



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc
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2012 ANNUAL REPORT

Introduction

The 2012 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 13th February 2013. It is available via the club website at www.hboc.org.au. This Annual Report consists of an overview of 2012 in the main body of the report along with detailed reports (from the various 'section' co-ordinators) attached as appendices.

1. Management & Administration

This section of HBOC includes management and administrative areas that facilitate all aspects of Club operations through its committee structure and other appointed positions.

The Annual Financial Report for 2012, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

HBOC was represented by a very strong and balanced committee that met monthly "in person" but that toiled hard for the remainder of the year behind the scenes. At the very beginning of the year we found ourselves one committee member short, but that was soon rectified and a full complement was at the helm not far into 2012. As an extremely diverse and active club, there are many challenges that face management to maintain cohesion and to satisfy the requirements and expectations of the groups and individuals involved. The Hunter Region is a remarkable area that possesses both significant biodiversity values (not least of all its bird life!) and equally as significant pressures via a range of development and other impacts causing habitat loss or modification. The challenge to integrate both leisure and conservation into birdwatching as a hobby within the Club starts with informed and balanced decision making that is mindful of the significant assets and pressures in the region. Those committee members are to be thanked for their support and input throughout the year, along with those other passionate members that regularly attend committee meetings.

The issue of affiliation was high on the committee's agenda during the year, as 2012 represented the first full year for Australia's new peak birding organisation, BirdLife Australia (BLA), which was formed when Birds Australia and Bird Observation and Conservation Australia (BOCA) merged. Although the exact manner in which the new affiliation function is yet to be formally resolved (we were formerly affiliated with BOCA), it is likely that the Club will remain affiliated with BirdLife Australia as there are numerous advantages for both organisations from such an arrangement and given that a good relationship already exists with BLA this makes good sense. This affiliation is already represented on the Club's new letterhead.

In 2012 the "duty of care" issue was addressed, thanks largely to some diligent work behind the scenes. It is a simple fact of life in this day and age that organisations need to be accountable for the well-being and safety of members and this extends to a regulatory obligation to do so. The development of suitable protocols to satisfy the Club's obligations is still ongoing at this stage and remains to be formalised before presentation to the membership.

The Club continues to maintain and enhance good working relationships with many private and public organisations. The promotion and undertaking of collaborative efforts is an important aspect of the role of Club management and that of the membership in general. The benefits of these collaborations are not just evident as financial support but rather as better communication, exchange of information and understanding resulting in

improved conservation of our birds which are under increasing environmental pressure. HBOC acknowledges the contributions of collaborative organisations and those members who have been involved in this regard. The Club has a deserved upstanding and highly respected position as one of the peak environmental organisations in the Hunter. The members are to be congratulated for consolidating this reputation and the vast amount of volunteer effort that goes into helping the Club function is also worthy of recognition.

2. Membership

Administrative, personnel matters and services related to the membership.

Membership Secretary: Our Membership Secretary (Rob Kyte) working in collaboration with the Treasurer (Joy Nicholls) has produced a comprehensive, regularly updated data base of the membership which facilitates reliable communication with members.

Club Membership: HBOC started 2012 with 288 members and finished the year with 286 fully financial members. 32 new members joined in 2012 (15 single, 8 family and 1 junior) and 35 members from 2011 did not rejoin in 2012 (15 single and 10 family) including 5 members who left the club.

A slight rise in membership fees in 2013 was decided by the management committee due to the increasing administrative and operational costs that are a reality for such a Club. An exciting initiative was instigated in 2012 whereby members have been given unique Membership Cards which entitle the holder to discounts at various retail outlets and venues. It is hoped that this strategy, together with a concerted effort to increase the circulation of membership application forms and information about the Club, will result in an increase in member numbers in 2013.

