

AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS – ECOLOGY AND BEHAVIOUR

Distribution and habitat:

- A native Australian wading bird, with distribution across much of the country, though absent from Tasmania
- Natural preferred habitats are marshy wetlands near open grassy areas, with nearby tall trees in which they roost and nest
 - In urban areas, exotic palms are particularly desired
- Occurrence in urban areas only since the 1970's in response to drought conditions in their natural inland habitats
- They are highly adaptable and are able to exist in a wide variety of habitats

Feeding ecology

- Naturally forage in aquatic, (shallow) marine, and terrestrial environments, including wetlands, swamps, beaches, mudflats and well-watered grasslands
- Opportunistic foragers with a generalist diet
 - Preferred prey are crustaceans and invertebrates, particularly crayfish and mussels, though will also prey on fish, frogs, small reptiles, insect, earthworms and other invertebrates
 - With their movement into urban areas, they have learnt to exploit anthropogenic foods, scraps, and carrion – this has allowed the species to expand their range

Reproductive ecology

- Breeding season varies across Australia in southern regions of the country, breeding tends to occur August-November
 - In urban areas, often have a prolonged breeding season throughout most of the year
- Courtship involves a noisy display by the males to attract females, followed by bowing to females when they arrive, presenting a twig and shared preening
- Communal nesting in trees located close to water bodies such as rivers, lakes and swamps
 - Breeding sites may contain up to 1,500 nests
 - Tend to also nest with other waterbirds such as egrets and cormorants
- Nests are shallow platforms made of sticks, reeds or grass
- Usually lay 2-3 eggs, though this may range from 1-5
 - Eggs are incubated for 21-23 days and hatchlings fledge at 43 days old
- Birds become sexually mature at 3 years of age and may live up to 28 years

Behaviour

- Highly social birds – roosting and breeding in often large colonies
- In urban areas they have become highly tolerant of human presence and can at times exhibit assertive behaviour towards humans, often driven by human feeding of birds (white ibis or other) at waterbodies
- Tend to leave roosts to forage during the day and return at dusk

Conservation status

- Play important role in natural pest management – in rural areas often called “the farmers’ friend” due to their habit of helping to control destructive locust and insect plagues
- Not currently threatened, though their future conservation status is debated, given declines in population numbers in their natural breeding areas