

Black-tailed Nativehen roosting behaviour at Paiwalla Wetland

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Paiwalla Wetland, 15 km north of Murray Bridge on the eastern side of the Lower Murray River in South Australia, is now an important site for water birds. Formerly an irrigated dairy farm, the area was purchased by the Wetland Habitat Trust and restored to form a wetland, largely with volunteer labour, between 1998 and 2002.

Covering approximately 100 hectares, the wetland consists of two basins within levee banks, periodically flooded from the river through two inlet regulators. The wetland now provides habitat for a wide range of species and substantial numbers of water birds.

In December 2013 an infra-red motion-sensing camera was set up. The camera has recorded some interesting night-time roosting behaviour by Black-tailed Nativehens, *Trybonyx ventralis*.

Figure 1 shows approximately 35 Black-tailed Nativehens standing in a defensive circle in water 40 mm deep. This behaviour would allow the birds to roost in relative safety from their main night-time predators, Water Rat, *Hydromys chrysogaster*, Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, and Feral Cat, *Felis catus*, as any approach by a predator would be quickly noticed. (Some birds typically rest one half of their brain, keeping guard with the other half, while sleeping. At some stage in the sleep period the resting and active sides change over.)

The image was recorded on 4 February 2014 at 0134 h; air temperature was 14°C.

Figure 2, taken four days later and at a later stage of the night (8 February 2014, 0447 h, 16°C) shows a smaller defensive circle of Black-tailed Nativehens.

Other images show the birds starting to group up about 2300 h and eventually forming defensive circles. After about two to three hours, the groups seem to break up and mingle around, then form smaller circles. It is also possible that they move out of camera range and form large circles again.

Soon after these images were recorded, the area received 100 mm of rainfall, water depth increased and the birds moved elsewhere.

These photographs appear to be the first record of 'defensive circle' roosting behaviour in Black-tailed Nativehens. The behaviour is not recorded in *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic birds*.

REFERENCE

Marchant, S. and Higgins, P.J. (eds). 1993. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic birds. Volume 2, Raptors to Lapwings*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

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Figure 1. Approximately 35 Black-tailed Nighthawks in a defensive circle



Figure 2. A smaller group of Black-tailed Nighthawks in a defensive circle