Hunter 300 & 350 Club: A fun component of the Club where those keen birders who have seen more than 300 species in the Region publish their tallies on the website. Badges are available for those reaching the 300 and 350 species milestones (it doesn't seem far away from there being a 400 club soon as well). In 2012 three members graduated from the 300 club to 350 club, but there were no new additions to the 300 club list.

Library: The extensive library continues to be well used by members each Club Night. The only purchased addition was "Sentinel Chickens" by Nobel Prize-winning immunologist, Peter Doherty. Several other additions were made to the library however, via some generous donations from members.

Digital Photo Library: The digital library now has 2540 slides covering 386 different species of birds, which represents a significant resource for club members to use.

E-mail Service: The e-mail service continued to play a much needed role in Club communications. This efficient means of distributing special messages, bird sightings and other interesting information keeps members informed, especially between Newsletters. It also provides an important link to those who receive their Newsletter electronically.

'Hunterbirding': This online forum for sharing (predominantly local) bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion saw 32 new members join the list in 2012. This brings the total number of subscribers to 139 (although some addresses are apparently bouncing so there are effectively 116 active members). Members are encouraged to join the forum, either with a view to read posts or to contribute to discussions. Regular summary articles appear in the Newsletter giving an overview of discussions covering a wide range of topics. The Club recognises the efforts of the Hunterbirding moderator and also thanks all contributors that make Hunterbirding happen.

3. Activities

Includes planning, organisation and participation in the leisure-based bird watching and social activities of the Club.

Outings: HBOC implemented a successful program of outings including the monthly Sunday and midweek outings, camps and annual Twitchathon, primarily focussing on the recreational needs of members.

Monthly Sunday outings covered a range of locations and habitats with attendances ranging from 3 present at one particular outing (where a long walk was involved!) to 27 at the new members day held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre.

Mid-week outings continued to be very popular and well attended with the biggest attendance being 24 people who turned out to Stockton Sandspit in April, whilst 18 people attended the mid-week camp at Glenbawn in September.

Long week-end camps: The Easter camp at Munghorn Gap was well attended with 35 members camping out (and finding Regent Honeyeaters at the same time). Ironically, this was the exact number of people who attended the 2011 Easter camp. Other camps were held at Coolah Tops (June) and Woko (October).

The *BASNA Annual Twitchathon* fundraising birdwatching event is always popular with HBOC members and 8 teams connected with HBOC took part in the various race forms in 2012. Again, the top 3 positions in the Main Race went to HBOC teams whilst the Dry-throated Buzzards team stayed true to their cycling-only format in the Hunter. Approximately \$5000 was raised by HBOC-related teams and the NSW & ACT total could exceed \$30,000 for the first time. Funds raised in 2012 will go to the Cowra Woodland Birds Project.

In addition to the leisure and social benefits enjoyed by everyone, these outings are also a not-to-be-underestimated source of observational data for the Hunter Region. Members are again encouraged to submit their sightings to the BirdLife Australia Atlas, on HBOC record sheets, at Club night meetings or via the Hunterbirding email chat group.

To the many members including the 2012 Club Activities Officer (Lorna Mee), those organising, coordinating and leading outings and to all those attending; thank you for your involvement. The generosity of the landholders of private properties is also acknowledged.

4. Club Night

The monthly Club Night is one of the feature activities of HBOC.

Club Night meetings were held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre every month in 2012 except January, with an average attendance of 53.5 members per meeting (Feb AGM and Club Meeting 53, March 42, April [not recorded], May 57, June 51, July 52, August 45, September 44, October 55, November 51 and December 75.)

The Guest Speaker Program included local and national subjects covering conservation issues, research findings, travel and general interest. Topics included Seabird Flight Morphology, Tristan da Cunha Islands, Bird Studies at Green Wattle Creek, Broughton Island Seabirds, Great Eastern Ranges Initiative, Hunter Big Year, Hunter Wetlands Centre update, Macquarie Marshes, The Powerful Owl Project, and Banding Rehabilitated Birds. In formulating the speaker program the committee seeks to establish a balance of topics and a range of speakers. Thank you to all presenters for their time, expertise and effort in preparing and presenting these informative talks.

