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Habitat under strain as birdlife flock to Coorong

Reporter: Mike Sexton

ALI MOORE: Well, as the current drought in Australia continues to break all records, the focus has been on how urban and rural residents are getting by with significantly reduced amounts of water. But the long dry is also taking its toll on nature. While Australian birds have evolved to cope with the continent's variable climate, ornithologists suspect many species are now struggling to cope as habitats dry out or, in extreme cases, are being burnt by bushfires.

But one part of the country is proving a haven the Coorong in South Australia is a 100km stretch of National Park where the River Murray meets the Southern Ocean. This spring saw a larger than expected breeding event in the area, as water birds from across the country sought refuge from the drought. But, as summer drags on, there are signs the once fertile area can no longer provide the habitat the birds are seeking. Mike Sexton reports.

MIKE SEXTON: On a craggy salt crusted island in South Australia's Coorong National Park is the equivalent of a daycare centre for pelicans.

RUSSELL SEAMAN, SA DEPT FOR ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE: I would say they would be about 3 months old and we have counted about 1,500 pelicans of about that age group with the adults not present, probably hunting or fishing for food.

MIKE SEXTON: At the moment, these chicks are too young to fly, but when they take to the skies, they'll be capable of flying thousands of kilometres. Birds banded in the Coorong have been found as far away as New Guinea, but when it comes to breeding, there is no place like home.

DAVID PATON, UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE: The only place in South Australia and probably Australia where there has been a permanent breeding colony of pelicans happens to be in the Coorong.

MIKE SEXTON: The connection between pelicans and the Coorong was immortalised 30 years ago when the film 'Storm Boy' was shot in the area, a feature that became one of the most popular films ever made in Australia.

FILM FOOTAGE: You are clever, Mr Percival. You are terrific.

MIKE SEXTON: So why is it, then, that when Russell Seaman, from the Coorong and Lower Lakes Conservation Program, comes out to count the birds, he is startled at what he sees?

RUSSELL SEAMAN: Somewhat surprising, considering how stressed the system is. So they are responding very well and it is quite encouraging to see that.

MIKE SEXTON: Pelican numbers in the Coorong have declined almost 80% over the past 40 years as the estuary system declined because of a lack of fresh water flows, and there were fears they would stop breeding here all together. But, now it seems, as the fierce drought dries out wetlands across the country, the birds are heading south, making this the biggest breeding event for a decade.

DAVID PATON: It is a really important drought refuge. Populations of water birds in particular disappear from inland areas because the swamps dry out, they move southwards to coastal regions. One of those is the Coorong. They stay there and then wait for conditions to ameliorate in these other parts of the country before they return back to those areas to continue their reproductive cycles.

MIKE SEXTON: It isn't only native birds who are seeking refuge. These tiny waders have flown in from Russia and north Asia and traditionally have found abundant food in the delta, where the sea water mixes with fresh water from the Murray River. But the reduction of freshwater flows has meant there are dramatic signs of change in the Coorong ecosystem. The water in the southern part is now three times saltier than the ocean, killing off vital weeds and fish.

DAVID PATON: Most systems actually have a degree of resilience. They can cope with one or two years of drought. This Coorong system is sort of looking at five years in a row of no flows in and over the barrages, down the river, into this system and as a consequence it's now in its fifth year of drought. So it is not just the drought. It's the length of the drought that is the driver for the system.

MIKE SEXTON: What concerns environmentalists is that while some species, like banded stilts, are thriving in the conditions, others can't adapt to the changes or reduction in food or are not able to cast further afield, like the pelicans can.

RUSSELL SEAMAN: They can fly larger distances, they can look for food, they can actively search, whereas species such as a fish are pretty limited to the water parameters. If the water becomes suddenly saline and they can't move to an area quickly – their habitat is limited. So the pelican has a bit more flexibility.

MIKE SEXTON: As this drought continues to break all records, the management of water is at a crisis level. In November, the governments of the Murray–Darling Basin met to begin planning for water allocation in 2007, with State officials now reporting to the Prime Minister's Department on contingency plans on a regular basis.

JOHN HOWARD, PRIME MINISTER: We can't act independently. We are Australians on this issue. In our approaches and our policies we must be prepared to obliterate State borders.

MIKE SEXTON: The best chance of the Coorong receiving vital freshwater flows is with the Living Murray program, that promises to deliver 500 gigalitres, the equivalent of Sydney Harbour, for environmental purposes by 2009.

MALCOLM TURNBULL, PARL SECRETARY FOR WATER: We are committed to getting to the 500 gigalitre target and the States are committed, as I understand it, to meeting their targets. Victoria is very close. South Australia is very close. Its contribution is relatively small. NSW has a way to go, but they have a number of very big projects.

MIKE SEXTON: No one expects fresh water to be available for the Coorong during this drought, and despite some signs of infant mortality, scientists believe the pelicans will survive. That they've had such a successful breeding event is testament to their resilience and underlining of the importance of finding water after the drought to keep the Coorong alive.

DAVID PATON: Until recently it's been a very productive system in terms of plant material being produced which feeds ducks, but also in terms of fish which feeds fish eating birds and a whole lot of invertebrates. The Coorong's real asset is, it's a really important drought refuge.