



Fieldwork among the Gunambaay (Waterbirds)

By Tamara Kermode, 2rog Consulting

Figure 1: Tamara in the Gwydir - a pit stop to deal with unwilling vehicles.
Photo credit. Leah McIntosh, UNE.

Traditional Gamilaraay Language of the Gomeroi nation used in this article (H. White & B. Duncan - Speaking Our Way)

A plain of tall green fills your view, the water reflecting the drifting clouds above. You find yourself peering into the murky water. The brush of various scaly tails rush past your water shoes, every time it happens it comes as a surprise. If you move too quick, your own surprise is reflected back to you. Wings of white, brown or shimmering black fill the blue skies, as hundreds upon hundreds of waterbirds take to the skies.

This is my experience of assisting with the waterbird colony surveys in early March (Figure 1).

The Gwydir Wetlands State Conservation Area provides habitat for a large variety of fauna and flora. Following several seasons with large flood events and extended inundation, flocks of waterbird species such as Ibis (yuwagayrr), Egrets (balun), Cormorants (birribangga), and Herons (dhaarrin), among others, may come to these precious wetlands for mass breeding events (Figure 2). The 2021/22 breeding event started in mid-December 2021, with the majority of the

colonies finished in mid-April. An event of this scale in the Gwydir hasn't occurred for about a decade, and across northern NSW, including the Macquarie Marshes and Narran Lakes (Dharriwaa) simultaneous mass breeding across all three systems has not occurred for around 25 years. (Read more in the [June Gwydir Valley Update](#)).

During the recent breeding event, monthly ground surveys were conducted from January to March, each taking 3-5 days to complete. The surveys were done to capture late stages of incubation and early hatching (January), chicks in nests (February), and juveniles beginning to take flight (March). Across multiple colony sites we recorded breeding data including number of breeding species, counts of adults, number of nests, the number of chicks per nest and their stage development, and details of any dead adults or chicks. Monitoring the progress of breeding events allowed for informed delivery of water for the environment.



Figure 2 A colony with Little Black Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*), Pied Cormorants (*P. varius*), Royal Spoonbills (*Platalea regia*) and Intermediate Egrets (*Ardea intermedia*), among others.

Photo credit. Tamara Kermode.



Figure 3 Little Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*) adults in breeding plumage sitting above a nest. Photo credit. Tamara Kermode.

As a young and budding new bird watcher, being confronted by a lot of new information is both extremely rewarding and exhausting. The trick to making bird surveys less challenging, is to remain quiet and calm while walking the survey sites. By doing this the birds remain largely undisturbed and come back to their nests, making counts easier. The surveys I assisted with led us through a Straw-necked Ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) colony among the Typha, an Intermediate Egret (*Ardea intermedia*) colony in River Cooba and River Red Gum, and Little Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*, birribangga in Gamilaraay) colonies that were in an open wetland forest (Figure 3). These few colonies are among many that can have a variety of species present. For example, another colony had egrets and herons in large numbers. When we visited this site, and although I was getting the hang of

identifying species, it sure can be baffling to try and decipher the difference between a juvenile and immature Nankeen Night Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*, dhaarrin in the Gamilaraay) (Figure 4)!

Let me paint you a scene (Figure 5), you are standing in shallow water; it is clear and feels warm on covered feet. Before you, lays the expanse of the wetland - Grebes dotted upon its surface, while Stilts stride along the edges in the shallows. Red, blue and brown dragonflies dance about you, some connected in mating while others chase potential partners (Figure 6). Overhead Ibis circle, riding the thermals. They fly in front of a cloud, its heavy swell hearkening the rains to come. All is serene. What a way to finish two long days of surveying.



Figure 4 A juvenile Nankeen Night Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*).

Photo credit. Tamara Kermode.



Figure 5 Capturing a moment in time. Black Swans (*Cygnus atratus*, barayamal in Gamilaraay) gliding onto the wetlands. Photo credit. Tamara Kermode.

Looking back now, having glimpsed the bigger picture through my work with 2rog Consulting over the last five months, I feel I can grasp the importance of these wetlands and the work done by the NSW Department of Planning and Environment - Environment and Heritage Group (DPE-EHG) and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) staff in partnership with the Flow-MER Program. These wetlands play a vital role within the landscape and are places of great importance both as public land maintained by National Parks and Wildlife Services and by private landholders. In addition to the rain that falls we can help to

sustain and provide for large colony waterbird breeding events by delivering water for the environment for the duration of an event to support successful breeding. Our capabilities to aid these environments is inspiring. I hope that I can witness such a spectacular event again, provide my assistance, drive and share in the knowledge and understanding of these spectacular landscapes.

Thank you to Jennifer Spencer, David Preston (DPE-EHG) and Jane Humphries (CEWO) for organising and coordinating the monitoring surveys and having me along.



Figure 6 A blue dragonfly that was flying around us. A challenge to photograph since it kept flying around quickly.

Photo credit. Tamara Kermode.



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