Bird of the Evening is a short, 5-minute piece that usually precedes the main speaker at Club nights and has proved a very popular concept. Members are encouraged to present a Bird of the Evening segment in any format (the most popular in 2012 was almost certainly the poem about magpies presented by Pat Poutney).

The “Observations” part of meetings is a good opportunity for people to share their local sightings and contribute to the knowledge-base of our birds.

The December *Christmas meeting* was very well-attended by 75 members who enjoyed a diverse array of speakers from the floor, as well as Twitchathon presentations and a very special event in the form of the first public announcement that Mike Newman had been awarded the J.N.Hobbs Memorial Medal. Of course, this was all topped off by a fantastic supper.

Hearty thanks are due to all of the volunteers that make Club Nights happen – it is certainly a team effort every month.

5. Newsletter

HBOC's regular newsletter communicates Club news, the events calendar, interesting sightings, Club outing and other reports and birding articles of general interest, to members, selected birding organisations and the public, either directly or via the HBOC web site.

The Newsletter continues its history as a quality publication and vital means of communication as it links members within the Club through its news reports, and other birding articles. There is always a good supply of articles and photographs submitted to the editor ensuring a high quality and sizeable Newsletter. The many members who contribute articles and photographs to the Newsletter are thanked for their interest, time and effort. The Club is indeed indebted to the dedicated editor (Liz Crawford) and the printing and distribution team (Robert and Margaret Stewart) for delivering such a high quality service to the Club.

6. Special Interest Group

At present, this section offers the opportunity for members with a special interest in bird photography to develop their bird watching and photographic knowledge / skills while promoting birds and the environment.

Unfortunately one of the key drivers behind the Photography Special Interest Group left the club in 2012. However, the ball was picked up by another enthusiastic photographer (Grant Brosie) late in 2012 and already another Photo Twitch has been set for March 2013.

7. Conservation

This section is primarily concerned with issues relevant to the protection of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region and beyond. It helps link the areas of HBOC endeavour and the community through its collaborative partnerships, networking and advocacy.

It is a reality that conservation issues affect many of the birds and their habitats within the Hunter Region. We live in a unique area where there is a clash between significant biodiversity values and equally as significant pressures from burgeoning industry expansion, urban encroachment and climate change. Fortunately, there is support in the Club on conservation issues that recognises that these threats and pressures do exist and that something needs to be done about it. With over 70 species of birds in the Region now listed as threatened, there is a real need to give the birds a voice. These efforts were spear-headed by Ann Lindsey, who has indicated she would like to relinquish the position after many years of service. For the Club to be able to be involved at the forefront on conservation matters in the Region depends on the dedication of members and the bank of quality supporting background information that is forthcoming through other sections of the Club (especially Field Studies and Data Management).

Possibly the greatest involvement was with the proposed "T4" fourth coal loader project on Kooragang / Ash Island by Port Waratah Coal Services. The Club has been very active with this issue as it could see the loss of one of the most important wetlands in the Hunter Estuary (Deep Pond) as well as significant incursions onto Swan and Wader Ponds on Ash Island. The Club contributed a comprehensive submission on the issue (which included comments on the appropriateness of proposed offsets) and this in turn motivated many Club members to also make submissions. Contact was made between active Club members and politicians concerned about the impacts of the proposal. In the same area the Club became aware of a proposed rail flyover by Newcastle Coal Infrastructure Group that would also have impacts on these wetlands and immediately swung into action to ensure that adequate assessments would be done to determine and offset impacts. It is fortunate that the Club has such a strong presence and knowledge-base in the estuary and that we are able to highlight the significance of these areas for a great variety of birdlife.

