

# Burraalga (Brolga) on Kamilaroi Country

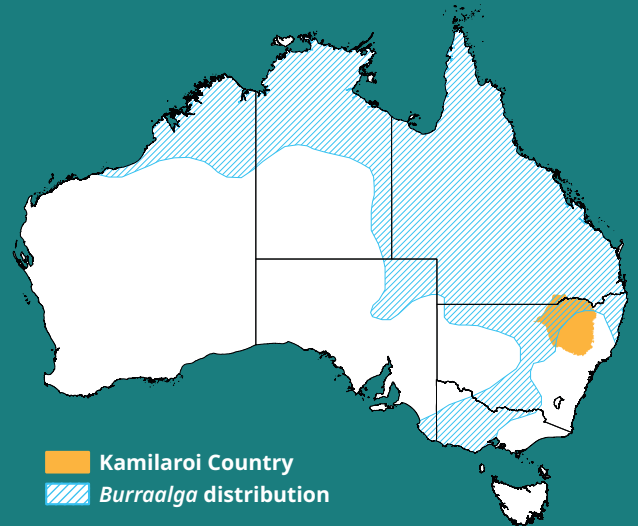
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Common names: Brolga, Native companion, Australian crane

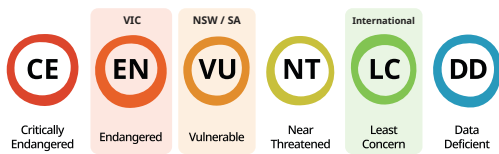
Scientific name: *Antigone rubicunda*

Language name: *Burraalga*

(Brolga is derived from the Kamilaroi language name)



## Status



## Description

*Burraalga* are a large, iconic Australian wetland bird. They are grey with a featherless head with a red band. *Burraalga* are omnivorous and opportunistic, their diet consists of various grains, insects, frogs, small mammals, birds, and reptiles. *Burraalga* mate for life and are well known for their elaborate courtship dance.



*Burraalga*. Photo: Darcy Whittaker.

## Distribution

*Burraalga* are found across mid and northern Australia and up into Papua New Guinea. They are found in smaller numbers in central New South Wales and western Victoria.

In response to rain and wetland availability, *Burraalga* undertake seasonal movements between breeding and non-breeding (flocking) habitat.

Kamilaroi Country is the second largest Aboriginal Nation in New South Wales, extending across a vast area of the north-west of the State and up into Queensland. Kamilaroi Country is home to the Gwydir Wetlands, an immensely sacred place where *Burraalga* were once present in great numbers.

## Habitat

*Burraalga* nest and roost in swamps and wetlands away from predators and forage in multiple habitats including large open wetlands, grassy plains, coastal mudflats and irrigated croplands.

### Kamilaroi Country - Gwydir Wetlands (key habitat)

The Gwydir Wetlands are one of a few of terminal delta wetlands remaining in the Murray-Darling Basin. The Gwydir Wetlands has a number of Ramsar-listed sites supporting diverse floodplain wetland communities including grass/sedge meadows, Cumbungi beds and Coolabah woodland. The majority of *Burraalga* habitat in the Gwydir Wetlands is located on privately owned land.

## Threats

Major threats to *Burraalga* and concurrently to the Gwydir Wetlands include:

- **Water impoundments, water diversion, crop irrigation, conversion of wetlands** all leading to changes in hydrological processes
- Subdivision and subsequent **fencing of large private land holdings**
- **Predation of eggs and chicks** by introduced predators, primarily the European fox
- **Climate change**, including extreme temperatures and more frequent drought events
- **Farming practices**, leading to the loss and degradation of habitat
- **Hunting and poisoning**, by landowners
- **Weed encroachment**, leading to habitat degradation
- **Altered fire regimes.**





## Cultural Connections

When migrating **Burraalga** arrive in the Gwydir Wetlands, in pairs or seeking a partner, and perform their hopping, swooping dance, to nest and mate, you get an ecological outcome: a vulnerable species is breeding. But you can also witness how and why the world's oldest living culture keeps **Burraalga** close, as kin. This visual display of courtship is mirrored in ceremonial/Lore dance and shared alongside tribal groups across Australia including the internationally recognised dance group Bangarra.



**Burraalga** take flight: Bunnor Waterhole, Gwydir Wetlands, 2014. Photo: Brad Moggridge.

## Cultural Values

### Country

**Burraalga** on-Country at the right time, with the right water and resources to do their mating dance and breed is an indicator for Kamilaroi that Country is healthy. **Burraalga** arrive usually after long flight times from afar and seek to breed if the waters and food webs are ideal. If the conditions are not right the **Burraalga** does not land in your wetland or marshland. During the breeding season, they often inhabit shallow marshes where they build nests using grasses, sticks and mud.

### Knowledge

**Buruuugu** (Dreaming) stories passed down from our ancestors connect these birds with Kamilaroi and freshwater life, encompassing culture, Lore, language, dance, meaning and existence.

### Kin

For Kamilaroi, **Burraalga** are central to culture, embedded in Country and kin. The significance of cultural connection to this bird by Kamilaroi is so strong, Lore prevents hunting the species.

There is commonality between ideal Country Kamilaroi access for resources and **Burraalga** habitat: grassy plains, open wetlands, coastal mudflats, and in a modern context irrigated cropland.



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## Results of Poor Management

### Lack of recognition of Culturally Significant Entities in legislation and conservation planning prioritisation

*Burraalga* are much reduced in abundance on Kamilaroi Country and this is of great concern to Kamilaroi. Due to the fact that they occur beyond the boundaries of our Country and are in larger numbers further north, there are very limited pathways for Kamilaroi to protect the species. There is no opportunity for the threats to the species, as seen and felt by Kamilaroi, to be recognised at the National level.

Current Western systems of determining what is important/threatened or a priority for conservation action/funding are prohibitive to Kamilaroi wanting to access Country and government funding to support recovery and protections for *Burraalga*.

### Lack of inclusion in decision-making and water policy

Water diversion is significant in the Gwydir Wetlands. Studies have identified that a small earth mound, built to allegedly protect grain plantings, has diverted water away from *turramungeri* (significant water places) that hold cultural and modern connections, including bird habitat for breeding<sup>1</sup>.

We are seeing an ongoing decline in waterbird numbers, even despite several recent above-average rainfall years. This is concerning, it means that bird abundance is not responding to environmental conditions. Kamilaroi see this and yet their voice is silenced in policy.

### Other impacts

Due to ongoing threats and degradation of Country, *Burraalga* may move further from nests than previous studies suggest and have home ranges like other cranes. This means that using current information to inform buffers and offsets may underestimate spatial and habitat requirements at breeding sites. Kamilaroi want to be included in discussions about the protection of this species.



Courtship dance. Photo: Uwe Bergwitz / stock.adobe.com

## Kamilaroi Vision

If Indigenous knowledge is applied with Western understanding, survival rates of *Burraalga* will increase.

We need:

- Recognition of Culturally Significant Entities as Matters of National Environmental Significance
- Access to Country
- Appropriate resourcing for ranger programs
- Management planning that is inclusive and respectful of Kamilaroi.

We need systems and policies that recognise the social, cultural and economic benefits to Kamilaroi so that they are supported to look after species that are of significance such as *Burraalga*.



National Environmental Science Program

<sup>1</sup> Moggridge BJ, Thompson RM. Chapter 18 - Indigenous engagement to support resilience: A case study from Kamilaroi Country (NSW, Australia). In: Thoms M, Fuller I, editors. *Resilience and Riverine Landscapes*; Elsevier; 2024. p. 363-87.