

## Chinese Pond Herons *Ardeola bacchus* on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands from 2011 to January 2020

Submissions to BARC regarding five identifiable birds

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### Introduction

The first record of a Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* for Cocos was in May 2006. That was also the first record for Australia (Carter & Baxter 2006; BARC case 488). Since then, the species has been widely reported from both mainland Australia and several offshore localities such as Christmas Island in 2008 and 2009 (BARC cases 567 & 626), and also in 2009 in the Tanami desert (BARC case 589) and Scott Reef WA (BARC case 611). Since 2011, Pond Herons have occurred annually on Cocos but not all were able to be identified to species. As none of these later Cocos reports have been assessed by BARC, we here submit for assessment the following identifiable birds in chronological order. We have chosen only those we think are identifiable by use of standard texts, i.e. the birds that in our opinion show sufficient breeding plumage. That is rich chestnut (sometimes termed maroon), on the head and neck shading to richer and darker tones lower down on the breast, or traces of this colour in those areas as opposed to buff (i.e. sandy yellow) as shown by the only other Pond Heron recorded in Australia, the Javan Pond-Heron *A. speciosa*. Similar species for which there are as yet no accepted records but are potential vagrants to our region are Indian Pond-Heron *A. grayii*, Malagasy (AKA Madagascar) Pond-Heron *A. idae* and Squacco Heron *A. ralloides*. A report of Indian Pond-Heron on Christmas Island is yet to be assessed by BARC. None of these have the dark chestnut head and neck of Chinese Pond Heron.

### BIRD 1. 2011; Southern end of West Island, 3<sup>rd</sup> January to 24<sup>th</sup> March.



**Figs. 1 & 2. West Island 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011** Photos by Pam Saul

When found by Tony Palliser, Frank O'Connor & Tom Smith near the RAAF facility at the southern end of West Island on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2011 (and subsequently seen by many observers including Mike Carter) this bird was in non-breeding plumage so could not be identified to species. It frequented the mud flats in that area through until at least 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011 during which time it gradually acquired a degree of breeding plumage sufficient to identify it to species, see images figs. 1 & 2 above.

**BIRD 2. 2014 to 2020.** Mostly at **Pulu Ampang** but first seen on West Island.



**Fig. 3. West Is. 21<sup>st</sup> May 2014** Photo by Karen Willshaw

This bird was showing much breeding plumage (Fig. 3) when first seen on West Island on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2014 by Geof Christie, Pam Jones and Karen Willshaw. It relocated almost immediately to Home Island and then took up residence on the reefs at the south-eastern tip of Home Island and those that surround adjacent Pulu Ampang. It remained there until at least January 2020 (six years) and there is no reason to suspect that it isn't still present. Although it is thought to have moulted in and out of breeding plumage, that sequence seemed to be independent of season. For instance it was in breeding plumage in May/June 2014, as well as six months later in January 2015 and again in December 2016. It was in non-breeding plumage in February 2018. Whenever looked-for it could normally be found near Pulu Ampang, only missed on rare occasions. This individual was timid and retiring. Other identifiable images of this bird are below and for interest, the last, Fig.10, is of this bird in non-breeding plumage.



**Figs. 4 & 5 Home Island & Pulu Ampang: left on 5<sup>th</sup> June, right 15<sup>th</sup> June 2014**  
Photos by Geof Christie





**Bird 2 at Pulu Ampang left to right & top to bottom**  
**Fig. 6, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2015; Fig. 7, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2015; Fig. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2016;**  
**Fig. 9, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2018; Fig. 10, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018.**

Photos by Geof Christie

Figure 10 shows the bird in non-breeding plumage



**BIRD 3. June to December 2015 on West Island concurrent with Bird 2.**

This bird frequented the airstrip from 23<sup>rd</sup> June to 30<sup>th</sup> December 2015. It could be identified individually by a broken iris in the left eye. That is a black mark extended from the black pupil forward across the yellow iris. Also at times a 'thread' emanated from its anus. Found by Geof Christie & Pamela Jones and seen subsequently by many individual birders and members of birding tour groups. Several groups were led by Richard Baxter and one by Peter Barrand. Other observers included Mike Carter. Likely this was a different individual to a non-breeding plumaged bird thought possibly a young one seen nearby earlier in the year. Contrary to Bird 2, this bird was very tame. It tolerated approach by persons in vehicles to less than 10 m and appeared to deliberately approach gangs of men working on the airstrip as they would disturb insects and often used fresh water, at times a scarce commodity on Cocos, pumped from underground.



**West Island airstrip, 2015.** Photos by Geof Christie  
**Fig. 11, 23<sup>rd</sup> June & Fig. 12, 30<sup>th</sup> October.** Note broken iris in left eye..  
**Fig. 13, 5<sup>th</sup> December.** Note thread emanating from anus.





