

## Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*)

Robyn Howard

The Royal Spoonbill is an easily identified bird. It is 75 to 80 cm tall, with white plumage, naked black face and throat, black bill and long black legs. The bill is long with a structured upper surface, and becoming wide and flat towards the tip, its spatulate shape leading to the common name "Spoonbill". Calls are rarely heard, and generally only at nesting sites, but infrequently, "bill-clacking" may be practised.

There is a second spoonbill species which may occasionally be sighted around the Sunshine Coast. The Yellow-billed Spoonbill is slightly larger, with dull yellow to grey bill and legs. It is normally found along inland rivers or at inland dams.

The habitat preference of the Royal Spoonbill is either fresh or salt shallow water areas, so these waders frequent freshwater floodplains, marshes, billabongs, farm dams or sewage ponds, as well as tidal mudflats, mangroves, and estuaries. Feeding birds are often solitary, or in twos or threes, but sometimes may be in larger groups. These groups employ the "V" formation for long flights.

During breeding, both male and female sport additional plumes emanating from the rear of the head and nape of the neck (nuchal plumes). A red mark appears on the black skin of the forehead, with a strong small yellow mark above each eye. The breast may have a light buff wash, making it appear stained. Their nest is a platform of sticks located above water on the branch of a paperbark or mangrove or other suitable tree. Small numbers create colonies with other waterbirds such as ibis, darters, and cormorants. The male selects twigs, presenting them to the female who constructs the nest, then lines it with leaves or aquatic vegetation. Nests may be up to 60 cm wide. Usual clutch size is from 2 to 4 eggs which are incubated by both parents for 20 to 25 days, with both parents then feeding the young.

Royal Spoonbills wade in the shallows, swinging partly open beaks through the water to encounter food. Once an item is sensed, the bill automatically snaps shut, and if prey has been captured, the neck is thrown back to allow the food to be swallowed. If unsuccessful, the bird may chase the prey or resume its sweeping search. Favourite food items include fish, crustaceans, insects and frogs. In fresh water, the bird may seek amongst aquatic vegetation for snails which it will also consume. They will relocate from place to place following food sources.

At the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary, Royal Spoonbills survey both edges of the river or wade through the waterway beside the crab-hides. They are generally solitary or in pairs, using the area jointly with White-faced Herons (as photographed), egrets, and Striated Herons.

Photos:

Royal Spoonbill in waterside vegetation

Royal Spoonbill and White-faced Heron near the far Crab Hide at MWS

Royal Spoonbill in flight – Photo from Wikipedia



