

WETLANDS - MORE THAN JUST WET LAND

Currawinya Lakes

Two large lakes are an unusual feature in the broad semi-arid mulga plains landscape of south-western Queensland.



Lake Numalla is probably fresh because it is flushed occasionally by waters flowing backwards up Carwarra Creek from the pressure of the flooded Paroo.

Many lakes in inland Australia are temporary, forming only after good rains. The Currawinya lakes are semi-permanent. While Lake Numalla has been dry only three times this century, Lake Wyara often dries out and becomes a vast glaring saltpan.

After heavy rains, temporary small claypan lakes and swamps dot the Currawinya landscape. In extremely wet conditions, excess water from Lake Numalla flows south into channels of the Paroo.

The Paroo River has several large permanent waterholes and a few springs. Other smaller semi-permanent lakes in this wetland system include the freshwater Lakes Kaponyee and Yumberarra and the brackish Lake Karetta.

The lakes are part of Currawinya National Park established in 1991 to conserve samples of the major ecosystems found in Queensland's Mulga Lands biogeographic region.

Lake Numalla is fringed by black box *Eucalyptus largiflorens* woodlands, belalie *Acacia stenophylla* shrublands and sedgeland. Dense groves of black box saplings parallel to the shoreline are evidence of fluctuating water levels.



Lake Numalla



Black cormorant

Lakes Numalla (right above) and Wyara (left) between the townships of Thargomindah and Hungerford, nearby swamps, and waterholes of the Paroo River are one of inland Australia's most important wetlands.

In this dry landscape, the Currawinya wetlands provide a permanent source of water for local wildlife and waders passing through inland Australia during their annual autumn migration. The wetlands are a wildlife refuge, particularly during drought. Few inland wetlands provide a home for such large numbers and varieties of waterbirds.

About the lakes

Both lakes are on the western edge of the Murray-Darling Basin but each lake has its own catchment. Lake Numalla (almost 3000 hectares) is a freshwater lake while Lake Wyara (3800ha), less than three kilometres away, is saline.

Lake Wyara fills entirely from its local catchment except during large floods. Werewilka Creek carries salts in solution into this shallow basin.

The freshwater Lake Numalla is fed from Boorara Creek to the north-east, which drains the eastern slopes of Willies Range and the western slopes of Hoods Range, and from Carwarra Creek to the south.



Pied stilt

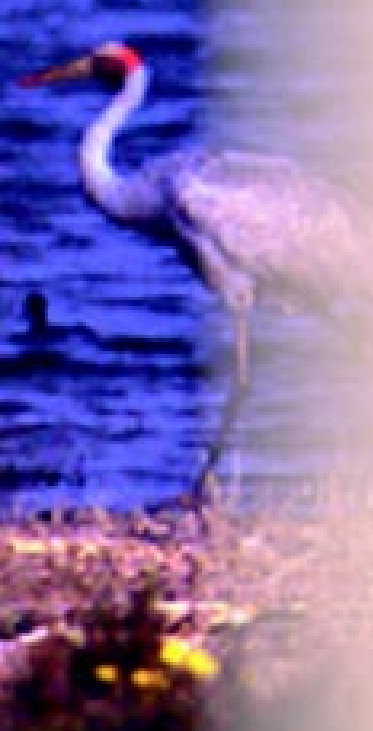


Eurasian coots

The vegetation surrounding Lake Wyara is quite different. Dense samphire *Halosarcia pergranulata* shrubs grow on the muddy flats and lower slopes of the fringing dunes. On the eastern side of the lake,

various samphires parallel the shore. At the northern end of the lake, large river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* grow at the foot of the fringing dune on what is probably a very old, exposed shoreline.

Yapunyah *E.ochrophloia* and gidgee *Acacia cambagei* woodlands grow along the Paroo River floodplain while river red gums fringe the Paroo's permanent waterholes.



