

# **Managing Wetlands for Waterbirds on a Coastal Floodplain of New South Wales, Australia**



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*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England*

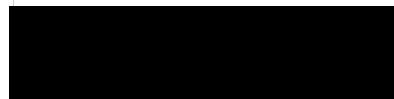
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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

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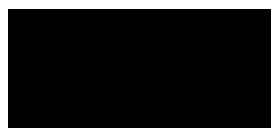
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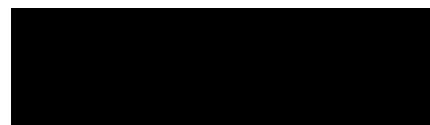
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## Abstract

Key to the conservation of waterbirds on coastal floodplains in Australia is improved management of their wetland habitats. Waterbirds and wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain, in north-east New South Wales, were studied from 2005 to 2007 to gather ecological information about the waterbird species that use the floodplain and the physical properties of the constituent wetlands. The work contained in this PhD consisted of a review of historical accounts, including oral history, appraisals of the wetland types and waterbird species present, monitoring of selected wetlands for waterbirds and water quality, particularly salinity, and bathymetric mapping of selected wetlands. Also, the grazing habits of one species (Black Swan *Cygnus atratus*) were studied, and an assessment of the value of drains as waterbird habitat was undertaken. Finally, wetland management on the floodplain was reviewed to contextualise how this would most favour waterbirds.

At the time of European settlement, the wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain sustained considerably higher numbers of waterbirds than at present. These wetlands were valuable natural resources for the local Aboriginal people with ducks, geese and swans easily hunted using traditional methods. European settlers displaced the local Aboriginal people from the floodplain in the 1800s, although through to the 1960s waterbirds were common food items for local residents with hunting being a popular sporting pursuit. European settlement dramatically altered waterbird habitat through the clearing of native vegetation, the introduction of farming and grazing, and hydrological alteration. The hydrology of the floodplain wetlands was altered initially by manually-constructed shallow drains but later, and more drastically, by a flood mitigation scheme that involved the construction of deep drains and channels affecting not only surface, but also sub-surface, hydrology. The subsequent ecological impacts included a dramatic decline in waterbird numbers and depletion of functional habitat. Only very recently have there been methodical efforts to restore locally important habitat, albeit incidentally to other restoration goals. On-going restoration efforts have focussed on modifying hydrological regimes on agricultural land for the control of acid sulphate discharge and creation of fish passage, although most recently a wetland area was purchased by government for nature conservation purposes.

I undertook waterbird surveys in wetlands across the floodplain from 2005 to 2007. I repeatedly identified and counted waterbirds in 13 of these wetlands during this time, and also measured salinity, pH, depth and temperature, and estimated the area covered by water at each visit. I then related the occurrence and number of each bird species to these environmental conditions. Over 60 species of waterbirds were recorded at the floodplain's wetlands, with 53 of these at the 13 monitored wetlands. One wetland, Little Broadwater, was outstanding relative to the other wetlands, in having consistently high numbers of species and birds. This was attributed to it being a large wetland and having retained consistently high levels of water. Wetlands consisted of two main types: those fed by rainfall and runoff only, and those fed by rainfall, runoff and regulated tidal flows through floodgates from the river or estuary. However, the abundances and number of species of birds were not significantly different between the two types of wetlands. Overall though, the wetlands differed significantly in the abundances and numbers of species, and of different ecological groups of birds. The most abundant species of waterbirds were Grey Teal *Anas gracilis*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Black Swan, Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* and Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*.

There were generally more waterbirds in wetlands that had a greater area of shallow water. This trend was shown in all foraging groups except diving omnivores, which was the only group where abundances increased as areas of water depths over 100 cm increased, but whose numbers decreased as areas of shallow depths increased. The abundances of all other groups increased as the areas of shallow depths increased. The results confirm the importance of shallow water depths in wetlands to waterbirds, and the potential importance of the aquatic-terrestrial transition zone. Therefore, incorporating bathymetric surveys with high vertical and horizontal resolution are strongly recommended for predictive management.

Of the 53 species recorded on the monitored wetlands, 13 were observed mostly in water of low salinity (<5 ppt total dissolved salts), with five of these species mostly limited to freshwater (<3 ppt), while 25 species occurred across all salinities (up to ~ 28 ppt). The Comb-crested Jacana *Irediparra gallinacea*, Pink-eared Duck *Malacorhynchus membranaceus* and Plumed Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna eytoni* were observed only in freshwater. Fifteen species were not categorised due to too few observations. The results here indicate that the introduction of more saline water (e.g., by hydrological

manipulation via floodgates) could have an impact upon the preferred habitat of threatened species, such as the Comb-crested Jacana and other species that prefer freshwater, locally at least. Other threatened species, such as the Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* and Brolga *Grus rubicunda*, which occur in both fresh and saline habitats, are less likely to be adversely affected, and may even benefit.

