behind Warden's Residence and historic school site (and crossing a dilapidated post & wire fence) until the bird hide (timber with metal roof) is reached at the edge of Malbup Creek. Access is wet in winter-spring and may be more than 0.5 m deep at times. Likely species are ducks, swan, cormorants, heron, egret, ibis, spoonbill, stilt. Most birds in summer. The bird hide and screened access are not yet complete so approach cautiously to avoid disturbing birds.

12. *Vasse estuary (Tuart Forest National Park)*

On the north side of Tuart Drive (the Ludlow Tuart Forest Tourist Drive), 0.35 km towards Busselton from the Layman Rd turnoff (and 0.1 km west of the Abba River), is a gate (leave it as you find it) and a track leading into the tuart forest. Follow this track (usually 2 wheel drive, but take care of dry, loose sand) for 1.2 km through the forest (with glimpses of the Abba River on your right) until you are within 100 m of the estuary. Park and walk. Wet underfoot in winter-spring. Likely species include swan, grebe, ducks, heron, ibises. Swans and cygnets most numerous August-November. Other species should be abundant November-March.

13. *Vasse estuary (Sabina Nature Reserve - Inlet Drive)*

Turn off Tuart Drive into Inlet Dve (Locality of Pigeon Grove) 0.1 km before its junction (western) with Bussell Highway. Drive 0.5 km along Inlet Dve to its junction with Barracks Dve. Almost directly in front is an undeveloped, 20 m wide, public laneway leading 250 m to the paperbark-fringed shoreline of the estuary. Access is difficult due to long grass, tall rushes, mud, water and fence. The lower end is wet in winter-spring. Likely species are swan, ducks, heron, swamphen. Swans and cygnets are most numerous August-November. Other species should be abundant November-January.

14. *Vasse estuary (Sabina Nature Reserve - Osprey Drive)*

0.8 km west of where Tuart Dve joins Bussell Hwy, turn off the Hwy and into Osprey Dve. Drive 0.6 km to the end of Osprey Dve. Park and walk down 5 m wide public laneway 200 m to the paperbark-fringed shoreline of the estuary. The laneway has long grass and sedges and the lower end is wet in winter-spring. Likely species are swan, ducks, heron, spoonbill, waders. Swans and cygnets are numerous August-November. Other species should be abundant November-January.

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 Group of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Perry House, 71 Oceanic Drive, Floreat WA 6014. Ph (09) 383 7749. Fax 387 8412, and from the Department of Conservation and Land Management, 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 (not zoom) is recommended. A *sturdy* tripod is needed to minimise shake caused by wind.

Several field guides to the identification of Australian birds have been published and may be purchased from good book stores in Busselton. A pocket notebook for recording observations in the field is recommended. Aerial photographs are not readily available (except from the Department of Land Administration, Midland) but are excellent for extensive exploration of wetlands on foot.

Shoes (in summer-autumn) or gum boots (winter-spring) are adequate for most sites. Thigh boots (gum boots extended to the upper thigh and attached to a waist belt) are recommended for the enthusiast as they enable the wearer to wade through moderately deep water and stay dry; they do not pull off in heavy mud and they provide added protection against snakes. Chest waders are not recommended - they are hot and sweaty and are rarely necessary.

Personal Safety

Tiger snakes *Notechis ater* 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 “snake bandage” on extended walks (to apply to bitten limb), to be familiar with first aid procedures for snake bite and to walk with a companion.

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 use personal repellents. Avoid times when mosquitoes are most active. Further advice may be obtained from the Busselton or Capel Shire Council or the WA Health Department.

Selected References

- Anon. (1992). *Wetlands nominated by the Government of Western Australia for Inclusion on the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention)*. Dept. of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), Perth.
- Bamford, M.J. & A.R. (1995). *Waterbirds of the floodplains of the Vasse and Wonnerup estuaries; patterns of usage and the effect of disturbance*. Unpublished report to the WA Department of CALM.
- Jaensch, R.P. (1992). *Vasse-Wonnerup wetland system*. Pages 904-6 in *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia. Second Edition*. Australian Nature Conservation Agency, Canberra.
- Lane, J.A.K. (1990). *Swamped with birds*. WA Department of CALM magazine “Landscape” 5(2), 17-22.
- Slater, P. (1995). *Slater’s Australian Birdwatcher’s Notebook*. Landsdowne, Sydney.

Information Sheets

The following are available* or proposed.

- A List of the Waterbirds of the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands.*
- Counts of Waterbirds on the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands.
- Breeding Waterbirds of the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands.

Further information about the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands may be obtained from the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management, 14 Queen Street, Busselton WA 6280. Ph (08) 9752 1677. Fax (08) 9752 1432. Info sheet prepared by JLane, CALM Bsn, March 1997. Minor revision May 1997.

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