

Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*
Nimiliaca Wetland Broome Western Australia 29/03/2008

Robert Berry drbob@dodo.com.au

Summary

A pond heron was discovered near Broome, W. A. on 29/03/2008. The back of the bird was black which limited the possibilities to two species. It exhibited sufficient plumage characteristics to be certain that it was a Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*. This is the first record for mainland Australia by date.

Circumstances of discovery

The bird was encountered on 29/03/2008 at 0815 in fine weather at Nimiliaca (also called Nimilarigan) a wetland 20 km north of Broome W. A. 17° 46.46S 122° 15.35E. It was flushed from flooded grassland by Robert Berry and Gail D'Alton. It flew to an exposed position in a tree and was observed from about 40 metres in good light using Leica 10X42 binoculars. After about 2 minutes it flew away from the observers showing it's back in flight. About thirty minutes and several frantic phone calls later it was rediscovered by the original observers and Christopher Hassell close to its first position. Once again it flew into a tree where it was observed through a telescope and photographed. Subsequently it was located by Adrian Boyle who was able to share the find with Peter Collins of the Broome Bird Observatory and some participants in a course run by the Observatory.

Description

In the instant of its initial takeoff the bird turned from a brown bird to a white one. From prior experience of a similar species it was immediately obvious to the observers that the bird was a pond heron.

What follows is a composite derived from direct observation and photographs. The bird was a small heron. Whilst perched most of the white, previously evident, was hidden. In its bodily proportion the bird was reminiscent of Nankeen Night-heron rather than any of Australia's long necked herons. The head bore chestnut streaking which was most intense on the crown. There was the suggestion of a crest. The bare skin at the base of the bill was pale yellow, the proximal two thirds of the bill was mainly yellow although the culmen was bone coloured. The terminal third of the bill was black. There was maroon streaking in the upper breast, the belly was pale. Through binoculars with the sun at a good angle the back was dark, the scapular feathers were a light brown hanging in scallops over white primaries (in photograph 1 the transmitted light gives a slightly different impression). The legs and feet were yellow.

In flight away the back was black, the wings were snow white.

Please see the attached photographs.

Differential Diagnosis

There are five Pond Herons that in non-breeding plumage are streaked brown when seen from above at rest and stark white from below in flight. Two are African species, the Squacco Heron *A. Ralloides* and Madagascar Pond Heron *A. Idae*.

Squacco Heron is found in Africa north and south of the Sahara, Madagascar, South-west and Central Europe and the Middle East. Part of the population is migratory and the species has been recorded as an accidental from the Azores to Cape Verde, the Seychelles and Brazil (Del Hoyo, Elliott & Sargatal 1992). The last record is evidence of the capacity for extended flight perhaps not surprising from a member of the family that includes the Cattle Egret. Illustrations can be found in Del Hoyo, Elliott & Sargatal 1992; Newman (1983) and Sinclair, Hockey & Tarboton(2002). In all plumages the back colour is too pale to match the Nimalaica bird.

Madagascar Pond Heron is found in Madagascar, East and Central Africa (Del Hoyo, Elliott & Sargatal 1992). In non breeding plumage it is difficult to distinguish from Squacco Heron but has darker streaking and a heavier bill. In breeding plumage it is white (Sinclair, Hockey & Tarboton 2002). The colour evident in the crown and breast of the Nimalaica bird is incompatible with this species.

There are three Asian pond herons Indian *A. grayii*, Chinese *A. bacchus* and Javan *A. speciosa*. Field guides such as Robson(2000) and King & Dickinson(1975) emphasize the difficulty of distinguishing between them except in breeding plumage.

In breeding plumage the differences are neatly summarized in King & Dickinson (1975)

	Head & Neck	Back	Breast
Indian	brownish buff	rich maroon	brownish buff
Chinese	dark chestnut	slaty black	maroon
Javan	brownish buff	slaty black	cinnamon

The colour of the back immediately disqualifies Indian.

Illustrations of Pond herons in breeding plumage can be found in Robson(2000) and King & Dickinson(1975) and also in The Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1(Del Hoyo, Elliott & Sargatal 1992). Javan Pond Heron is illustrated in MacKinnon & Phillipps(1993). In breeding plumage the greatest difference between Chinese and Javan Pond Heron is to be found in the crown and upper breast where Javan is very much paler.

The Nimalaica bird is in partial breeding plumage but exhibits sufficient colour in the breast and crown to show that it is a Chinese Pond Heron.

This is the first record of Chinese Pond Heron for the Australian mainland by date.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Chris Hassell and Adrian Boyle for allowing me to use their photographs and for their help in compiling this submission.



Image 1 Chris Hassell



Image 2 Adrian Boyle

References

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