

BIRDS ON ORGANIC FARMS: WETLANDS & BIRDS



Many organic farmers ask me about birds on farm dams and other wetlands. Many want more waterbirds on their property, some are concerned about damage to their crops.

Sid Cowling, Wildlife Biologist & Ornithologist reporting.

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Many farm dams are already attractive to various waterbird species, and a little work can enhance the habitat for them. For instance, since I enlarged the dam on my small market garden (and built a real island to supplement the floating islands) I now this week have a clutch of Pacific Black Duck on it. My dam is also fenced off from stock, with a trough in each paddock supplied by gravity from tanks.

But every property is different, with different soils, vegetation, run-off, rainfall and different regions of Australia support different waterbird species. And we build dams for different purposes – stock and domestic supply, irrigation of

crops or pasture, and for our aesthetic pleasure.

Can a farm dam meet the needs of the farm, and also support birds and be a scenic asset. Yes, although some compromises may be needed. As with my dam, for maximum bird use it is best to exclude stock from all the edge. The provides fringing vegetation for shelter for birds, but also habitat for the pond life that birds feed on. But it also implies that an alternative supply to stock troughs is needed. A compromise is to have a fenced lane for stock access to part of the water's edge, the remainder being for the birds.

Most dams are relatively deep, with steep sides, not ideal for aquatic vegetation and difficult for birds. But islands, including floating islands, can convert a deep irrigation dam to an attractive area for birds. The simplest floating islands are wooden pallets, covered with a couple of inches of soil and grass, and supported by plastic drums. It takes a bit of trial and error to get it right, but most farms have these on hand, and most farmers have the necessary ingenuity.

Different waterbird species have different habitat and food preferences, so it is possible to manipulate your dam to encourage or discourage some species. Swans need a long fetch across open water to land and take off. If you plant tall trees all around a dam, then when they have grown it is not attractive to swans. As well as feeding to a depth of the reach of their neck, swans also graze, having been known to damage peas and other crops. So a densely vegetated wetland will favour ducks but not swans. Some ducks and geese also graze, and hence may not be welcome. One of these is the Maned Duck, often known as the Australian Wood Duck, which has greatly benefited by the proliferation of farm dams in Australia.

Australia has a few “diving ducks”, but most are “dabbling ducks”. The latter feed on the surface of the water, sifting food items with their bill. And vegetation in the water provides ideal conditions for the production of duck food.

Some other waterbirds, such as the ibis species, noted insect eaters, may roost in the trees around a dam and so are attracted to the property. Grebes, waterhens and other waterbird species add to the attractiveness of a property.

There are many useful references on birds and farm dams – most state conservation departments have such a publication. Their staff can also be of help.

A good reference is Romanowski, Nick (2000) – *Planting Wetlands + Dams* – UNSW Press, Sydney. It has a good reading list at the back.

A Nankeen Night Heron. Photography by Gina O'Donoghue.

