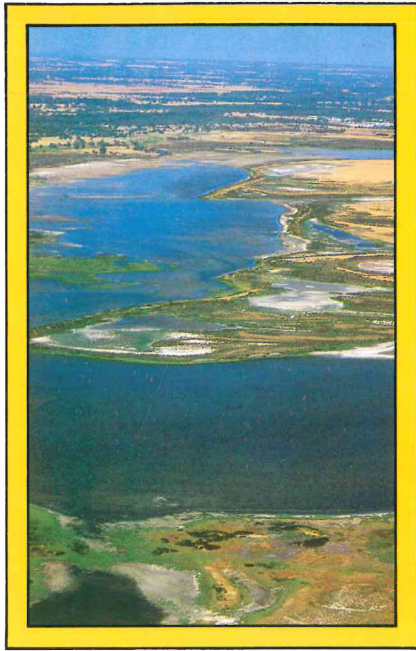


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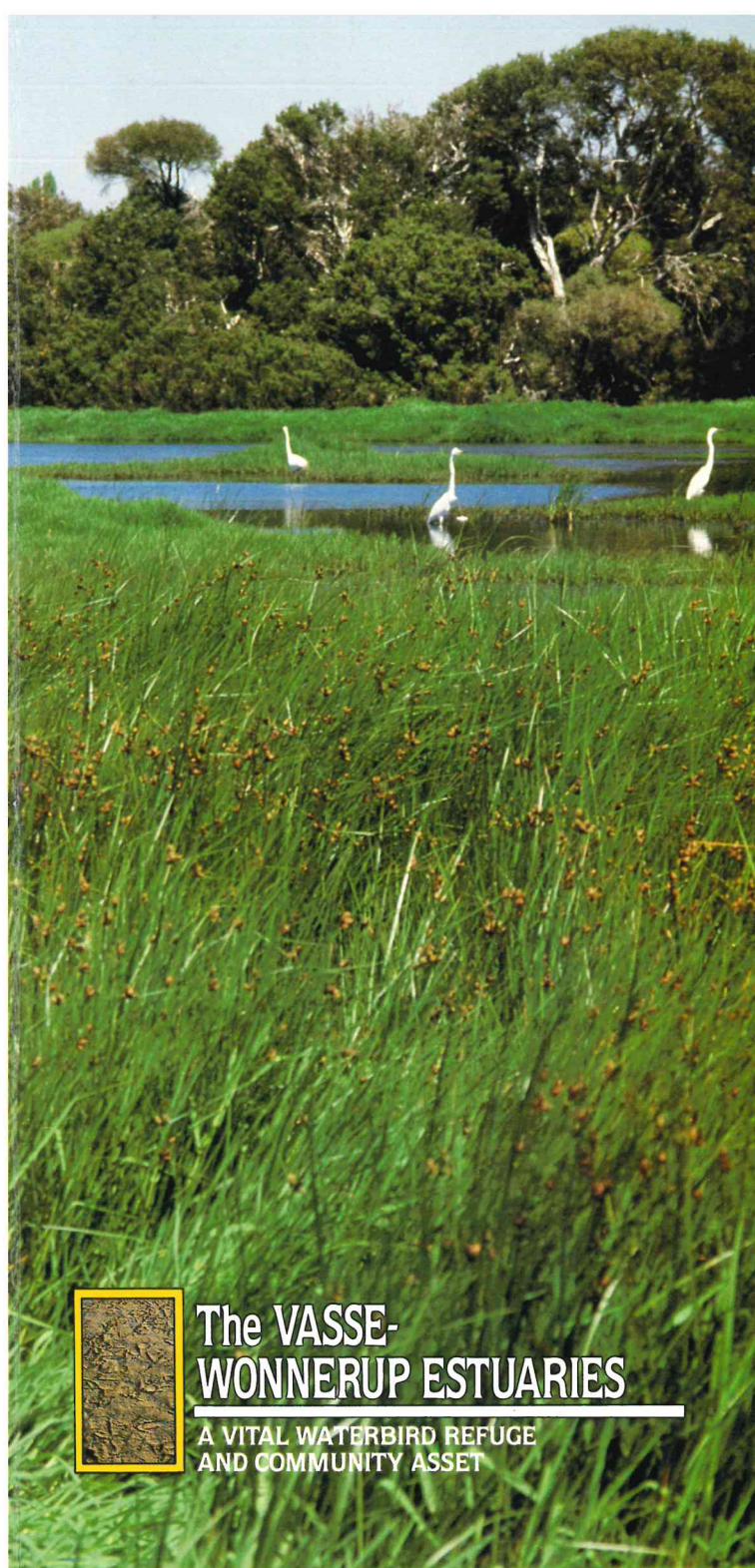


*Vasse Estuary, near Busselton,  
Western Australia.*

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## The VASSE- WONNERUP ESTUARIES

A VITAL WATERBIRD REFUGE  
AND COMMUNITY ASSET



## The WATERBIRDS

Waterbirds are among the most conspicuous and spectacular of all birds, and large concentrations of waterbirds are an inspiring sight in many parts of the world. They are often the most visible means of bringing the world of wildlife into our own.

The Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries attract prolific numbers of waterbirds, particularly in summer and autumn when wetlands in other areas recede or dry up. About 75 species of waterbirds use these estuaries, which is more than most other wetlands in south west W.A. Only two other estuaries support such a variety — Swan Estuary in Perth, and the Peel Inlet at Mandurah.

More than 33,000 waterbirds have been counted at Vasse-Wonnerup on a single occasion (e.g. in January 1986). In southern W.A. these numbers are second only to totals at Peel Inlet and Dumbleyung Lake, which are much larger waterbodies. At least 10,000 ducks and swans use the Vasse-Wonnerup every year; this means that it is a wetland of international importance, especially as a waterfowl habitat.

Waterbird families using the Vasse-Wonnerup include ducks and swans, grebes, cormorants, ibises, spoonbills, waterhens, gulls, terns and the shorebirds or "waders". The latter comprise plovers, dotterels, stilts and avocets which breed in Australia; also the sandpipers, godwits, curlews and snipe which breed in Siberia and migrate to Australia each year.



Numbers of the Great Egret (237), Yellow-billed Spoonbill (102), Black-winged Stilt (5000), Red-necked Avocet (4000) and the Australian Pelican (750) counted at the Vasse-Wonnerup are among the highest ever made for these species in a wetland in southern W.A. These birds congregate on the Estuaries as the water recedes in summer.

Twenty-one species which occur at the Vasse-Wonnerup have international protection through the Japan Australia Migratory Bird Agreement.

All basic needs of life for many species of waterbirds are provided by the Vasse-Wonnerup. The Estuaries have a range of deep and shallow water available for virtually the whole year, which caters for the feeding requirements of diving ducks, grebes, coots and cormorants (deep water feeders), and dabbling ducks and wading birds (shallow water feeders). Low, dense vegetation fringing the Estuaries is ideal as a breeding ground for ducks and swans. Ibises, egrets and spoonbills breed in McCarley's Swamp near Ludlow, and obtain food for their young from the Estuaries.

Tens of thousands of waterbirds depend for their survival on the continued ability of the Vasse-Wonnerup to provide much of their total requirements.

*Below left: Sharp-tailed Sandpipers: annual migrants from Siberia.*

*Below: Thousands of Black-winged Stilts congregate at the estuary margins.*





## CONSERVATION

The progressive loss of wetlands on the Swan Coastal Plain is well recognised. This places even more pressure on the remaining wetlands to provide sustainable resources for wildlife, particularly waterbirds.

Given the significance of the Vasse-Wonnerup Estuaries, the protection and maintenance of their conservation value is a matter of high priority.

Wetlands in the Dunsborough to Bunbury coastal strip have been reduced to the extent that many waterbirds in the region now have no summer refuge other than the Vasse-Wonnerup Estuaries. In their present condition, the Estuaries are of regional, national and international importance for waterbirds and therefore the community has a special responsibility to ensure that this asset is retained for this purpose and for future generations to enjoy.



Numerous developments have been proposed which could place pressure on the wetland system. These include caravan parks, urban subdivision, hobby farm subdivision, marina and canal development and mineral sands mining. While some of these may have little direct, short-term effect on the Estuaries, they may have the potential to cause major changes to the physical, chemical and biological environment of the Estuaries. Hence it is of vital importance that responsible planning, incorporating effective management to properly protect the environment, forms part of any development proposals.

For natural areas of such importance, the usual and most effective means of giving them adequate protection is by placing them within an 'A' Class nature reserve or national park. However, in the case of the Vasse-Wonnerup Estuaries, which fall largely within private land, this may not be totally practicable.

An alternative approach may be the establishment of a combination of nature reserve and a regional park over the Estuaries, similar in concept to that recently declared over the Cockburn Wetlands. Such an arrangement would ensure that planning and development proposals impinging on the Estuaries take into account their conservation and landscape values.

*Below left: Rush beds provide shelter for secretive water-birds and breeding sites for ducks.*

*Below: Vasse River, where it meets the Estuary.*





## The Estuaries

The Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries are an important part of the Busselton region — important for people and important for our waterbirds. They comprise some 1500 ha of low-lying land immediately east of Busselton and are a remnant of an area formerly inundated by the sea.

The Estuaries lie close to the renowned Ludlow Tuart Forest and are largely within private property, with only five percent set aside as a nature reserve.

Flood control, drainage, cattle grazing and fishing are all important functions of the two Estuaries, but they are also a vital refuge for waterbirds.

Large areas of open water, surrounded by samphire, short rushes and grass-covered flats which

are partially covered by water in winter, characterise the Estuaries. The contrast between the tuart forest and wetland further enhances these superb natural features.

Four rivers — the Vasse, Sabina, Abba and Ludlow — flow into the Estuaries and the quantity and quality of the river waters contribute significantly to their welfare and their function as a wetland.

Within the Estuaries, the Wonnerup Inlet and the Deadwater (see map) provide breeding grounds for fish, which re-enter Geographe Bay or remain over summer in those parts of the Estuaries which do not suffer from nutrient enrichment or a lack of oxygen.

Recreational fishing is enjoyed by many in the Inlet and the Deadwater, and the area is also popular for bird and nature studies.

Busselton is fortunate to have such a valuable natural asset as the Vasse-Wonnerup Estuaries — their presence enriches the quality of the environment for both people and wildlife.