Black Swans were excluded from part of a wetland to measure the grazing impact of this large, and at times abundant, waterbird. After 135 days, the mean above-ground biomass of the dominant sedge *Eleocharis equisetina* was significantly less in grazed sites ( $607 \pm$  s.e.  $81 \text{ g.m}^{-2}$ ) than in ungrazed sites ( $1259 \pm$  s.e.  $177 \text{ g.m}^{-2}$ ) (a difference of ~6.5 tonnes / hectare). This difference was mostly due to the loss of leaf biomass above the waterline in grazed sites. Black Swans grazed preferentially at water depths of at least 15-20 cm, although they moved into shallower areas after depleting the above-water food source in deeper areas. The result was an altered structural habitat for waterbirds above the ambient water level, yet habitat complexity for aquatic fauna and the potential for rapid regrowth of leaves remained. The grazing had the effect of creating open water resulting in more habitat for other birds such as wading birds (e.g., Royal Spoonbills *Platalea regia*) and dabbling ducks (e.g., Grey Teal). Grazing by Black Swans appeared to be an important natural component of the ecological function of many of the floodplain's these wetlands. Where water levels can be artificially manipulated, local wetland managers could attempt to restore the flood pulse to wetlands that are large enough to sustain Black Swan populations in order to retain a variety of other waterbirds that require open water.

Flood mitigation drains provided habitat for only a few common species of waterbirds, mostly the Pacific Black Duck. Birds that used the drains were from a range of foraging groups but with low numbers and species in each. Changes to water quality in the drains did not appear to significantly improve their habitat value. Limitations of drains as waterbird habitat appear to be due to their inherent shape and size, and because the water levels provide a poor view of their surroundings for birds to feel safe using them. Also, lack of shallows, steep sides, lack of aquatic vegetative habitat, difficult flight access, and disturbance from the surrounding land-use activities probably all contribute to these drains being of less value as waterbird habitat than natural wetlands. Future management options to improve drains as waterbird habitat include widening and shallowing drains to

remove the steep sides, an action consistent with the improved management of acid sulphate soils.

Because of the previous land use practices and ongoing restoration there was much interest from local and state government resource managers in the work I was undertaking, and how acquired knowledge could improve management for waterbirds. There appears to be considerable local support for improving the management of wetlands, which often included the restoration of waterbird habitat. Restoration opportunities, however, were limited by the prevailing uses of the land that prevented establishing hydrological regimes most beneficial to waterbirds. Acquisition of land for conservation purposes offered the best possibility to improve wetland management in this regard.

## Table of Contents

<i>Declaration</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Statement of Originality</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Statement of Authors' Contribution</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xviii</i>
<i>List of Abbreviations and Terminology</i>	<i>xxii</i>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1. General</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2. Management</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.3. Restoration</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.4. Focus and Aims</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.5. Significance</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.6. Structure</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Waterbirds and their habitat on the Clarence River floodplain: a history</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.1. Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>2.1.1 Overview</i>	7
<i>2.1.2 General Significance</i>	7
<i>2.1.3 Materials and Methods</i>	8
<b>2.2. Traditional Aboriginal Use, European Discovery</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>2.2.1 The Pre-European Landscape</i>	11
<i>2.2.2 Aboriginal Use</i>	11
<i>2.2.3 European Discovery</i>	14
<b>2.3. Landscape Change I - European Settlement</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>2.3.1 The 1830s to 1850s: The Cedar-getters and Pastoralists</i>	14
<i>2.3.2 The 1860s to 1950s: Free Settlers – Small Farms, Displacement and Land Clearing</i>	16
<i>2.3.3 Floodplain Farming Life through to the 1950s</i>	19
<i>2.3.4 Waterbirds as “Sport”</i>	24
<i>2.3.5 Naturalists</i>	26
<i>2.3.6 Flooding and Drainage</i>	30
<b>2.4. Landscape Change II - Flood Mitigation</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>2.4.1 General</i>	32
<i>2.4.2 Increased agricultural productivity</i>	33
<i>2.4.3 Decreased agricultural productivity</i>	34
<i>2.4.4 What was lost?</i>	35
<i>2.4.5 Loss of a sport and recreation resource</i>	36
<i>2.4.6 Solastalgia</i>	36
<b>2.5. The Present</b>	<b>37</b>
<i>2.5.1 General</i>	37
<i>2.5.2 Restoration</i>	40
<i>2.5.3 The Clarence Floodplain Project</i>	40
<i>2.5.4 The Everlasting Swamp State Conservation Area</i>	40

