

Medium to large elegant wading birds with long neck and legs, straight dagger-like bill and long unwebbed toes. Flight strong, typically with heavy languid wingbeats on broad wings, neck folded back and head tucked in, and legs trailing. Sexes alike. Immatures of most species are like adults but duller. Many species have ornamental plumes, which may be on the head, back and chest, sometimes distinctively coloured. The colours of bill, facial skin, legs and feet may become brighter or change as birds come into breeding condition. They feed in shallow water or on damp pasture, walking slowly or standing motionless and lunging at prey. Diet is mainly aquatic animals. All may make a harsh grating call in flight; otherwise silent except at breeding colonies. Many species breed and roost communally, others are solitary. Lay 2–5 blue-green eggs on a platform of sticks built in trees or on cliffs.

WHITE-FACED HERON *Ardea novaehollandiae*

Abundant native

67 cm, 550 g. Slim bluish-grey heron with white face, chin and upper throat; bill black, legs greenish yellow. Strap-shaped plumes, more prominent in the breeding season, are long and pale grey on the back and short and pinkish brown on the chest. Juvenile like adult but lacks plumes and the white face is reduced, often white chin only. Flight slow, often high, with steady beats of 2-toned wings. **Habitat:** Occupies a wide variety of habitats from coastal estuaries and lagoons to rivers, lakes and farmland. Nests in solitary pairs high in trees, especially eucalypts and shelterbelt pines on farmland. **Breeding:** Jun–Feb. [Sp 106]



HERONS, EGRETS and BITTERNs Ardeidae

About 65 species; 10 in the New Zealand region, including 5 breeding species. An endemic species, the New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaeseelandiae*, became extinct in the late 1800s.

Egrets and herons are very similar: for example, all have bare facial skin, often distinctively coloured. Egrets are white; herons are usually grey: the distinction is useful but not absolute. Egrets are gregarious and breed in colonies, often mixed with other egrets and with ibises; true herons are solitary. Both typically have plumes when breeding. Their nests are untidy platforms of sticks and twigs. Incubation starts with the first or second egg, and so chicks are of different ages and sizes. Adults feed the young with regurgitated food, not offering whole food. The young start breeding at one or two years old, sometimes still in immature plumage.

This family occurs worldwide, mainly in the tropics. Their broad-winged flight is ponderous but strong, though the smaller species are faster. Apart from the bitterns and night herons, they are active by day. They have a slender body and long neck and legs; night herons have a stouter body and a shorter neck. All have a straight, dagger-like bill and a short tail. The bill, on a long, often kinked neck, is ideal for seizing or skewering fish.

Herons, egrets and bitterns feed mainly on fish; also frogs and insects. Larger species may take small mammals and birds as chance offers.

Patches of powder down are on the breast and rump in bitterns, and the thighs also in egrets. The middle of the three forward-pointing toes has serrations along the side like the teeth of a comb and is thought to remove fish-slime and mud during grooming and preening. All species give a low-pitched croak when alarmed but feed silently.

Reading: Hancock, J. & Elliott, H. 1978. *The Herons of the World*. London: London Editions. Hancock, J. & Kushlan, J. 1984. *The Herons Handbook*. London: Croom Helm.

106. WHITE-FACED HERON *Ardea novaehollandiae* **Plate 26**

Other names: Blue Heron, Blue Crane
Size: 67 cm, 550 g
Geographical variation: Two subspecies: *nana* in New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands, and *novaehollandiae* throughout the rest of Australasia.
Distribution: Breed in southern Indonesia, New Guinea, Australia, Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands and New Zealand. Occasionally reported in New Zealand from 1865 to the 1930s, they became established and are now the most common heron, having benefited from the widespread conversion of forest to farmland. They are open-country generalists, being found in swamp margins, lake shores, farm dams and creeks, riverbeds, town parks; also mudflats, estuaries, rocky shores, and sandy beaches inside harbours and estuaries.

widespread on the New Zealand mainland in the 1940s and increased explosively in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They colonised the Chatham Islands by the early 1970s, and vagrants have been recorded from the Kermadecs, The Snares, Auckland and Campbell Islands.
Population: Widespread and common, especially in lowland districts with rough pasture and nearby lakes and estuaries.
Conservation: Protected self-introduced native. White-faced Herons spread and increased rapidly between the 1940s and 1970s, but numbers have probably since declined.
Breeding: Breed solitarily or in loose groups, usually high up in belts of macrocarpas, pines or eucalypts, not necessarily near water. The nest is an untidy bundle of sticks and twigs, not easy to see, in a fork or well out on a branch. At the Chathams especially, they nest on cliff ledges and under rocks just above

high-water mark, in sites usually used by Reef Herons. Laying starts in June in the north, later further south, with the peak about October.

on a fencepost or the lip of a trough. In flight, a harsh 'graaw' is quite common.
Feeding: Diet is fish, frogs and tadpoles, aquatic and pasture insects, spiders, earthworms and mice. They stalk through the shallows of wetlands, darting a dagger-like bill forwards by straightening out their long neck or pausing to rake one foot rapidly back and forth.

They lay 3–4–5 pale blue-green eggs (45 x 33 mm), which both sexes incubate for c. 26 days. Usually only 2 young are raised, fed by both adults. Unlike other herons, the young stay at or near the nest until they are able to fly.
Behaviour: Mainly solitary, but they form loose flocks in winter on damp and flooded pasture, often with Cattle Egrets and Black-backed Gulls. When not breeding, they may roost together. They are often seen perched

Reading: Hemmings, A.D. & Chappell, R.G. 1988. *Notornis* 35: 245–247. Lo, P.L. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 95. Lo, P.L. 1991. *Notornis* 38: 63–71. Lo, P.L. & Fordham, R.A. 1991. *Notornis* 33: 233–245. Lowe, K.W. 1983. *Corella* 7: 101–108. Moore, P.J. 1984. *Notornis* 285–299.