



Some Coastal Birds of Eastern Yorke Peninsula



At Port Vincent there are many species of coastal birds, each with its particular diet and habitat preferences. The wharf area provides roosting points for a number of species, and kingfishers occasionally use it for shelter. The sandy northern beach is a feeding area for herons and several waders. The southern, more exposed, back beach has an extensive area of shallows with rock patches and mats of small mussels which are the feeding grounds for other waders, while its sand banks provide resting areas for pelicans and a variety of gulls, terns and cormorants. Other species, such as penguins, ospreys and sea eagles are occasional visitors to the area.

This pamphlet introduces some of the birds that are known from the area and lists publications where further information can be found.



Penguins

The **Little** or **Fairy Penguin** is the only species of penguin breeding in Australian coastal waters. There is a colony of them on Troubridge Island East of Edithburgh. Penguins are easily distinguished from other

birds on the surface by their short necks and flattish backs. Unlike most other water birds their wings provide the main power for swimming, and are extended when they are in the water. The feet are used on land for walking and in the water for steering. Little Penguins are occasional visitors to Port Vincent.



Grebes.

Grebes and dabchicks are a group of herbivorous birds that live mainly on lakes and ponds. There are three species in Australia, but the one commonly seen at Port Vincent is the **Hoary headed Grebe**. These little birds can be recognised by their dumpy shape and habit of diving under the surface. The non-breeding breeding plumage is darker, with less marked streaking of the head.



The **Great Crested Grebe** is the size of a Little Pied Cormorant, but can be recognised by its ear-like plumes. It has an almost world-wide distribution.

Non-breeding



Hérons

Hérons are long-legged birds with spear-like beaks. They are found in a variety of habitats, including grassland. They nest in trees and reeds.

There are a number of species in Australia, but the only one common on the shore of the Yorke Peninsula is the **White-faced Heron**, which is widespread in Australia. This feeds in water 5 to 10 cm deep, where it grasps small fish and invertebrates. It is usually seen close to the water's edge.



The pure white **Great Egret** is also occasionally seen on the back beach.

Lapwings

Lapwings and the next three related groups are long-legged wading birds with short beaks. They are found near water and in grassland and nest in scrapes on the ground.

The **Masked Lapwing** is a common species at Port Vincent, where it is seen at the seashore and in short vegetation on vacant sites.



The **Banded Lapwing** is similar, but has a dark bar across the chest and is found in short vegetation in dryer areas away from water.

Stilts

Stilts are wading birds with very long legs and thin beaks. They feed on small invertebrates in shallow water. Two species are found in Australia and both have been seen in this area.



The **Banded Stilt** is the more common, and can usually be seen in the tidal pools near the boat landing in the mangroves north of Port Clinton, and also near the causeway at Coobowie. They have pale backs, no black on the back of the neck and, in adults, a chestnut band on the breast.



The **Black-winged Stilt** is less often seen. It has a dark back and no chest band. In adults the back of the head and neck is black.

Oystercatchers.

Oystercatchers are wading birds with narrow, straight scissor-like bills with which they force open the shells of mussels and clams. They are common on beaches and rocky shores where these shellfish are found. Australia has two species.



The **Sooty Oystercatcher** is the common species at Port Vincent. It can usually be seen on the back beach, where there are abundant beds of small mussels.

The **Pied Oystercatcher**, similar in size and build has a white belly and is less common in the area.



Sandpipers, Dotterels and Sand Plovers

These wading birds are usually seen in intertidal areas or at the water's edge. Many are very similar to each other, making them hard to identify. Two species are common in the area, but a number of others may be seen from time to time. Most species are migrants and are not in their breeding plumage while they are in Australia.



The **Greenshank** is the commonest wader on the north beach at Port Vincent. It is relatively large and has greenish legs and a slightly up-turned bill. It is usually seen feeding in water 2-3 cm deep. Most of the birds migrate, but some are still present in June, and may not migrate.

The **Red-necked Stint** is a small bird about the size of a sparrow. It breeds in Siberia and Alaska so that it is in its non-breeding plumage in Australia and does not show the colour that gives it its name. It feeds on tidal sand and mud flats where it scurries about, stopping to pick up small invertebrates. It is common on the back beach at Port Vincent, but not on the other, steeper, beach.



Ducks, Geese and Swans

Swans and geese are vegetarian, while ducks may eat vegetation, invertebrates or even, in some northern hemisphere species, fish.

Black Swans are rare at Port Vincent, but common near the causeway at Coobowie, where the **Cape Barren Goose** may also be seen. There are also several species of ducks in the area.



Musk Duck, all black except for grey under the wing. The males have a large leathery flap below the bill. The tail can be spread into a fan of pointed feathers.



They are found in well vegetated areas swamps and estuaries, where they feed on soft submerged plants. Individuals are occasionally seen at Port Vincent.



Chestnut Teal, males have glossy green heads, chestnut breast and flanks with white patches near the tail. The females are drab greyish brown with a slightly paler throat. This species often forms large flocks. They are common at Coobowie but seldom seen at Port Vincent.