<i>2.5.5 Knowledge Gaps</i>	41
<i>2.5.6 Climate Change</i>	41
<b>2.6. Conclusions</b>	<b>42</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Chapter 3: Wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain: types, and use by waterbirds</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>3.1. Introduction</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>3.1.1 General</i>	58
<i>3.1.2 Wetlands and Waterbirds</i>	59
<i>3.1.3 Classification of Wetlands in NSW and Locally</i>	62
<i>3.1.4 Wetlands and Waterbird Habitat on the Clarence River Floodplain</i>	63
<b>3.2. Methods</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>3.2.1 Study Area</i>	66
<i>3.2.2 Floodplain Overview</i>	66
<i>3.2.3 Survey Design</i>	70
<i>3.2.4 Data Collection</i>	74
<i>3.2.5 Data Analysis</i>	76
<b>3.3. Results</b>	<b>78</b>
<i>3.3.1 The Floodplain: general results and observations</i>	78
<i>3.3.2 Monitored Wetlands</i>	84
<i>3.3.3 Waterbird Communities - comparisons between wetlands</i>	92
<b>3.4. Discussion</b>	<b>100</b>
<i>3.4.1 General</i>	100
<i>3.4.2 Wetland Types and Habitat Variables</i>	100
<i>3.4.3 Foraging Groups and Species</i>	104
<b>3.5 Conclusions</b>	<b>106</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Chapter 4: The effect of water depth on the distribution and abundance of waterbirds in wetlands of Clarence River floodplain</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>4.1. Introduction</b>	<b>108</b>
<i>4.1.1 General</i>	108
<i>4.1.2 Aims</i>	114
<b>4.2. Methods</b>	<b>114</b>
<i>4.2.1 Study Area</i>	114
<i>4.2.2 Survey Design and Data Collection</i>	115
<i>4.2.3 Data Analysis</i>	118
<b>4.3. Results</b>	<b>119</b>
<i>4.3.1 General</i>	119
<i>4.3.2 Waterbirds and Wetlands</i>	121
<i>4.3.3 Relationship between Depths and Waterbirds</i>	133
<b>4.4. Discussion</b>	<b>138</b>
<i>4.4.1 Depth Measurements and Waterbirds</i>	138
<i>4.4.2 Numbers of Waterbirds and Numbers of Species</i>	138
<i>4.4.3 Important Depths for Foraging Groups and Species</i>	139
<i>4.4.4 Explanation of Results</i>	142
<i>4.4.5 Further Research</i>	142
<i>4.4.6 Management Implications</i>	144
<b>4.5. Conclusions</b>	<b>145</b>
Attachments to Chapter 4	146

Chapter 5: Waterbirds on wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain wetlands: associations with salinity 151

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<b>5.1. Introduction</b>	<b>151</b>
<i>5.1.1 General</i>	151
<i>5.1.2 Aims</i>	154
<b>5.2. Methods</b>	<b>155</b>
<i>5.2.1 Study Area</i>	155
<i>5.2.2 Survey Design and Data Collection</i>	155
<i>5.2.3 Data Interpretation and Analysis</i>	155
<b>5.3. Results</b>	<b>157</b>
<i>5.3.1 Wetlands</i>	157
<i>5.3.2 All species</i>	158
<i>5.3.3 Comparison with statistical analysis in Chapter 3</i>	158
<i>5.3.4 Categorisation</i>	159
<i>5.3.5 Functional Foraging Groups</i>	160
<i>5.3.6 Species of Conservation Significance</i>	161
<i>5.3.7 Comparisons with previous research</i>	161
<b>5.4. Discussion</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>5.4.1 Overview of results</i>	169
<i>5.4.2 Species and Management</i>	169
<i>5.4.3 Data Collection</i>	170
<i>5.4.4 Local Management Issues: higher salinity in wetlands</i>	173
<b>5.5. Conclusions</b>	<b>174</b>

Chapter 6: Grazing by Black Swans *Cygnus atratus* on a seasonally-flooded wetland 175

---

<b>6.1. Introduction</b>	<b>176</b>
<i>6.1.1 General</i>	176
<i>6.1.2 Aims</i>	178
<b>6.2. Study Site</b>	<b>178</b>
<i>6.2.1 Study Area</i>	178
<i>6.2.2 Little Broadwater</i>	179
<i>6.2.3 Management</i>	180
<i>6.2.4 Preliminary Observations</i>	180
<b>6.3. Methods</b>	<b>181</b>
<i>6.3.1 Exclosures and Vegetation Sampling</i>	181
<i>6.3.2 Bird Counts</i>	182
<b>6.4. Results</b>	<b>182</b>
<i>6.4.1 Biomass: Grazed and Ungrazed</i>	182
<i>6.4.2 Swans: Numbers and Grazing Patterns</i>	183
<i>6.4.3 Water Quality and Quantity</i>	184
<i>6.4.4 Influence of Grazing by Black Swans on Other Birds</i>	185
<b>6.5. Discussion</b>	<b>186</b>
<i>6.5.1 General</i>	186
<i>6.5.2 Implications of Swans Grazing on Wetlands</i>	187
<i>6.5.3 A Keystone Species?</i>	188
<i>6.5.4 Management</i>	188
<b>6.6. Conclusions</b>	<b>189</b>

