

Lord Howe Woodhen (*Tricholimnas sylvestris*)

Description

Brown flightless bird about the size of a bantam hen, with strong legs and feet and a brown-grey bill.

Conservation Status

Listed as Endangered under the NSW TSC Act 1995.

Listed as Critically Endangered under the Commonwealth EPBC Act 1999.

Protected under the *Lord Howe Island Act* 1953.

Distribution

Endemic to Lord Howe Island.

Populations on Lord Howe Island include: the summit of Mt. Gower; the lowlands at Big and Little Slopes; Grey face; Far Flats and throughout the settlement area. Lowland distribution closely follows that of *Howea forsteriana* palm forest. Approximately half the breeding population lives around houses in the settlement area where they are fed or find food in gardens.

Ecology

Breeding: August to January. Can breed all year if conditions are favourable (Hutton pers. obs.).

Eggs: 1-6, dull white, with tiny dots and irregular blotches of chestnut, red and blue-grey. Both parents assist with incubation, which is 20-23 days.

Nest: Woodhens construct a nest in a shallow depression on the ground, lined with dry grass and leaves. It is located under dense ferny vegetation, or in the unused burrow of the Providence Petrel (Woodhen Recovery Plan 2002).

Diet: Earthworms, molluscs and invertebrates. Woodhens readily scavenge food from walkers and residents. Bester *et al.* (2005) found that Woodhens took a number of Providence Petrel chicks. Woodhen will also kill and eat introduced rats and mice (Hutton pers obs.).

Foraging Behaviour: Woodhens forage during the day and occasionally at night on the ground.

They use their bill to sift among fallen leaves and rotten timber (Miller and Mullette 1985).

Population Data/Health

Population estimated at 220-230 birds and 71-74 pairs (Harden 1997). Population has remained relatively static over the last 10 years.

Habitat

Woodhens occur predominately in three vegetation types: Gnarled Mossy-Forest, Megaphyllous Broad Sclerophyll Forest, particularly the *Kentia* Palm association; and gardens around houses.

Threats

The current and potential threats to the Woodhen population are:

- Vulnerable to disease or natural disaster due to distribution being limited to Lord Howe Island.
- Introduced Masked Owls may take juvenile Woodhens.
- Increased rodent control may cause increased predation by Masked Owls.
- Introduced Blackbirds and Song Thrushes, together with Buff-banded Rails and Purple Swamphens, compete with the Woodhen for food.
- The introduction to the island of additional exotic flora or fauna species could threaten the Woodhen and its habitat.
- Existing weed species that degrade habitat.
- The risk of introduction of disease that may affect the food or health of Woodhens.
- Loss of habitat through clearing for agriculture or development.
- Consumption of rat bait by Woodhens.
- Impacts of domestic dogs.

Impacts Upon Other Species

Woodhens regularly kill the chicks of other land birds, especially the land rail (Hutton pers obs.). Bester *et al.* (2005). found that the greatest cause

of Providence Petrel mortality was attributed to Woodhen predation.

References

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Photo: Ian Hutton

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