

# ASH ISLAND BIRDING ROUTE

**ASH ISLAND:** Before European settlement in the early 1800s, Ash Island was a complex of lush coastal rainforest, mangrove-lined tidal channels and saltmarsh. It was named after the ash trees that were abundant at that time. In 1827 Ash Island was granted to A.W. Scott, an entrepreneur and keen naturalist, who grew oranges and established a market garden at Scotts Point. His talented daughters, Helena and Harriet, recorded and painted the diverse and abundant fauna and flora. Gould and Leichhardt, after visiting the area, were enthusiastic about “the beauty of nature” and the “great number of plants”.

Unfortunately, during the 1860’s, the island was subdivided, cleared and drained for agriculture and dairying. Subsequently, most of the estuarine islands, including Ash Island, were amalgamated for industrial development, into one landmass, Kooragang Island. However, the name Ash Island is still used to refer to the western end of Kooragang Island. Industrialisation is still an ongoing threat to the ecological integrity of Ash Island, with proposals for a major airport and an infrastructure corridor for a proposed steel-

works. Although only an environmental shadow of its former self, Ash Island still has vitally important waterbird habitat. Since 1993 Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project has been restoring wildlife habitat in suitable areas, particularly for fish and waders, while conserving threatened species such as Green and Golden Bellfrog. Ash Island is a haven for many of the smaller migratory waders such as Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint and Pacific Golden Plover. Non-migratory waders include Black-winged Stilt, Red-necked Avocet, Red-capped Plover, Red-kneed Dotterel and Black-fronted Dotterel. Ash Island is noted for turning up the occasional rarity, such as Ruff, Little Curlew, Grey Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper and, almost every Feb-

ruary and March, several Yellow Wagtail. Raptors are frequently seen with occasional sightings of Black Falcon and Brahminy Kite. A comprehensive report, discussing over 180 species that have been recorded on Ash Island by the Hunter Bird Observers Club since 1980, has been prepared by Alan Stuart. A copy is available from the Kooragang Wetlands Information Centre (Old Schoolmaster’s House, off Schoolhouse Road). The number and diversity of birds using Ash Island vary dramatically according to season, rainfall and state of the tide.

**1. ASH ISLAND BRIDGE CAR PARK:** Immediately after crossing the Ash Island bridge, turn left into a car park. Mangrove Gerygone can often be seen and heard here. In summer look for White-breasted Woodswallows perched on nearby powerlines.

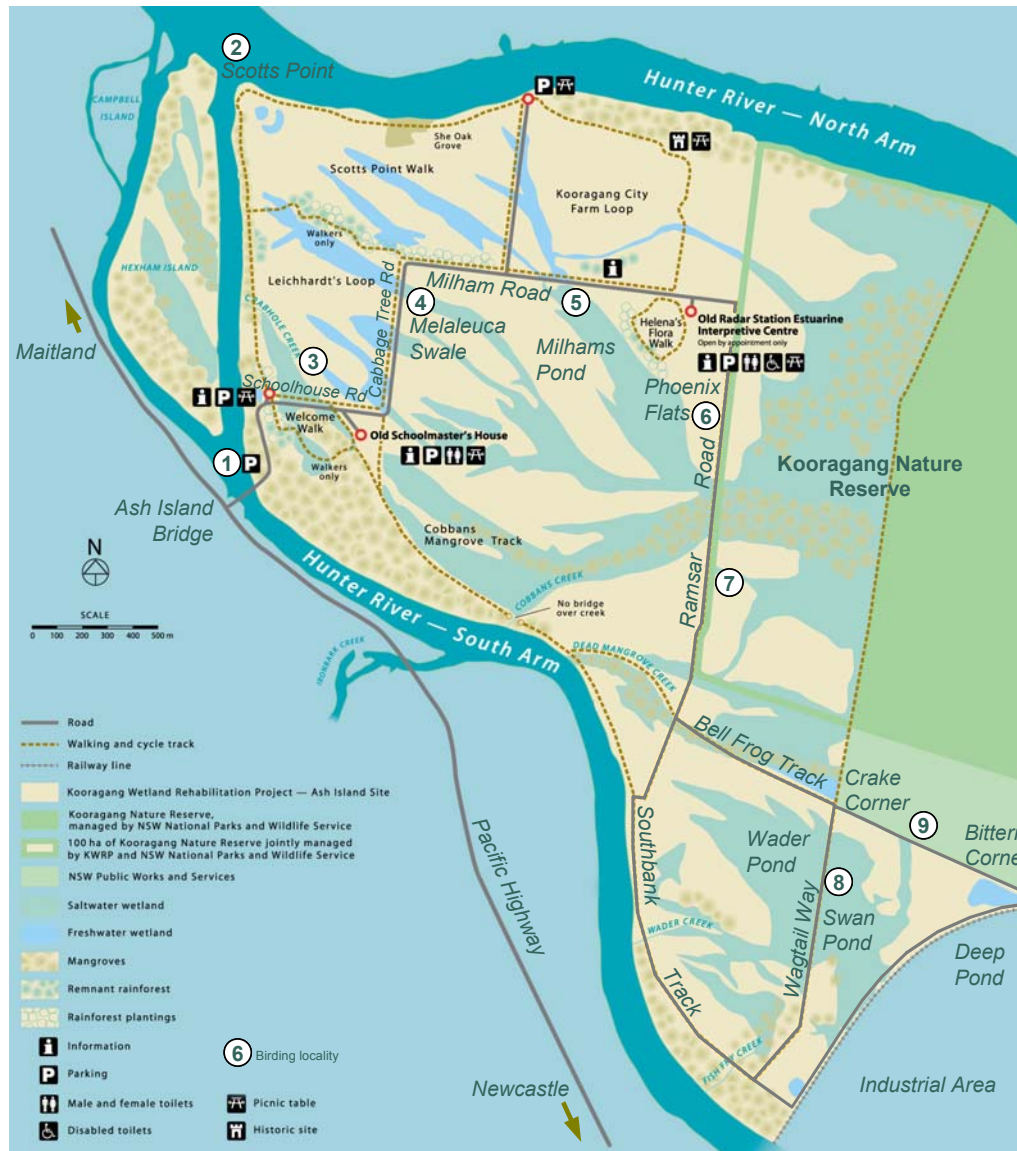
**2. SCOTTS POINT:** About 200m past the car park, just left of an information bay, a track leads to Scotts Point where Pacific Golden Plover, Common Sandpiper and other waders often roost at high tide. From a locked gate, walk north for about 750m and observe the river banks. Also watch for Brown Quail alongside the track.



