

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler



Night Hunter

Many water animals are hunted day and night. My new local patch at Brookfield has several large open water habitats. The predators feeding on the animals under the water surface, the insects, larvae, tadpoles, fish, frogs, and crustaceans is not very conspicuous. What is glaringly obvious is the loss of the baby birds floating on the water surface: the grebe chicks and the ducklings. One day there will be four Australasian Grebe chicks and a few days later the parents will only be feeding two, and it can commonly go to zero; mostly taken by the Night Hunter.

Much of the danger to water animals comes from the large wading carnivores, of which there are four local species: Great Egret (100cm), Intermediate Egret (70cm), White-faced Heron (70cm) and Nankeen Night Heron (60cm). The first three do the day shift and the name of the last gives it all away! They are beautifully evolved to catch fish and invertebrates in shallow water. Their long legs, their rapidly extensible long necks and their long pointed bills with serrated edges make them lethal to fish and invertebrates.

Amongst this group of four, the Nankeen Night Heron is a standout. It hunts by night and secretively roosts by day. So it is not an easy bird to locate and not well known. It is however, a very widespread bird found throughout Australasia and the genus it belongs to covers the whole world except for the coldest regions. Uniquely, the Night Heron regularly eats the eggs and chicks of other birds, hence the missing Grebe chicks. Adaptively, they have strong digestive acids that can dissolve bones. Their faeces are white and limey because of the dissolved calcium. Incidentally, the Queensland Art Gallery has a beautiful Australian painting of this bird from the 1880's on display.

Happy night birding

- Jim



Image: Nankeen Night Heron taken by Ed Frazer at Brookfield

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