

Drought clips waterbirds' wings

ENVIRONMENT

Selina Mitchell

THERE is not a bird in sight at Australia's world-renowned waterbird breeding ground, the Macquarie Marshes.

"In the 1980s we averaged 20,000 waterbirds from more than 20 species," said University of NSW state, river and waterbird expert Richard Kingsford, who on Friday completed his annual survey of waterbirds.

"In the 1990s that dropped to 5000 from 13 species and since 2000 we have averaged 600 from nine species. But this year we did not find a single bird. It was heartbreaking."

The state of the Macquarie Marshes, north of Dubbo in central NSW, provides a dire illustration of the devastating effects drought is having on the environment of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Australia's waterbird population is in dramatic decline due to the drought and years of regulated river operations. An annual aerial survey of the state of the bird life across eastern Australia details a barren and waterless environment with critically low



Devastated: A 1998 photograph of Macquarie Marshes

waterbird numbers in many parts of the basin.

River Red Gums are "dropping like flies", and the Macquarie Marshes, where Professor Kingsford just completed his latest waterbird survey, is a disaster.

"This is my 22nd year involved in the survey, and I have never seen it this bad," he told *The Australian*. "This will be the lowest count ever of waterbirds in 25 years."

The effect of the arid state of the Murray-Darling Basin on

irrigators and communities along the river system has received significant attention. But the plight of the environment and its plant and animal inhabitants has been underplayed, Professor Kingsford said.

This is the seventh year there will be no breeding event in Macquarie Marshes, a wetland unique to Australia because of its large colonies of breeding ibis and egrets. The site is on the Ramsar List of internationally important wetlands.

There is a certain amount of resilience in wetland systems because the animals and plants are used to wet and dry periods. But too much water is being taken from the system for dams and irrigation, and reform is too slow compared to the pace of deterioration, Professor Kingsford said.

He said the saving grace this year was the big flood that went into Lake Eyre in outback South Australia and filled lakes along the way. There is some water and therefore some waterbirds in a few places, such as lakes Torquinnie and Mumbleberry near Birdsville.

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