<b>Chapter 7: Waterbirds and drains on the Clarence River floodplain</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>7.1. Introduction</b>	<b>191</b>
<i>7.1.1 General</i>	191
<i>7.1.2 Aims</i>	192
<b>7.2. Location, Drainage and Drains</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>7.3. Methods</b>	<b>193</b>
<i>7.3.1 Data Collection</i>	193
<i>7.3.2 Data Analysis</i>	198
<b>7.4. Results</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>7.5. Discussion</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>7.6. Conclusions</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Chapter 8: Managing wetlands for waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>8.1. Introduction</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>8.2. An International Overview</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>8.3. An Australian and Local Overview</b>	<b>215</b>
<i>8.3.1 Conservation of Species and Habitat: Statutes and Reserves</i>	216
<i>8.3.2 Hunting</i>	217
<i>8.3.3 Restoration</i>	218
<b>8.4. Planning</b>	<b>219</b>
<i>8.4.1 Scale</i>	219
<i>8.4.2 Plans and Guidelines</i>	221
<b>8.5. The Clarence River Floodplain</b>	<b>223</b>
<i>8.5.1 Regional Context</i>	223
<i>8.5.2 Review of Findings from Previous Chapters</i>	224
<i>8.5.3 Management Strategies and Techniques</i>	228
<i>8.5.4 The Clarence Floodplain Project</i>	230
<i>8.5.5 Case Studies</i>	231
<i>8.5.6 Unknown Issues</i>	233
<b>8.6. Management in Practice: looking forward</b>	<b>234</b>
<i>8.6.1 Waterbird Species and Habitat Requirements</i>	234
<i>8.6.2 Wetland Management Strategies and Objectives</i>	237
<i>8.6.3 Social and Economic Issues</i>	238
<i>8.6.4 Monitoring</i>	241
<i>8.6.5 Management Practice</i>	241
<i>8.6.6 Data Gaps and Uncertainties</i>	243
<b>8.7. Conclusions</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Chapter 9: General Conclusions</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>248</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 2.1.</b> Location of the Clarence River floodplain in north-east New South Wales.	43
<b>Figure 2.2.</b> Aboriginal men hunting and fishing from a bark canoe in an estuary of the New South Wales north coast ca. 1900. (From the Thomas Dick photographic collection, courtesy of Lisa Apo, NSW NPWS)	44
<b>Figure 2.3.</b> Studio portraits of Aboriginal men of the Clarence River area ca. 1873 with hunting equipment, including what is probably a bird net (M. Smith, pers. comm. 2008, WA Museum). (Photographs by J.W. Lindt, Grafton. Courtesy of the Clarence River Historical Society)	45
<b>Figure 2.4.</b> The Clarence River floodplain 2002 (Spot Image) showing a landscape mostly cleared of native vegetation (in lighter shades). (Courtesy of Clarence Valley Council)	46
<b>Figure 2.5.</b> Shooters on the Clarence River ca. 1900, posing for photo. The boatman holds a duck caller in his mouth and a Eurasian Coot ( <i>Fulica atra</i> ) in his hand. (Possibly on the main river channel near Grafton) (Courtesy of the Clarence River Historical Society)	47
<b>Figure 2.6.</b> Duck shooters with “catch” ca. 1910 on the Clarence River floodplain (possibly on the Ulmarra or Coldstream wetlands). Note the “duck dinghy” and decoy ducks (Black Duck) on bow. These decoy birds are dead and probably wired into position, although live decoys were sometimes used (illegally) on the water. (Courtesy of the Clarence River Historical Society)	48
<b>Figure 2.7.</b> Portrait of the naturalist John MacGillivray and his “famous three-barrelled gun”. He was based in South Grafton 1864-66. (From the Australian Zoologist Volume 9, Plate 4) (Iredale 1937).	49
<b>Figure 2.8.</b> South Grafton (looking west along Through Street) during the “Great Flood of 1890” flooding homes, crops and roads. Water reached a height of 7.8m in Grafton, the highest recorded from 1839 to the present. (Courtesy of the Clarence River Historical Society)	50
<b>Figure 2.9.</b> Construction of the Cowper flood mitigation drain in the 1960s, to drain the northern area of the Coldstream-Ulmarra wetlands into the Clarence River. (Courtesy of Clarence Valley Council)	51
<b>Figure 2.10.</b> Cattle grazing and Black Swans at Little Broadwater, 2003. The Clarence Floodplain Project has included strategies to reintroduce water onto drained wetlands on private land, benefiting livestock graziers and waterbirds. (Courtesy of Clarence Valley Council)	52
<b>Figure 3.1.</b> Major habitat variables of wetlands that affect use by waterbirds where arrows indicate the interactions between the variables (from Ma et al., 2010).	60
<b>Figure 3.2.</b> Location of wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain: (a) visited irregularly during 2005-07 with numbers referring to wetlands listed in Table 3.5; (b) monitored regularly 2006-07.	69
<b>Figure 3.3.</b> Average water temperatures in 13 wetlands 2006-07 (pooled data from all wetlands sampled monthly in 2006, and in March, June, September and December in 2007) (box plot data: 75% within box with median; 90% within whiskers; dots are 10%).	84

