

An observation of Black-necked Stork hunting and eating an Australasian Grebe

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Abstract

In October 2015 a male Black-necked Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus australis*) was seen stalking, catching, killing and eating an Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*) at Hasties Swamp National Park, northern Queensland. This appears to be only the third record in Australia and the first in Queensland of predation on a waterbird. Detailed photographs are included.

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Distributed across the Australian tropics, the Black-necked Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus australis*) (also known as Jabiru) is the only Stork in Australia. The species also occurs in southern New Guinea and has recently been considered for separation from the Black-necked Stork (*E. asiaticus asiaticus*) of Asia and South-east Asia (Greg Clancy, pers. comm.). The Black-necked Stork typically feeds while wading in shallow water, probing with its large bill and snapping on its prey which usually consists of fish, crustaceans and some insects as well as snakes (Marchant & Higgins 1990). In a major study in NSW over a period of more than two years Clancy (2011) found a range of fish, amphibians and invertebrates were the main diet items but there was one reptile (a turtle) and a single observation of a bird, an Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*). There appears to be only one other record of a Black-necked Stork consuming a waterbird in Australia, a record in Eremaea Birdlines NSW from 14th December, 2014. Ted Wrnowski reported observing a pair of Black-necked Storks catching, "playing with" and eventually one stork eating a Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*) cygnet, at Everlasting Swamp National Park, in NSW (available on Eremaea Birdline Archive, <http://www.eremaea.com/BirdlineArchive>

[.aspx?Birdline=2&From=20141214&To=20141214](#), downloaded 9 June 2016).

On the 1st October 2015 at the Hasties Swamp National Park near Atherton, northern Queensland, Australia, a single male Black-necked Stork was observed running down, pinning, battering, killing and finally eating a waterbird. The time was at 8.45 am and the hunt was completed by 9.00 am when the bird was swallowed. A series of photographs were taken that show the different stages. The prey was an Australasian Grebe (several of these were present in the shallows where the stork was hunting).

Initially the stork was seen actively running down the prey in the water (an expression employed by Clancy in his study), with wings raised and with long strides concluding with a strong downward stabbing action with the grebe apparently pinned underwater (Fig. 1).

The stork then vigorously shook the grebe several times with wings raised (Fig. 2) before commencing a series of strong battering actions in which the bill was raised and then quickly lowered with the grebe making heavy contact with the surface (Fig. 3).



Figure 1. Black-necked Stork stabbing and pinning Australasian Grebe.
All photographs by Peter Valentine, at Hasties Swamp, October 1, 2015.



Figure 2. Black-necked Stork shaking grebe.



Figure 3. Black-necked Stork battering grebe against the surface.

After a series of batterings over a period of several minutes it was clear that the grebe was motionless and legs and wings were broken or dislocated with some blood stains evident (Fig. 4). The stork then made numerous attempts to swallow the grebe

during which period there was occasional additional battering. The grebe was positioned head first down the bill (Fig. 5). Eventually the grebe was swallowed intact.



Figure 4. Black-necked Stork with the battered and blood-stained grebe prior to swallowing attempts.



Figure 5. The stork in the process of swallowing the grebe, headfirst.

The complete exercise, from running down the prey to final swallowing, took 15 minutes of more or less continuous effort by the Black-necked Stork.

The Black-necked Stork has been observed in India eating waterbirds including Coots, a Shoveller and chicks of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana (Ishtiaq et al. 2010). It may be that these are relatively rare events in Australia but it is clear that Black-necked Storks are capable of and will occasionally hunt, kill and eat waterbirds here also. Australasian Grebes spend a lot of time in deep water and are unlikely victims unless they venture into shallow water where storks hunt.

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References

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