



Above
Brolga (*Grus rubicunda*) enjoying the Gwydir Wetlands
State Conservation Area (SCA)
Source - MER Project team

Observations from the bird guru - Steve Debus

Steve Debus is a bird expert and all-round animal enthusiast. A key member of the team assessing and monitoring water for the environment in the Warrego and Gwydir systems, Steve contributes data on fauna that inhabit these areas.

Last February Steve jumped in a 4WD, along with a team of fellow scientists, and headed west to our study site at [Toorale National Park](#) on the Warrego River. Upon arriving, Steve soon became aware of the scarcity of water at the site. He recalls that the water level at this time was much lower than in November, three months prior. This sight made Steve especially aware of how intense and enduring the drought's grip had been on this region.

To collect data on local fauna, Steve heads into the field and identifies animals by sight and sound in what we call a 'fauna survey'. Steve's survey during the Warrego's dry spell wasn't very fruitful.

Given the very dry conditions, he spotted very few species of waterbirds and frogs and tallied only a small number of individuals of the species he did spot.

This was not ideal for a bird enthusiast. However, Steve did mention that he saw some shallow surface water in the Warrego's claypans from recent rainfall. It was there he sighted two Brolgas, a memorable sight and his 'bird highlight' of the trip.

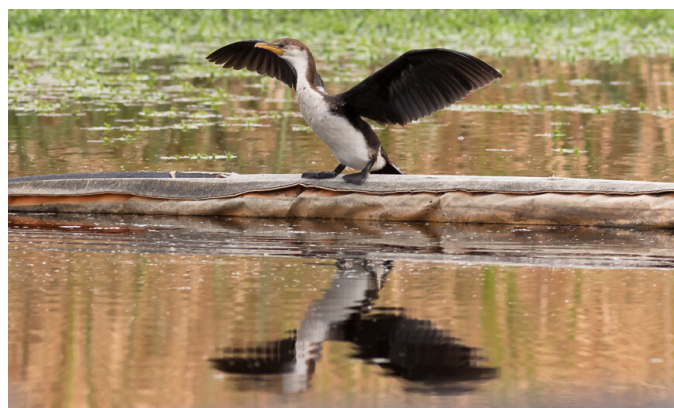


Figure 1. Little pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*)
Source - MER Project team

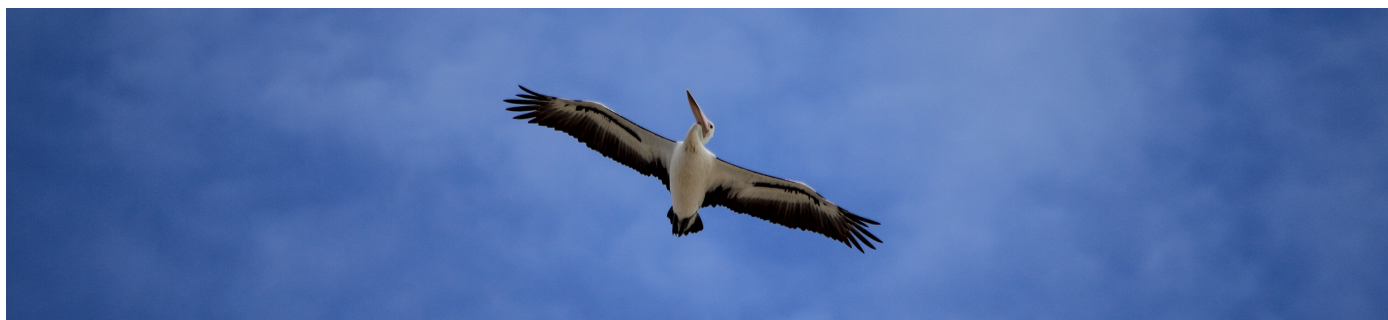


Figure 2. Adult pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*). Source - MER Project team

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A month later in March, Steve and the bird survey team were west bound again, although this time en route to the Gwydir and Mallowa Wetlands, which include many sites on the [Gwydir Wetlands State Conservation Area](#) (SCA). This trip contrasted the previous one to the Warrego. Landing in the Gwydir, Steve was delighted to see an abundance of waterbirds flocking to the wetlands, responding to a recent inundation event.

The water level was still rising due to ongoing inflows, causing a great number of waterbirds to join in on the excitement. Steve recalled, “most of the sites I surveyed were the fullest I’ve seen them throughout the project so far”.

Waterbird species including Freckled ducks, Magpie geese, Latham’s snipe (Figure 3) and Sharp-tailed sandpipers opportunistically filled all corners of the wetland habitat while the inundation lasted.

Steve's observations in the Warrego and Gwydir indicate the importance of good flow, namely rainfall and environmental water, in these dynamic wetland environments.



Figure 3. Latham's snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*)
Source - MER Project team

For more on the Flow-MER Program, click [here](#).

Steve's work is part of a collaborative effort involving the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO), the NSW Department of Primary Industries - Fisheries (DPI-Fisheries), Environment, Energy and Science (EES) within the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE), NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS), the University of New England (UNE) and 2rog Consulting. Field work is conducted on private and public land within the Gwydir and Mallowa Wetlands.

Managing water for the environment is a collective and collaborative effort, working in partnership with communities, private landholders, scientists and government agencies - these contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land which we discuss here. We also pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.