**Figs. 14, 15 & 16. West Island airstrip, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2015**  
Photos by Mike Carter

**BIRD 4. From September 2015 to January 2016 on West Island concurrent with Birds 2 & 3. Seen intermittently by Geof Christie**

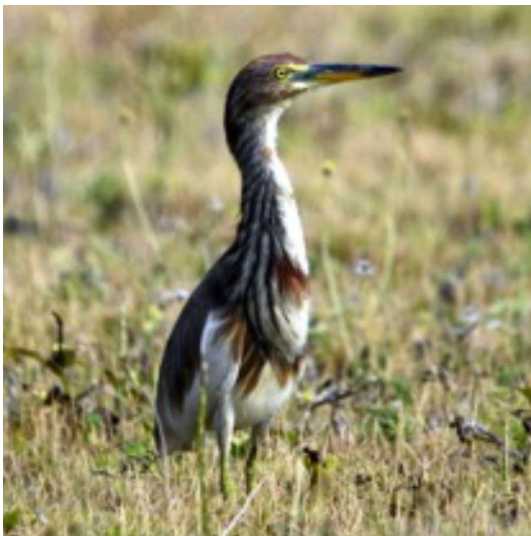
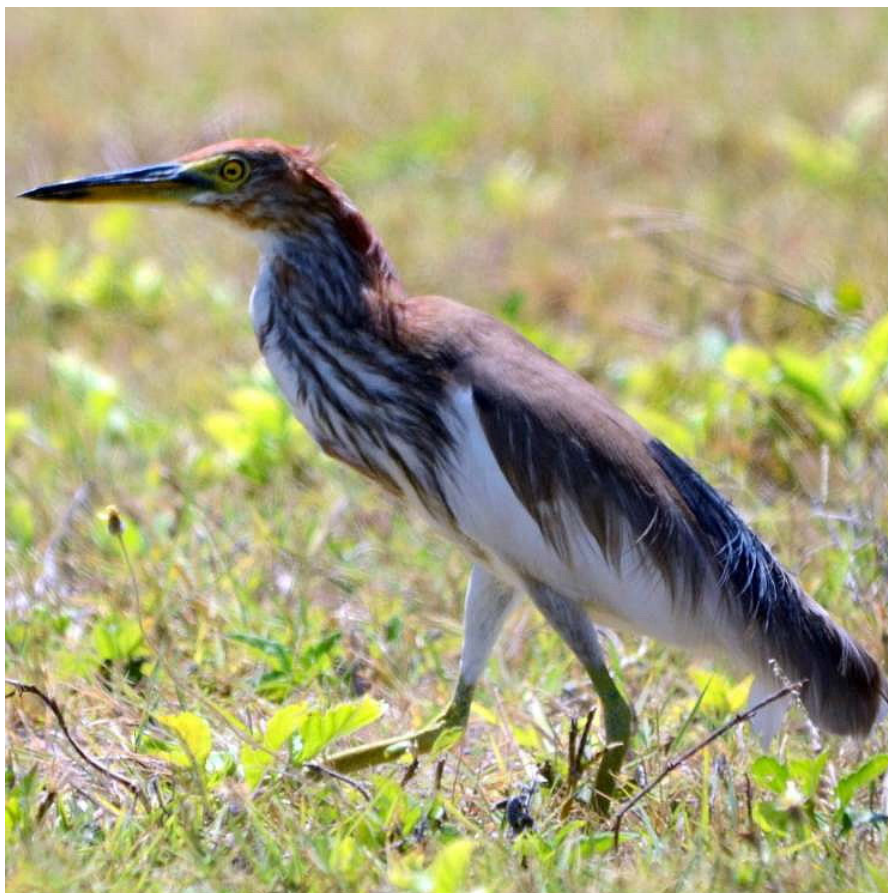


Photo by Geof Christie

**BIRD 5. 2019/20 West Island** concurrent with Bird 2.

Frequented the airstrip and the Settlement on West Island; found on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2019 by Geof Christie and present into late November and then intermittently with periods of apparent absence through to January 2020. Not as tame as Bird 3. Seen by numerous observers.



**Fig. 14**      **West Island 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019**      Photo by Geof Christie

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## Appendix

A character of Chinese Pond Heron not exhibited in Javan Pond Heron noticed by Geof Christie (not yet universally accepted as a reliably diagnostic) that can also show in birds not showing breeding plumage is illustrated below.



**Chinese Pond Heron Cocos 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015** Photo by Geof Christie

Note that as seen in the above image, only in this species does the yellow skin that forms the supercilium *continue and curl around behind and under the eye*. Compare images of Javan Pond Heron in the submission for BARC Cases 1056 to 1059.