<b>Figure 3.4.</b> Boxplots of salinity ranges at 13 wetlands monitored over 2006-07 (n = 16, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)) (box plot data: 75% within box with median; 90% within whiskers; dots are 10%).	86
<b>Figure 3.5.</b> Boxplots of ranges of pH in 13 wetlands in 2006-07 based on three data points (maximum, minimum and median) on each monitoring occasion (n = 16, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)) (box plot data: 75% within box with median; 90% within whiskers; dots are 10%).	87
<b>Figure 3.6.</b> Boxplots of ranges of total numbers of 53 species of waterbirds counted at 13 wetlands in 2006-07 (n = 16, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)) (box plot data: 75% within box with median; 90% within whiskers; dots are 10%).	91
<b>Figure 3.7.</b> Boxplots of ranges of number of waterbird species at 13 wetlands 2006-07 (n = 16, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)) (box plot data: 75% within box with median; 90% within whiskers; dots are 10%).	91
<b>Figure 3.8.</b> nMDS plot of waterbird species and abundance at 13 wetlands: (a) individual wetlands, and; (b) water source. (Plots generated from the same data)	96
<b>Figure 3.9.</b> ANOSIM (analysis of similarity with 99,999 permutations): pair-wise tests for similarity among 13 wetlands (based on abundance data of 53 waterbird species with fourth-root transformation). The pairs highlighted were not significantly different (i.e. $p > 0.01$ ) with p values indicated, while all other pairs were significantly different (* = $p < 0.0001$ , ** = $p < 0.001$ and *** = $p < 0.01$ ).	97
<b>Figure 4.1.</b> Wetland morphology types (after "lake types" from Wantzen et al., 2008) indicating the "different importance of water-level fluctuations (minimum and maximum water levels indicated by horizontal lines)": (A) Large, deep wetland with steep banks, (B) Shallow wetland, entirely influenced by the flood pulse, (C) Combined type of A and B with deep central trough and extensive shallow areas, (D) "Average" wetland with moderate shallow areas and permanent central trough.	110
<b>Figure 4.2.</b> Software-generated images of wetlands: (a) (ArcGIS) contour map of Arndilly wetland based on physical survey data (5 cm contours shown); (b) (MapInfo) image of Chaffins, Kennys and Morans wetlands (approximate boundaries shown) and surrounds based on Digital Terrain Model data.	122
<b>Figure 4.3.</b> Depth-Area plots for 10 wetlands derived from survey or digital terrain models. Horizontal lines indicate the maximum, median, and minimum values recorded of the maximum depths of each wetland during monitoring in 2006-07. (A maximum below the end of the plot indicates that the wetland was not observed at its fullest during this time. A maximum above the plot indicates the wetland was full and overflowing at that point.)	123
<b>Figure 4.4.</b> Ranges of maximum water depths (cm) at which 52 waterbird species were observed in 10 wetlands during 2006-07. Species listed in Foraging Groups.	130
<b>Figure 4.5.</b> (a) number of waterbirds, and (b) number of species: at 10 wetlands during 2006-07 measured by the total area of wetlands (Correlation - Pearson's (a): $r = 0.144, p = 0.080, df = 146$ ; (b): $r = -0.164, p = 0.046, df = 146$ ). Data points for the Little Broadwater wetland are highlighted.	131

<b>Figure 4.6.</b> (a) number of waterbirds, and (b) number of species: at 10 wetlands during 2006-07 measured by the wet area of wetlands (Correlation - Pearson's (a): $r = 0.663, p < 0.001$ , df 146; (b): $r = 0.537, p < 0.001$ , df 146). Data points for the Little Broadwater wetland are highlighted.	131
<b>Figure 5.1.</b> Box plots (left to right: outliers, 90%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 10%, outliers) of averages of salinity measured at 13 wetlands (including four zones within one wetland, Little Broadwater) monitored over 2006-07 ( $n = 16$ , except Ryans ( $n = 12$ ) and Woodwards ( $n = 13$ )).	157
<b>Figure 5.2.</b> Ranges (absolute minima to maxima) of salinity over which 53 waterbird species (number of observations of each species in parentheses) were recorded in 13 wetlands during 2006-07. (Species with $< 10$ observations are represented with hollow bars.)	164
<b>Figure 5.3.</b> The relationship between the salinity range values (maximum less minimum) (ppt) of each waterbird species observed, and the number of observations of each species, at 13 wetlands during 2006-07 (Correlation - Pearson's: $r = 0.696, p < 0.001$ , df = 51).	165
<b>Figure 5.4.</b> Box plots (as indicated left to right: outliers, 90%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 10%, outliers) of average salinities of wetlands measured during 2006-07, where 53 waterbird species (number of observations) were observed, presented in eight Foraging Groups (Note: varying scales). (In instances where only one or two observations of a species were made, maximum, minimum and average records of salinity were used to generate plots.)	166
<b>Figure 6.1.</b> Location of Clarence River floodplain and Little Broadwater; vegetation of Little Broadwater and location of Black Swan exclosure experimental sites.	179
<b>Figure 6.2.</b> Total above-ground, above-water, and below-water biomass, in grazed ( $n=5$ ) and ungrazed ( $n=5$ ) sites at Little Broadwater on 11 July 2007, means and standard errors.	183
<b>Figure 6.3.</b> Vegetation plot excluding Black Swans at Little Broadwater in July 2007, and showing the effects of grazing of Soft Rush above the water line outside of the exclosure.	184
<b>Figure 6.4.</b> Water depth at Little Broadwater from March to September 2007 (data from continuous water-level data logger (Clarence Valley Council) transposed to fixed gauge).	185
<b>Figure 6.5.</b> Theoretical scenarios of wetland ecological function according to hydrological regime of the wetland, pasture growth and activities of Black Swan s.	190
<b>Figure 7.1.</b> Clarence Valley floodplain: (a) location; (b) without drains, showing natural watercourses only; (c) with flood mitigation and agricultural drains marked, and showing location of Harwood Island and reference monitoring sites R1 to R5.	195
<b>Figure 7.2.</b> Harwood Island and location of monitoring sites M1 to M12 (public drains marked in blue).	196
<b>Figure 7.3.</b> (a), (b) and (c): Drains and remnant wetland, 2006.	197