Another large development scenario which would see the destruction of significant areas of habitat was the Warkworth Mine expansion (near Bulga), including an appearance by Ann Lindsey at the Land and Environment Court Hearing in Singleton in August.

Other submissions were made or letters written about: the Upper Hunter Strategic Regional Land Use Plan; recreational shooting in national parks (and listing of birds species as 'game'); Inquiry into the Management of Public Land; bird-diverters to be put on powerlines on Wagtail Way; Hexham Relief Roads project; Northbank

Enterprise Hub; Corroba Mine; and Hexham Train Support Facility project. Broader issues were also addressed, including a submission objecting to weakening of environmental laws in response to the *Protect the Places You Love* campaign.

On a brighter note, habitat rehabilitation was undertaken or continued in 2012 at Green Wattle Creek, Tomago Wetlands, Hexham Swamp, Kooragang Dykes, Ash Island and Stockton Sandspit.

There have also been 6 meetings of the "Hunter Wetlands National Park Plan of Management Stakeholder Working Group" during 2012 with HBOC having been represented at each one by either Ann Lindsey and/or Chris Herbert.

The attached Conservation Report (**Appendix A**) provides a detailed summary of the various conservation matters that HBOC was directly involved with in 2012.

8. Field Studies and Data Management

This section of HBOC addresses collection of data, monitoring of bird populations and maintenance of records which underpin the HBOC research and conservation effort while at the same time making a worthwhile contribution to members' leisure-based bird watching.

Field studies and data management are inherently linked - no field studies program has any significant value unless the data from it are appropriately managed (including storage, analysis, and dissemination of results). This part of the club is very strong and underpins many of the conservation efforts and published work in *The Whistler*.

Field Studies

A feature of HBOC's Field Studies program is the high degree of collaboration with other conservation organisations - such as the Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Project, The Hunter Wetlands Centre, OEH offices in Newcastle, Nelson Bay and Gloucester, Crown Lands Department, BirdLife Australia and WetlandCare Australia. Individual Club members often receive similar strong support from relevant organisations when conducting their regular surveys.

The monitoring of Important Bird Areas (IBA) within the Hunter Region was again a major part of the Field Studies program in 2012 and it is envisaged that this will remain the case well into the future. Resource constraints limit the HBOC effort and resulted in priority being directed to the Hunter Estuary IBA and the Barrington Tops & Gloucester Tops IBA. The majority of effort has been within the Gloucester Tops / Barrington Tops (HBOC has become the lead organisation for the monitoring program for the Rufous Scrub-bird used in NSW and Qld) and Hunter Estuary IBAs, with some targeted surveys for trigger species also done within the Greater Blue Mountains IBAs. Some indirect monitoring has also occurred within the Mudgee-Wollar, Hunter Valley and Lake Macquarie IBAs.

Several other field studies are also co-ordinated by the Club, with examples being Morpeth Wastewater Treatment Works, Manning Estuary, Forster/Tuncurry, Curricabundi NP, Ash Island rehabilitation areas, Newcastle Bight, Port Stephens, Birubi/Fingal coastline, Newcastle Baths, Green Wattle Creek, Black Rock, Walka Water Works and properties at Butterwick, Duns Creek, and Tocal.

The Song Meter was used extensively in 2012 to monitor Rufous Scrub-bird territories. This work has helped increase our understanding of the calling behaviour of this cryptic species. A paper appears in the 2012 issue of *The Whistler*, which has now been published and is available to be accessed via the website.

Data Collection and Management

HBOC has a variety of ways by which data from field studies and from opportunistic sightings by local birdwatchers are managed. 2012 saw further entrenchment of the initiatives started in previous years and which have substantially enhanced HBOC's data capture and management capability and the analysis and reporting of data.

An arrangement is in place with BirdLife Australia to receive all the data for the Hunter Region from the BA Atlas database ("Birdata"). In June 2012, HBOC received the 2011 data from the Atlas and also an updated data set for the period 1998-2010. Online data entry to Birdata is increasingly used by many HBOC members and there are plans within BirdLife Australia to streamline the Birdata interface.