Grey Teal are also common at Coobowie but rare at Port Vincent. Both sexes are alike and are very similar to female chestnut teals, but the chin and throat are much paler.



Pacific Black Duck, dark birds with prominent white stripes above and below the eye, common on fresh water, but may also be seen in the area



Pelican

Australian Pelicans One of the largest flying birds in Australia. They are common at Port Vincent and can be seen swimming off both beaches, but congregate to rest on the sand bars of the back beach. They have learned to take fishermen's offal and visit the fish-cleaning area at the caravan park.

Cormorants

Cormorants are long-necked birds with hooked beaks that feed on fish that they hunt underwater. There are many freshwater and marine species around the world, with five in Australia. Some species can dive to considerable depths. In Lake Malawi in Africa the Great Cormorant is known to stay under water for more than one minute, and has been seen at a depth of about 30 metres. Four species known from Port Vincent are illustrated here. These species are often found together.



This picture shows the size differences between Little Pied, Little Black and Pied Cormorants on a diving raft at Port Vincent. Because they dive, the pressure forces water between the filaments of their feathers and they spend much time airing these to dry them.



Pied Cormorant, the largest of the 4 species, with a wing span of about 1.5 metres. It is distinguished by its white belly, long greyish beak and an area of bare yellow skin between the eye and the nostril. Young birds are dark brown and dirty white. May form large flocks. Often rest on sand bars off the back beach., but also common near the wharf.

Black-faced Cormorant, resembles Pied Cormorant but is slightly smaller, with a wing span of about 1 metre. It is recognisable by its thinner black bill and by the fact that the facial skin is black. They are marine birds and prefer cliffs. Not as gregarious as the pied cormorant. Rare at Port Vincent.



Little Pied Cormorant is coloured like the pied but is much smaller (see photo of these together), with a shorter neck, thicker but shorter yellow bill and no bare skin between eye and top of beak. It often displays a short crest. It favours shallow water and is common at Port Vincent, at the jetty or on navigation markers.

The **Little Black Cormorant** is the same size as the little pied cormorant but is all black. Unlike the other species, which hunt by looking under the surface and diving, flocks often locate fish from the air, then settle on the water and dive in pursuit.



Gulls and Terns

Gulls and terns are common shore birds all around the world. Gulls feed on scraps and dead material at the sea surface or ashore, some species often being seen far from water, while terns take live food from the water surface, or just below it. They fly with head turned down to spot morsels on which they dive. Terns have pointed beaks and are more slender, with longer wings and shorter legs than gulls, which are more robustly built in order to handle larger food items.



Caspian Tern, the largest of the terns, is bigger than the silver gull. It is recognisable by its dark cap (grey in juveniles and black in adults) and red bill. It is found world-wide on the shores of seas and large lakes. Can be seen in pairs or small groups on the back beach and near the marina.

Crested Tern, smaller than the Caspian tern, from which it can easily be distinguished by the colour of its bill, which is yellow, and by the marked crest of black feathers. They are common at Port Vincent and in summer often perch on the jetty. One found dead on the beach at Port Vincent had a ring that had been put on its leg 9 years earlier at Troubridge Island.



Gulls

Silver Gulls are the common gulls that form large flocks on the shore and often inland around lakes and rubbish dumps, often approaching people to take scraps of food. Adults have bright red beaks and legs but in juveniles these are darker and the wings are flecked with brown.



An upright posture with the beak pointed down indicates dominance and submission is shown by a crouching posture that is also used by juveniles when begging food. When a pair meets, they perform a ritual where one adopts the dominant posture and the other shows submission.



Pacific Gulls are the largest Australian gulls, with a wing span of up to 1.5 metres. They are heavily built birds, white on the head and below and with black back and wings and a white patch above the tail. The legs are yellow, as is the massive bill, which has a prominent red tip



In their first year they are dark all over, but become lighter brown, then mottled with increasing areas of white until they attain the adult plumage after four years.



These large, powerful birds are seen singly or in pairs.

First year

Second year

The **Kelp Gull** is similar to the Pacific gull, but it slightly smaller and has a thinner bill, with the red spot on the lower mandible only, and pink legs. It has been seen at Port Giles.

Skuas are large, dark predatory gulls that can be distinguished from young Pacific gulls by a lighter, more hooked beak and by the presence of white bands in the wings. They may be seen in the area.

Further References: A few of the many bird books that are readily obtainable are listed below. Information can also be obtained from museums and ornithological societies.

Morcombe, - *Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Steve Parrish Publ 2000

Pizzey & Knight – *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* Angus & Robertson 1997

Simpson & Day - *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* . Viking Press, 1986 & later

Slater – *Australian Waterbirds* – Reed, 1987

Slater, Slater & Slater – *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds* – Rigby 1986 and later

Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds.

South Australian Ornithological Association, c/o S. A. Museum, Adelaide web site: www.birdsa.asn.au.