

Robbing behaviour by Australian Pelicans

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The Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* is widely and regularly recorded at medium to large waters throughout the Hunter Region, and with a small breeding colony present on an island within Wallis Lake (Stuart 2010). The main diet of the Australian Pelican is fish, but it is noted to be an eclectic carnivore and scavenger, taking anything from insects and small crustaceans to ducks and small dogs (Marchant & Higgins 1990). It is known occasionally to rob other birds, such as the Black-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax fuscescens*, Eastern Great Egret *Ardea modesta*, Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* and Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* (Marchant & Higgins 1990). The robbing of cormorants *Phalacrocorax spp* by Australian Pelican has also been noted (MacGillivray 1923); however the author did not make it clear which cormorant species was the victim.

In 2011, I observed two incidents of robbery by Australian Pelicans. Both incidents occurred at Harrington NSW (31°52'23" 152°41'24"), where 30-50 pelicans are regularly present. In one incident, a Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius* was robbed; in the other, a pair of Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus* was robbed. The robbing of birds of prey by pelicans is not mentioned in Marchant & Higgins (1990).

On 25 January 2011 I observed a Pied Cormorant swimming in the Manning River, a few metres from the Harrington breakwater. The bird surfaced with a large fish, which it began to try to reposition in its bill in order to swallow it. However, after about a minute the cormorant still had not managed to complete the task. Its endeavours attracted the attention of an Australian Pelican, which swam over to the struggling bird and gripped the Pied Cormorant's head firmly in its bill. Very quickly,

the Pied Cormorant let go of the fish, at which point the pelican released the bird, then grabbed and swallowed the fish. After this, the pelican swam away sedately, and the deprived Pied Cormorant flew away, presumably to look for a safer place to fish.

On 18 April 2011, two Whistling Kites landed together on a sandbank in the mouth of the Manning River at Harrington. The birds began to share a fish – one of them had the main carcass while the other was picking at what appeared to be some entrails. After a short while, an Australian Pelican, one of a group of several which were roosting on the sandbank, walked unhesitatingly towards the pair of kites, which immediately backed away by 2-3 metres. The pelican promptly picked up and swallowed the fish carcass that they had left behind. The pelican then flew away, with the two kites staying put for several minutes before also departing.

Since I have never before witnessed Australian Pelicans robbing another bird, it is remarkable that I observed the behaviour twice at the same location in less than 3 months.

REFERENCES

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