In 2012, there continued to be growth in participation (# of subscribers, # of messages posted) in HBOC's on-line forum 'Hunterbirding' from where many records were noted.

The main vehicle for data analysis and reporting is the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report. The 2011 Bird Report (#19 in the series) was published in late 2012, with data for 438 species. Once again, the Atlas data were included in the Report with a summary of the full 14 years of prior data (for all locally common species).

HBOC's journal *The Whistler* is another important vehicle for data analysis and reporting. Volume 5, published in late 2011, contained a number of papers where the authors analysed data from regular surveys which they carry out, as does Volume 6 which was finalised in 2012 and has now been published.

HBOC is indebted to the Field Study and Data Management coordinators (Mike Newman and Alan Stuart) and to the many members, who organise and participate in acquiring and reporting observational data, for their expertise, dedication, and persistence in the pursuit of knowledge and better environmental outcomes for Hunter Region birds. Alan Stuart is the editor of the Annual Bird Report and his untiring commitment to this role is greatly appreciated and duly acknowledged.

Please refer to the comprehensive *Field Studies and Data Management Report* in **Appendix B**.

9. Projects

Comprises the "hands on" conservation projects that restore selected areas of bird habitat in the Hunter.

A comprehensive run-down of works undertaken as part of the Ash Island and Stockton Sandspit Habitat Restoration Projects is available in **Appendix C**.

Area E, Ash Island: This collaborative project saw the removal mangrove seedlings from Swan Pond in late January when all the area south of the mature mangroves was cleared. Subsequent visits in February completed the entire Swan Pond area and parts of Wader Pond. The momentum continued in March and eventuated with work being completed on both Wader Pond and Wader West. The hours spent at Swan and Wader Ponds were down from 128 hours in 2011 to 66.5 hours to complete the work in 2012, much to the satisfaction of the team involved!

Milhams Pond, Ash Island: Similar success was enjoyed at Milhams Pond with saltmarsh noted returning in some areas, though it was noted that the fewer volunteers required more visits to the site. Another exciting development was the placing in December of Mangrove Propagule Exclusion Devices and all eyes are on them to see how they tackle the problem of incoming mangrove seeds.

Stockton Sandspit: Volunteers from many areas contributed to habitat restoration at Stockton Sandspit in 2012. A total of 288 hours of volunteer work was carried out by 45 people over 43 visits. Overall HBOC volunteer effort in 2012 was 305 hours and the total effort calculated in 'in-kind' dollars since 2003 now stands at over \$160,000.

Works in 2012 included removal of a significant amount of rubbish from the site, creation of shelly sand (done in winter when most migratory shorebirds are absent), restoring saltmarsh areas by removing Spiny Rush plants and the removal of weeds generally from the area to encourage native species to thrive.

Focus again was upon the local breeding pair of Australian Pied Oystercatchers, although sadly after 4 attempts and efforts to control threats (such as fox-baiting and signage to manage visitors at the site), the pair were unsuccessful in the 2012 season. Fortunately the local Red-capped Plovers enjoyed greater success.

Members are encouraged to contribute their time to these projects to support the volunteer team and ensure the health of these shorebird habitats. The dedicated project manager (Tom Clarke) and volunteer team are to be congratulated for ensuring the successful rehabilitation of these sites.

10. The Whistler

HBOC's research-based, occasional periodical of refereed papers and notes that places on record observational details and analysis of HBOC members' field studies.

Please refer to the Joint Editors' Report in **Appendix D**.

One volume of *The Whistler* (Volume 6) was completed during 2012 and has been published early in 2013. Priority was given to articles which had immediate conservation significance. Other priorities were to encourage new authors, and some first-time authors contributed to Volume 6. In order to extend the authorship base members are encouraged to contribute, especially with regard to short articles.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant are editors of *The Whistler*, whilst Liz Crawford is the production manager. The other production and distribution personnel and of course the authors, are congratulated and thanked for dedication to the demanding task of producing *The Whistler*.