**3. CRAB HOLE CREEK:** For the next 300m along Schoolhouse Road, survey to the left and right of the road for Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterel, Yellow-rumped Thornbill, Golden-headed Cisticola and, sometimes, Latham’s Snipe and Fairy Martin in summer. A mangrove boardwalk opposite the information bay is always worth checking (Welcome Walk).

**4. MELALEUCA SWALE AND RAINFOREST WALK:** Turn left into Cabbage Tree Road. The paddocks either side can have large numbers of White-faced Heron, White and Straw-necked Ibis, Cattle Egret and sometimes White-necked Heron and Yellow-billed Spoonbill. If there is water in Melaleuca Swale a variety of ducks may be present. At the corner of Cabbage Tree and Milham Roads a walking track leads off into an area of rainforest regeneration. Already Brown Thornbill, White-browed Scrubwren and Eastern Spinebill can be seen here.

**5. MILHAMS POND:** Turn right into Milham Road and after about 600m Milhams Pond can be seen extending to the southeast. White-fronted Chat, Black-fronted Dotterel,



Black-winged Stilt, Red-necked Avocet, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank and Eastern Curlew frequent the area. Watch out for Black-necked Stork at the far end. Waders often use the pond as a nocturnal roost site.

**6. PHOENIX FLATS:** Turn right down Ramsar Road. After about 400m note excavations to re-create saltmarsh 100m west of the road. Saltmarsh has established on the older southern section and Red-capped Plovers have already nested there. It will be interesting to see which



*Red-capped Plover*

birds use this area as saltmarsh establishes in the northern section. In dry conditions, vehicle access can be gained by turning right down a track off Milham Road immediately east of the Estuarine Interpretive Centre, about 100m before turning right down Ramsar Road. After about 800m

the track joins Ramsar Road just north of Cobbans Creek. Walking access to the southern end of Milhams Pond is available from this part of the track.

**7. RAMSAR ROAD PONDS:** Proceed down Ramsar Road, observe any ponds along the way. These ponds are influenced by rainfall and tidal inundation and have an ever changing variety of birds depending on water levels. Sometimes the ponds are full of ducks, then as the water dries up, small waders and White-fronted Chat, and then nothing when dry. Black-necked Stork have been recorded here. At night Nankeen Night Heron use the area.

**8. SWAN POND AND WADER POND:** The easiest car-access to these ponds is to turn left from Ramsar Road onto Southbank Road and left up Wagtail Way. Check out ponds immediately north of Wader Creek, off Southbank Track, for herons, egrets, crakes and rails. Swan Pond and Wader Pond are extensive shallow sheets of water to the east and west of Wagtail Way. These ponds are



*Sharp-tailed Sandpiper*

the most important sites for water birds on Ash Island. From September to April each year the smaller migratory waders make this their summer retreat from the northern hemisphere winter. Numbers of Sharp-tailed, Marsh and Curlew Sandpiper, Pacific Golden Plover, Common Greenshank, and Red-necked Stint are variable. During

winter Double-banded Plovers may be present. Most of the rarities reported from Ash Island are observed in this area. At times, Gull-billed and Whiskered Terns can be seen working over Swan Pond. When water levels are high ducks and Black Swans occur in considerable numbers. Since 1998 from one to seven Yellow Wagtails have been observed along Wagtail Way and along the railway line to the east of Swan Pond. They generally arrive during February and leave in early March. The eastern side of Swan Pond can also be observed from a track along the railway line. However, it is somewhat overgrown with woody weeds and thus difficult for vehicle access.

**9. BELL FROG TRACK:** A vehicle with high clearance is required to negotiate this track comfortably. Good elevated views into the northern parts of Swan Pond and Wader Pond can be obtained from this track. Keep a lookout for Brown Quail, Golden-headed Cisticola, Little



*Australian Spotted Crake*

Grassbird and Tawny Grassbird. At times of high water level and healthy juncus growth Australian Spotted Crake and Buff-banded Rail are present at Crake Corner. An Australasian Bittern has been seen occasionally at Bittern Corner and in freshwater swamps immediately north of

Bell Frog Track. From the eastern end of the track there are views across the railway line to Deep Pond and a variety of ducks, swans and small waders. Yellow Wagtails sometimes frequent the area around the railway line, especially from February to early March. Coal trains regularly use the line and it is safest to view the area from the western side.

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HBOC meets at 7.30pm, every 2nd Wednesday of the month (except January) at The Wetlands Centre, off the roundabout, Sandgate Rd, Shortland.

## Newcastle Birding Route No. 1

Hunter Bird Observers Club



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*Black-winged Stilt on Wader Pond*

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