Brolgas



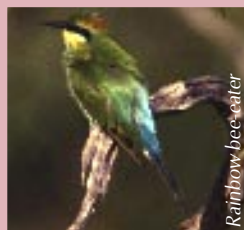
Vegetation that can tolerate waterlogging grows in swampy areas — lignum *Muehlenbeckia cunninghamii*, canegrass *Eragrostis australasica*, creek wilga *Eremophila bignoniiflora* and belalie.



Black swans

Currawinya's birds

Currawinya is rich in birdlife. Lakes Wyara and Numalla are major waterbird habitats and important refuges for all birds and other animals during drought.



Rainbow bee-eater

About 180 species of birds have been observed at Currawinya. In March 1988 for example, 280 000 birds were estimated to be on the lakes.

More than 100 000 waterbirds of at least 41 species were seen at Currawinya during a 1987–89 survey. No other wetlands in arid or southern Australia are thought to support such high numbers of waterbirds consistently. Only the Northern Territory wetlands (in the dry season), Lake Eyre North (South Australia), Lake Galilee (Queensland) and Lake Gregory (Western Australia) have comparable numbers.

With other inland wetlands, the Currawinya lakes form part of an inland route for migratory waders. At least 10 migratory species have been recorded at the lakes — the great egret, glossy ibis, black-tailed godwit, common greenshank, red-necked stint, sharp-tailed sandpiper, curlew sandpiper, Caspian tern, white-winged black tern and rainbow bee-eater.

Although the lakes are similar in size and Lake Numalla has more species than Lake Wyara, there are many more birds on Lake Wyara.

Lake Wyara, clearer and more shallow than Lake Numalla, contains more food for birds, especially water plants and planktonic invertebrates. Submerged plants *Ruppia* spp. *Chara australis* and *Lamprothamnium papulosum* grow extensively across the bottom of this saline lake.

Lake Wyara supports large numbers of plant-eating birds, especially grey teal, freckled duck and Eurasian coots. Large numbers of Australasian shovelers, pink-eared ducks, black-winged stilts and red-necked avocets have also been seen here.

Australian pelicans, red-necked avocets, silver gulls, Caspian terns, cormorants, and black swans breed along the western shoreline.

In contrast, Lake Numalla has turbid water, fewer water plants and more abundant fish and shrimp populations.

Large wading waterbirds and other birds which eat fish and shrimps prefer Lake Numalla. Pied cormorants, Pacific herons, Australian white ibis, royal spoonbills, yellow-billed spoonbills and Pacific black ducks live and breed around Lake Numalla where extensive reedbeds provide excellent sheltered breeding sites.

Pelicans that live and breed on Lake Wyara fly to nearby Lake Numalla to feed on the more abundant fish.

Although Lake Wyara usually has more waterbirds, Lake Numalla is an important waterbird refuge when Lake Wyara's water level drops. When Lake Wyara was almost dry in 1985, Numalla supported more than 100 000 birds.

Enjoying Currawinya

People can visit Currawinya National Park and see the lakes. Camping is allowed at selected sites but visitors must take all supplies including water and spare parts.

The park is about four hours' drive from Charleville. Four-wheel drive is recommended. Please drive carefully on the unsealed, often narrow, roads.

Power boating is not allowed but you can canoe on the lakes. The lakes are large and the surrounding lands arid and vast so visitors should not expect to see many birds easily. The best times to go birdwatching are early morning and late afternoon. Use powerful binoculars or a telescope on a tripod. Parrots, raptors and other birds can be seen in the park.

Conserving the lakes

The Currawinya wetlands are an important link in a chain of wetlands, large and small, permanent and temporary, which dot Australia's vast inland and which are now recognised as a major Australian waterbird habitat. The lakes and part of the Paroo River floodplain are protected in Currawinya National Park, managed to ensure this wetland continues to provide a refuge for local and international wildlife.

For more information about wetlands, contact:
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Black-winged stilt



Lake Numalla



QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT

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Currawinya lakes

