The White-necked Heron - *Ardea pacifica* - is a large bird with dark grey bill. Head and neck are white, back and wings sooty black with a bluish sheen. Prominent white patch at the shoulder of the wing seem as "headlights" in flight. Breast and belly are grey-brown, streaked white. Legs dark grey. Non-breeding individuals have dark spots down the throat; these may wear away. Neck spots on juveniles spread to the side of the neck. Breeding individuals lack the spots and have maroon plumes on the upper body. Grows 76 to 106 centimetres.

Neck is folded back in flight. Makes slow, deep wingbeats; soars high on thermals.

Lives in shallow wetlands, swamps, floodwaters, wet grasslands, shallow of lakes. Mainly found in fresh water but occasionally on coastal mudflats. Most often seen as individual birds silently stalking in shallow water.
Two views of a White-necked Heron in flight with the legs trailing, the head drawn back against the body and showing white 'headlights' on the wing leading edge. Upper at St George, Qld, lower in the Darling River at Menindee, NSW

White-necked Herons eat insects, crustaceans, fish, frogs and tadpoles. They forage in shallow water (less than 10 cm deep), and in wet grass. Large prey is swallowed head-first. The bird stands and waits for prey, or moves slowly, all the time watching carefully for signs of food items. It strikes quickly when food is found within range. Usually seen alone but numbers gather on food patches without defending particular territory.

Breeds throughout the year if sufficient food is available, often after rain. Nesting is usually in September to February in the south (including Tasmania) and December to March in the north. The nest is a loose platform of sticks to 60 centimetres across in a dead or living tree up to 30 metres above the ground and near or over water. Nests may be reused in successive years. Males collect twigs to build the nest. Nests are solitary or in loose aggregations, of 2 to 30 nests, sometimes in mixed species groupings with other herons, ibis, spoonbills and cormorants. Up to five nests have been observed in one tree.

Up to six, usually four, eggs are laid. Coloured dull blue-green; oval, about 53 by 38 millimetres. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young by regurgitation. Parents continuously guard the nest and young for three or four weeks. Older siblings harass smallest chick, which usually dies; generally two chicks are produced. The young fledge after six or seven weeks.

This is a nomadic species which moves about following the seasonality of Australian wetlands. Uncommon around the coast, except during droughts. Exceptional rainfall in arid inland areas can lead to temporary local population booms.

Also known by the older name of Pacific Heron.
Left: Breeding White-necked Heron with maroon plumes on the flank (Hamilton, Vic). Right. Adult White-necked Heron in the Bulloo River, Thargomindah, Qld showing 'headlights' on the folded wing.

Adult White-necked Heron. The row of dark dots down the neck indicates this is a non-breeding bird. The sparse grey plumes on the lower breast above the legs also indicate a non-breeding bird. Darling River at Menindee, NSW.