

## Bird Note

# Breeding of Australian White Ibis at St Peters, suburban Adelaide

**PENNY PATON**

The St Peters Billabong consists of two wetlands, the North and South Lagoons, which occupy the original ox-bow bend of the River Torrens in St Peters, 2 km north east of Adelaide. In the 1970s the Billabong was created by isolating this oxbow section of the River due to concerns over bank erosion (City of Norwood, Payneham and St Peters, n.d.). The course of the River was straightened thus cutting off much of the water

supply to the ox-bow. In 2002 the Billabong was dredged to increase the depth of the lagoons and a gross pollutant trap was installed at the outlet of Second Creek in a joint Torrens Catchment Water Management Board and City of Norwood, Payneham and St Peters project. In addition to inputs from Second Creek, perennial springs contribute around half a million litres of water per day to the Billabong (City of Norwood, Payneham and St Peters, n.d.).

Beginning in May 2003, bird surveys have been conducted at the Billabong on a monthly basis, with the emphasis on the waterbirds to track changes in species richness and abundance. Bird surveys occur once a month over half an hour and consist of walking the same path from north to south on the western and southern margins of the lagoons. The numbers of each bird species are



Figure 1. Southern lagoon, St Peters Billabong, with the Pepper-tree on the right

Image Penny Paton

recorded along with any evidence of breeding, such as breeding plumage, nest building, mating, birds on nests and dependent juveniles. Subsequent to the first recorded breeding record of Little Pied Cormorants, *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*, along the main stream of the River Torrens at St Peters in 2002 (Paton 2003), this species was found nesting in trees on the edge of the southern lagoon of the St Peters Billabong (Figure 1) in spring 2003 (Paton 2006). Since this time Little Pied Cormorants have bred in the same trees (a River Red Gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, and a Pepper-tree, *Schinus areira*) every spring/summer. Little Black Cormorants, *P. sulcirostris*, which often perched in the same trees, were sitting on a nest in January 2006, but breeding was not confirmed until December 2010 when young birds were seen.

There were scant records of Australian White Ibis, *Threskiornis molucca*, along the River Torrens in the St Peters/Walkerville area until 2013, being more regularly recorded at the mouth of the river and upstream of Walkerville in the 1990s and early 2000s (Paton and Pedler 1999;

P. Paton pers. obs.). Six birds were counted in the monthly surveys at the St Peters Billabong in April 2013 and seven in November of that year. On 2 December 2013 two adult Australian White Ibis with breeding plumes were sitting on nests side by side in the Pepper-tree amongst the nests of Little Pied Cormorants (Figure 2). I was unsure whether these were nests that the ibis had built themselves or whether they had taken over cormorant nests. Another four adult ibis were sitting in the same tree. On 10 January 2014 one adult ibis was sitting on a nest and a single bird was seen in the Billabong in February, but they were not seen again in the Billabong until September 2014. It is likely that this breeding attempt in summer 2013-14 was unsuccessful.

On 24 September 2014 one adult ibis was sitting on a nest in the Pepper-tree, with another adult bird perched nearby. A month later there were two ibis nests in the same tree, one of which contained one large chick and one adult, with three other adults perched nearby. On 28 November there was one large chick in one nest and two adults near the second nest and



Figure 2. Pepper-tree nesting tree, photographed November 2015

Image Penny Paton



**Figure 3. Adult Australian White Ibis sitting on nest**  
Image Penny Paton

the following month there were two nests, both containing two young. In one nest were two large chicks and in the other there were two mid-sized chicks. By January 2015 there were generally five or six ibis in the Billabong, but no longer near the nesting tree. At least three immature birds were in this group and on one occasion one of these was fed by an adult bird. This represents the first documented confirmed breeding of Australian White Ibis in the Billabong and possibly along the River Torrens in urban Adelaide.

During 2015 numbers of Australian White Ibis fluctuated in the Billabong from no birds to 45 in March 2015. On 18 September 2015 four adult ibis were sitting on four nests in the same Pepper-tree where ibis and cormorants had bred previously. By 2 November there were two adults sitting on nests (Figure 3) plus one nest with two large young and one nest containing one small young bird. On 23 November there were ten adult ibis, of which six were sitting on nests, two nests with three chicks each (Figure 4) and one nest with at least one chick. In total there were at least eight ibis nests. There was also at least one juvenile/immature ibis on a River Red Gum about 60 metres from the nest tree and an adult bird fed this young bird. This was presumably one of the young birds that had occupied a nest on 2 November.



**Figure 4. Australian White Ibis nest with adult and three chicks**  
Image Penny Paton

While the 2014 event is the first breeding record of Australian White Ibis in the St Peters area, numbers of ibis have increased enormously in the Adelaide region over the past 10 years and breeding has been reported at several urban sites over the past few years. For example ibis bred at the Roy Amer Reserve at Oakden in 2009, 2010 and 2011, with over 300 birds being recorded there at these times. This number of ibis caused angst for local residents and park users in the form of strong smells and noise, as well as possibly impacting on water quality in the lake. Habitat manipulation on the breeding island reduced the number of breeding ibis in the 2012 breeding season (EBS Restoration n.d.).

Range expansion of the Australian White Ibis since European settlement followed clearance of native vegetation for agriculture (Marchant and Higgins 1990). The increase in abundance and range of this species in the Adelaide region is following a similar expansion in the eastern States and south western Australia (Moon 2013).

## REFERENCES

City of Norwood, Payneham and St Peters. n.d. *Biodiversity Strategy 2006-2016*.

EBS Restoration. n.d. <http://www.ebsrestoration.com.au/case-studies/white-ibis-management/> (accessed 14 January and 15 December 2015).

Marchant, S. and Higgins, P.J. (eds). 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Volume 1B. Australian Pelican to ducks.* Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Moon, D.L. 2013. *A study of the spatial dynamics of some introduced avian species in the southwestern region of Western Australia.* BA Hons thesis, Edith Cowan University.

Paton, P.A. 2003. Little Pied Cormorants *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* breeding on the River Torrens, St Peters. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 34: 151-152.

Paton, P. 2006. Breeding Little Pied Cormorants *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* in the Adelaide area. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 34: 283-284.

Paton, P.A. and Pedler, J.A. 1999. A survey of the avifauna of the River Torrens Linear Park, Adelaide. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 33: 33-46.

**Penny Paton**  
**47 Gilbert St**  
**Gilberton SA 5081**  
**pennypaton@adam.com.au**