11. Education & Promotion

To equip club members, the organisation and the broader community with the knowledge, skills and capacity to not only enhance the bird watching experience, but also to support the conservation of Hunter birdlife and its various habitats. This section includes avenues for members to champion birds, the environment and HBOC to the broader community.

For the purpose of this report these two aspects are linked as many HBOC activities have shared outcomes.

Website: The website continues to play a vital role as the easily accessible “front line” source of information for both the birding community and for the general public. This resource undergoes continual development with further expansion in 2012. It is the “go to” resource for the Club.

Publications: The Hunter Region Annual Bird Report No. 19 (2011) was published and this report enjoys a respected reputation as the definitive resource regarding the status and distribution of Hunter Region birds. Volume six of HBOC's occasional journal, “*The Whistler*” was prepared during the year and is currently available (refer to separate report).

Events: HBOC successfully hosted the annual Australian Bird Study Association (ABSA) seminar which was held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. The club provided expert speakers who presented topics such as, Shorebirds of the Hunter Region, Shorebirds of the Hunter Estuary, Shorebirds of Morpeth. This seminar provided not only outstanding educational value for delegates but also excellent promotional opportunities.

As in previous years, presentations were given under the Club banner to service clubs and other community-based groups, including U3A.

Community events in which HBOC participated included: Clean Up Australia Day, The Bengalla Mine Birdwatch, Welcome to Shorebirds, Back to the River Family Festival, Maitland City Council Youth Forum, Biodiversity Day 2012. The Biodiversity Day event has become very popular with an increase in the number of participating organisations and attendance (>500) by the public. This event is a major contact point with the community for the Club's environmental and educational/promotional presentations.

General: In 2012 HBOC acquired a colourful banner, featuring the Club logo, for use at displays (many thanks to Rob Kyte). The displays have also benefitted from the purchase of display boards for mounting the photographs of an assortment of birdlife which form the focal point of the Club display. Club photographers continue to add to this valuable educational resource (thanks to Jim Smart for supporting this). Expansion of the educational resource base for use at these field events is currently the subject of ongoing research and discussion.

2012 has also seen the initiation of several strategies to update benefits to members and to promote the Club with the view of increasing the membership base. The real benefits of these initiatives are hoped to be realised during 2013.

12. Notable Highlights

As aforementioned, the J.N. Hobbs Memorial Medal for 2012 was awarded to Mike Newman and this was first announced at the December Club meeting. The J.N. Hobbs Medal is awarded to an amateur birdwatcher who has made a significant contribution to the knowledge or conservation of birds in Australia. This is taken to include contributions to Australian ornithology through the organisation of and participation in Birds / Birdlife Australia's collaborative programmes. The emphasis is on the amateur status of the recipient's contribution (i.e. not a professional ornithologist).

The Hobbs medal was once awarded by the NSW regional group of Birds Australia, but since 1999 has been a national award which is conferred for outstanding contributions to Australasian ornithology by an amateur ornithologist. Nominations are made by BirdLife Australia members and the winner is selected by a committee that includes representatives from Local Branches and Special Interest Groups and the Research and Conservation Committee (RACC).

It is generally accepted as being one of, if not the, highest awards in Australia for recognition of an amateur ornithologist.

The full citation (and a response from Mike) is available in the February 2013 HBOC Newsletter.

13. Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the assistance I have received in my first year as President of HBOC. There is no need to run through the list of people who have made this first 'term' a lot easier than it would have otherwise been, as there are too many and it is too intricate a web of support that keeps this club running as effectively as it does. HBOC really is the epitome of the concept that "*the whole is greater than the sum of the parts*".

Mick Roderick (HBOC President 2012)

7 February 2013