

Birds of the Macquarie Harbour region

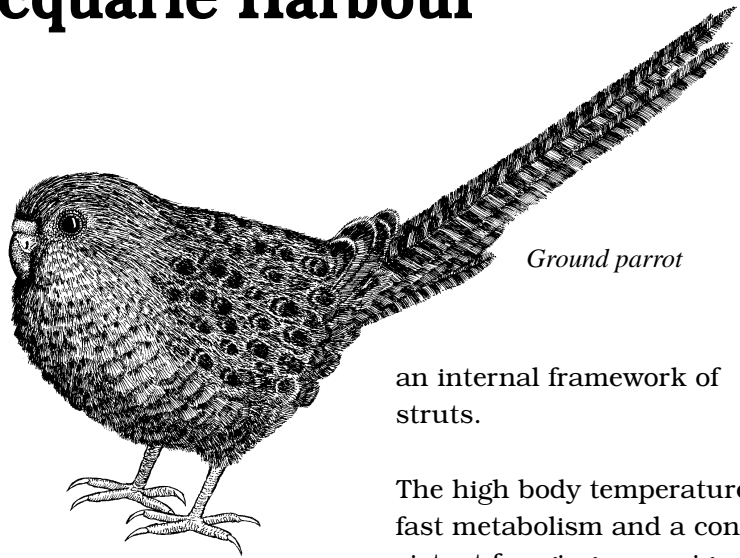
Birds are among the most conspicuous group of animals to be seen in Tasmania. Of the 325 species recorded from the State, some 200 can be considered to be regular inhabitants. Many species are migratory and can only be seen during the summer months. Twelve species of bird are endemic to the State (ie found only in Tasmania).

These are:

- green rosella
- Tasmanian thornbill
- scrubtit
- yellow wattlebird
- yellow throated honeyeater
- strong-billed honeyeater
- black-headed honeyeater
- forty-spotted pardalote
- black currawong
- Tasmanian native hen
- dusky robin
- brown scrub wren

Biology of birds

Many of the characteristics which we associate with birds are intimately linked with their capacity for flight. Feathers are perhaps the most obvious of these, yet there is debate as to whether these evolved for the purpose of flight or to act as insulation which allowed the development of homeothermy (warm bloodedness). Feathers



Ground parrot

are composed of non-living keratin, a material similar to that of reptilian scales and our own fingernails. The wing acts both as an efficient airfoil and as a means of propulsion through the air. The large pectoral muscles that power the wings can make up more than 30% of the body weight of strong flying birds such as pigeons and falcons.

Many of the adaptations of birds act to reduce weight. Modern birds lack teeth — the heaviest part of the vertebrate body. Instead, birds break up their food in the crop — a muscular, grinding machine that is more suitably located close to their centre of gravity. The skeleton is composed of hollow bones that are strengthened structurally by

an internal framework of struts.

The high body temperature, fast metabolism and a consistent foraging campaign of seeking out high energy foods such as seeds or nectar provide birds with the energy needed to power their flight muscles. Other species such as the marine albatrosses and shearwaters are beautifully adapted to gliding. Such species are remarkably attuned to the variations in wind velocity above the surface of the oceans and the rising air produced by waves to gain height, before gliding forward and repeating the process.

Birds of the lower Gordon River

The number of species occurring along the lower reaches of the Gordon River is considerably less than is found in the drier regions of eastern Tasmania. The cool temperate rainforest that dominates the vegetation communities in this area

is generally poorer in species than drier forest communities. This is partly due to the lower diversity of plants found in the rainforest as compared to the drier forests of the east, as bird species diversity is known to increase with increasing diversity of plant species and forest structure. Further, the steepness of the banks along much of the river means that there is little available habitat for wading birds. However, at least 58 species occur in the area, including six endemic species: green rosella, Tasmanian thornbill, scrubtit, yellow-throated honeyeater, strong-billed honeyeater and black currawong.

The most commonly seen species in the lower Gordon River area are the great cormorant, green rosella, grey fantail, olive whistler, Tasmania thornbill, white-browed scrub wren, pink robin and the crescent honeyeater.

The beautiful azure kingfisher has also been recorded along the lower Gordon River. This little-known species is restricted to the west of the state, where its preferred habitat is along forested streams and rivers. The majestic sea eagle and the largest of Australia's cormorants, the great cormorant, hunt along the Gordon River. Black ducks may also be seen along the lower reaches of the river. Even the little penguin is a frequent visitor to the lower Gordon. Black swans, once a common food

item for Aboriginal people, early explorers and convicts alike, are found on both the river and the harbour, although in presumably vastly lower numbers than at the start of the nineteenth century. It has been estimated that during the convict period from 1822-1826, some two million swans were killed.

Birds of the Macquarie Harbour foreshores

At dusk and dawn, the moorlands that surround Macquarie Harbour ring with the distinctive ascending call of the stunningly beautiful ground parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus*). This bird, one of only three ground parrots in the world, is vulnerable to extinction on the mainland. Western Tasmania is the species' stronghold.

Another species of parrot which may occasionally be seen foraging among the scrublands along the Macquarie Harbour coast is the orange-bellied parrot. This endangered species breeds only in the south-west of the State. It migrates to southern Victoria for the winter.

Along the sandy shores of the harbour and on Ocean Beach, a number of wading birds can be found. The two species of oyster catcher which occur in Tasmania can both be seen along the coast. The all black sooty oyster catcher prefers rocky coastlines, while the black and white pied oyster catcher can be seen on Ocean Beach.

Both species forage on a range of marine worms and molluscs. The long bill of oyster catchers allows them to probe inside the shells of bivalve molluscs and snip the muscle which closes the valves. Thus the bird can feed on the flesh within without the risk of its bill being trapped.

The pied oyster catcher and several other wading birds, such as the red-capped and hooded plovers, nest on the ground just above the high water mark. Consequently, their nests are very prone to destruction by recreational vehicles. Obviously, it is important that vehicles on Ocean Beach do not drive above the high water mark.

A number of other wading birds are migrants from as far afield as Siberia. The red-necked stint, sanderling and ruddy turnstone are among the species which spend the southern winter in their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. These birds are not seen in their full breeding plumage in Tasmania.

Further reading

Green, R. H. (1995). *The Fauna of Tasmania: Birds*. Potoroo Publishing, Launceston.

Slater, P., Slater, P., and Slater, R. (1989). *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Weldon Publishing, Sydney.