<b>Figure 7.4.</b> nMDS plot of waterbird species presences and abundance at 11 sites on drains on Harwood Is before and after floodgate opening, on five reference drains and on a remnant wetland on Harwood Island. (Transformation: Fourth root; Resemblance: D1 Euclidean distance; 2D Stress: 0.11). The unbroken oval line indicates the concentration of data for drains, and the dotted oval line indicates the concentration of data for the remnant wetland.	204
<b>Figure 7.5.</b> Mean numbers and species of birds at all drain sites (M1 to M11 and R1 to R5) relative to: (a) width of drain; (b) vertical distance from water surface to top edge of drain, and; (c) depth of water in drain. Significant associations ( $p < 0.05$ ) are indicated between: the number of species and width of water; and, the number of birds and width of water.	206
<b>Figure 7.6.</b> Number of waterbirds and species at Harwood Is drains (sites M1 to M11) relative to: (a) salinity, and; (b) pH. Significant associations ( $p < 0.05$ ) are indicated between: the number of species and salinity, the number of species and pH; and, the number of birds and pH.	207
<b>Figure 8.1.</b> The relationship between the ecological significance to waterbirds, and the manageability of wetlands, of increasing landscape scale and complexity (after Erwin, 2002). See locations in Chapter 3.	221
<b>Figure 8.2.</b> A generalised representation of the major landscape elements and interactions on the north coast of New South Wales (from Institute for Rural Futures, 2008), including for the Clarence River floodplain and its surrounds. Arrows indicate the main direction of influence on other landscape elements, showing wetlands connected directly or indirectly to most other elements.	224
<b>Figure 8.3.</b> Depth-area curve (solid line) for a stylised wetland typical of the Clarence River floodplain. Mean water levels are indicated: upper dashed line indicates a natural mean-maximum water level; and, lower dotted line indicates a mean-maximum water level following drainage of the floodplain.	225
<b>Figure 8.4.</b> Components and flow path for a guideline or plan, for managing a wetland for waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain.	242

## List of Tables

<b>Table 2.1.</b> Human activities affecting waterbirds and their habitat on the Clarence River floodplain (based on historical, anecdotal and personal observations)	53
<b>Table 2.2.</b> Frequently recorded waterbird species of the fresh and seasonally fresh wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain: indicative abundance before and after floodplain drainage of the 1960s (based on historical, anecdotal, personal observations and unpublished data from current research). (Estimate of maximum abundance: U = unknown; 0 = 0; 1 = 1 to 10; 2 = > 10 to 100; 3 = > 100 to 1,000; 4 = > 1,000 to 10,000; 5 = > 10,000) (Listed refers to listing under the NSW TSC Act 1995, or as a migratory species under Australian EPBC Act 1999.)	54
<b>Table 3.1.</b> Wetland features that determine waterbird habitat (from Weller, 2004).	61
<b>Table 3.2.</b> Coastal wetlands types in New South Wales (from Green, 1997)	62
<b>Table 3.3.</b> Wetlands in the Coldstream River area of the Clarence River floodplain (after Pressey, 1987).	63
<b>Table 3.4.</b> Waterfowl habitat value of coastal wetland types in New South Wales (from Goodrick, 1970).	63
<b>Table 3.5.</b> List of wetlands visited irregularly on the Clarence River floodplain from 2005 to 2007. ‘N°’ refers to location on Figure 3.2. Type: 1 = fresh wetlands, Rain-Only; 2 = tidal, seasonally fresh wetlands, All-Water; 3 = tidal, saline, estuarine wetlands	68
<b>Table 3.6.</b> Wetlands on the Clarence Valley floodplain monitored regularly during 2006 and 2007 (n = 16 times, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)). Type: 1 = fresh wetlands, Rain-Only; 2 = tidal, seasonally fresh wetlands, All-Water. ASS = acid sulphate soils.	72
<b>Table 3.7.</b> Waterbird species observed on wetlands of the Clarence River floodplain from 2005 to 2007. See Table 3.5 and Figure 3.2 for names and locations of wetlands as per numbers here. Common and species names follow (Christidis & Boles, 2008).	79
<b>Table 3.8.</b> Water depth at deepest points: average and range of 10 wetlands monitored during 2006-07 (n = 16, except Gills (n = 12) and Woodwards (n = 8)).	85
<b>Table 3.9.</b> Presence or absence of waterbirds at 13 wetlands 2006-07 as indicated by maximum counts (n = 16, except Ryans (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 13)). Shading indicates species that were observed in all 13 wetlands. Figures in bold show the highest number of that species counted. Foraging groups: diving omnivores (do); diving piscivores (dp); wading piscivores (wp); large wading omnivores (lw); dabbling ducks (dd); herbivorous grazers (hg); small wading birds (sw), and; birds of prey (bp).	89
<b>Table 3.10.</b> Table 3.10. Nested ANOVA results for comparison of abundance and number of species in 10 wetlands of two types (five Rain-Only and five All-Water). (Analyses were done for total waterbirds and each foraging group, between wetland-types and wetlands. VC = variance component (strength of association). VC (%) calculated as the variance component of each factor divided by the total variance times 100.)	93

