

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler



White-faced Heron and FID

The White-faced Heron (65 cm) is the most frequently encountered heron in Australia. It was originally described by ornithologist John Latham in 1790. But a DNA-DNA hybridization study in 1987 showed that the White-faced Heron is really an egret! To paraphrase Shakespeare: This heron by any other name looks just as beautiful! They are found throughout Australia and South-east Asia wherever there is water: from tidal mudflats and coastal reefs, through inland creeks and rivers, to moist farmlands and urban gardens. When breeding, the birds have long filamentous feathers (nuptial plumes) on the head, neck and back (see photo).

White-faced Herons hunt fish by standing in shallow water and watching for movement or by walking and stalking prey. They see us as predators and when we approach they flee, departing at a leisurely pace on their slow-beating wings and uttering hoarse croaks. Studies of the exact distance at which different bird species begin to flee from humans have been undertaken. This distance is termed the 'flight-initiation distance' (FID). Behavioural ecologists believe individual bird species vary FID so as to minimise the cost of interrupted feeding

while maximising survival. FID is a species-specific trait. Research has shown that there are "flighty" bird species with consistently large FID: and other "tolerant" species with consistently small FID. Some FID results for waders in their natural habitats are: White-faced Heron 30m; Silver Gull 20m; Masked Lapwing 40m.

Knowing the FID of different species is important because wildlife managers can determine effects from human disturbance to threatened bird species in nature management areas and refuges. Adverse effects from human disturbance include reductions in feeding rates, reproductive rates, productivity and survival. Wildlife managers can minimise the harm by specifying sufficiently wide protective buffers around habitat of bird species of concern. The great variability in FID implies that wildlife managers should be conservative in developing buffer zones.

Happy New Year

– Jim



Image: White-faced Heron taken by Ed Frazer at Brookfield

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