<b>Table 3.11.</b> SIMPER (Bray-Curtis similarity percentages) analysis of average abundance of each species, and contribution to similarity by each species, in 13 wetlands (six All-Water wetlands and seven Rain-Only wetlands). Species are listed in order of contribution to similarity. The three species of highest average abundance in each group are highlighted. Species in bold indicate those most abundant only in that type wetland.	98
<b>Table 3.12.</b> Principal Component Analysis of 13 wetlands (based on abundance data of 53 waterbird species with fourth-root transformation). (a) Contribution of principal components (PC) to analysis; (b) list of species with the 10 highest PC1 values, and four threatened species, ranked in order of PC1 value; (c) list of species with 10 lowest PC2 value, ranked in order of PC2 value. Eigenvector values (coefficients in the linear combinations of variables making up PCs) are listed for each of these species.	99
<b>Table 4.1.</b> General shape, flooding characteristics and average abundance and number of waterbird species at 13 wetlands on the Clarence River floodplain 2006-07 (n=16, except: Woodwards = 13; Ryans = 12). (General Shape: A to D, see Figure 4.1.) (Flood / Depth Regime: Permanent (P); Seasonal (S); Episodic (E).) (ATTZ = aquatic-terrestrial transition zone: estimated percentage of whole wetland.) Wetlands with the three highest average abundances of waterbirds are highlighted.	120
<b>Table 4.2.</b> Maximum depths (cm) of 10 wetlands at each monitoring occasion during 2006-07 with the corresponding maximum wet area (ha) on these occasions. (Blanks indicate that no observations were made on that occasion.)	125
<b>Table 4.3.</b> Numbers of waterbirds and numbers of species in 10 wetlands, in each of up to 16 monitoring occasions during 2006-07. (Blanks indicate that no observations were made at that time.)	126
<b>Table 4.4.</b> Maximum counts of waterbird species at 10 wetlands during 2006-07 with average and s.d. for counts of species and total numbers of waterbirds for all wetlands (n = 16, except Gills (n = 12), Woodwards (n = 8)). Figures in bold are the highest number of that species counted. Foraging groups (FG) of waterbirds: diving omnivores (do); diving piscivores (dp); wading piscivores (wp); large wading omnivores (lw); dabbling ducks (dd); herbivorous grazers (hg); small wading birds (sw), and; birds of prey (bp). (Scientific names are listed in Chapters 2 and 3.)	127
<b>Table 4.5.</b> Mean area of water of functional water depth zones at 10 wetlands observed 2006-07 (n = 16, except Gills (n = 12) and Woodwards (n = 8))	132

<b>Table 4.6.</b> Correlations between abundance of waterbird species / abundance of species in foraging group, and areas of zones of water depths (including Dry areas, i.e. <0 cm, and Total Wet areas. i.e. >0 cm) at 10 wetlands over 2006-07. N = number of separate observations of individual species. r = Pearson Correlation Coefficient, df = 146 (148-2). Significant correlations are highlighted: significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and; highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). aCorrelations for migratory waders (as sub-group and as individual species) and depths are from September to April only: df = 100. Analyses of Foraging Groups are for all species observed. Analyses of species only if $\geq 10$ observations. (Species listed within Foraging Groups.) * indicates the significant results that were also significant for analyses of means (see Attachment Table A).	136
<b>Table 5.1.</b> The most abundant waterbird species on wetlands of two types on the Clarence River floodplain 2006-07: wetlands whose source includes a saline influence but whose salinity levels vary (All-Water), and wetlands with a rainfall source only and remain constantly fresh (Rain-Only) (after Chapter 3).	159
<b>Table 5.2.</b> The salinity (ppt Total Dissolved Salts) of wetlands used by waterbirds in south-west of Western Australia, observed 1981-1985 (after Goodsell, 1990).	161
<b>Table 5.3.</b> Salinity (ppt) of wetlands used by waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain 2006-07. (species n $\geq 10$ , in maximum salinity <5, ppt are highlighted)	163
<b>Table 5.4.</b> Summary of salinity tolerances for 53 waterbird species based on monitoring in Clarence River floodplain wetlands 2006-07. (Species observed >95% in <3 ppt (freshwater) are shaded.) (For n <10, tolerances (in parentheses) are indicative only.)	168
<b>Table 7.1.</b> Dates of observation of water birds and water quality sampling at flood mitigation drains at monitoring sites on Harwood Island (M1 to M12) and reference drains elsewhere on the Clarence River floodplain (R1 to R5) (● = floodgate on drain closed to water exchange; □ = floodgate on drain open to water exchange).	194
<b>Table 7.2.</b> Site attributes of drains monitored for waterbirds 2006-07 at Harwood Island (M1-M12) and reference drains elsewhere on the Clarence River floodplain (R1-R5). Refer to Figures 7.1 and 7.2 for site locations.	199
<b>Table 7.3.</b> (a) Number of waterbirds; (number of species), and means (s.e.) at drains on Harwood Island (M1-M11), before and after floodgate opening, and Reference Drains (R1-R5) elsewhere on the Clarence River floodplain, during monitoring visits in 2006-07. (b) Results of t-tests: $p$ values.	201
<b>Table 7.4.</b> Mean number of waterbird species (s.e.) observed in flood mitigation drains in 2006–2007. Drains M1 to M11 (n=9), and reference drains R1 to R5 (n=4). See Table 7.1 for dates of observations. Waterbird foraging groups : diving piscivores (dp); wading piscivores (wp); large wading omnivores (lwo); herbivorous grazers (hg); diving omnivores (do); dabbling ducks (dd); birds of prey (bop); small waders (sw).	202

<b>Table 7.5.</b> Mean number of waterbirds per drain, presented in groups of drains: Harwood Island before and after opening of floodgates (10 drains); reference drains (five drains), and a remnant wetland. Mean totals are shown with and without Pacific Black Ducks in the counts. Waterbird foraging groups (see Table 7.4) are indicated (in parentheses).	203
<b>Table 7.6.</b> Range from minimum to maximum of salinity (ppt - parts per thousand) and pH, at drains on the Clarence River floodplain during monitoring visits in 2006-07.	205
<b>Table 8.1.</b> Priorities for future research and management of wetlands for waterbirds (after Ma et al., 2010).	215
<b>Table 8.2.</b> Key issues to be considered when developing practical plans and guidelines for biodiversity conservation (from Lindenmayer et al., 2008).	222
<b>Table 8.3.</b> Wetland management practices to provide waterbird habitats (after Ma et al., 2010).	223
<b>Table 8.4.</b> Groups of waterbirds for management on the Clarence River floodplain. Based on information presented in previous chapters.	235
<b>Table 8.5.</b> Habitat requirements of management groups of waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain. Based on information presented in previous chapters.	236
<b>Table 8.6.</b> Management and factors regulating habitat conditions for various species or groups of waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain.	237
<b>Table 8.7.</b> Management Scenarios according to agricultural landholder preferences for depth and salinity of water in wetlands on their properties. Based on personal observations and communications 2005-2007.	238
<b>Table 8.8.</b> Subjective assessment of the compatibility of land uses on the Clarence River floodplain: 1. Nil to Very Low; 2. Low; 3. Moderate; 4. High; 5. Very High. Based on distribution and abundance of waterbirds at various wetlands observed 2005-2007 (see Chapters 2 to 7) and personal communications. Shading indicates a very high compatibility, with figures in bold indicating a very high compatibility with waterbirds.	240
<b>Table 8.9.</b> General, subjective assessment of restoration potential of wetlands by hydrological manipulation or other means under different land uses: (a) Possibility for restoration of waterbird habitat to be undertaken under current land use scenarios; (b) Probability that if restoration was undertaken it would achieve improved outcomes for waterbirds. Scale: 1. Very Low; 2. Low; 3. Moderate; 4. High; 5. Very High. Based on general observations 2005-2007 (see Chapters 2 to 7) and personal communications.	240
<b>Table 8.10.</b> Components and methods for the monitoring of wetlands managed for waterbirds on the Clarence River floodplain. Based on pers. obs. 2005-2007.	241

## List of Abbreviations and Terminology

### **Abbreviation**

cm	centimetre(s)	1 cm = 0.01 metres (m)
km	kilometre	1 km = 1,000 m
ha	hectare(s)	1 ha = 100 m x 100 m
pers. obs.	personal observation	by the author
<i>cf</i>	compared with / to	
<i>e.g.</i>	for example	
pers. comm.	personal communication	usually verbal
N°.	number	
CVC	Clarence Valley Council	
NSW	New South Wales	
NPWS	National Parks and Wildlife Service	a group within DECCW
DECC	Department of Environment and Climate Change	up to 2009
DECCW	Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water	since 2009

### **Terminology**

### **International equivalent(s)**

catchment	watershed
drain	canal, ditch
swamp	any wetland