

Shorebird Roost Rehabilitation at Stockton Sandspit

Project Report 2014

Introduction

Stockton Sandspit is a small but vital component of the Hunter Wetlands National Park and is regarded as one of the premier day-time roosts for shorebirds in the Hunter Estuary. Shorebird roost rehabilitation at Stockton Sandspit (the Sandspit) is focussed on a variety of roost habitats favoured by the shorebirds. As an added bonus, these rehabilitated areas provide occasional feeding habitat for shorebirds as well as breeding opportunities for some ground-nesting birds.

Volunteers from Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) have a long association with this site and over the last 15 years have held a strong site presence.

2014 Contribution

Since we have been keeping records (16th April 2003) an aggregate of 5457.5 hours of volunteer work has accrued. The value of this effort in terms of productive habitat for shorebirds is immeasurable of course, but when figured against contractor rates, it amounts to an in-kind value of over \$207,000. This is not an insignificant sum.

Volunteers visited the sandspit on 23 occasions to carry out restoration works during 2014 and a bumper total of 626.5 volunteer hours of their time was put to good use.



Figure 1. The 2014 volunteer effort is the highest since 2005.

This remarkable increase in volunteer availability was largely due to the collective efforts of some non-HBOC organisations with an interest in the estuary and its health. Members of HBOC were ably assisted by staff and volunteers from Conservation Volunteers (CVA) on several occasions through a program funded by industry and coordinated by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). A working visit by a group of TAFE students studying Native Area Restoration also contributed.

The 2014 volunteer effort focussed on maintaining high standard saltmarsh and shelly sand areas, removal of mangrove seedlings over all areas plus the annual Clean Up Day activity. This has always been the case over the years. With the additional volunteer resource enjoyed this year, restoration of other non-roost areas was also targeted. These areas have gone neglected over the last couple of years since precious volunteer resources needed to be utilised at shorebird sites on Ash Island.

Mangroves

To provide a shorebird friendly site all mangrove seedlings are removed (under licence) from designated areas. It is usual for this work to be carried out in January before the new seedlings get too established. At the beginning of the year however, we had not yet secured a permit so mangrove treatment was put on hold.

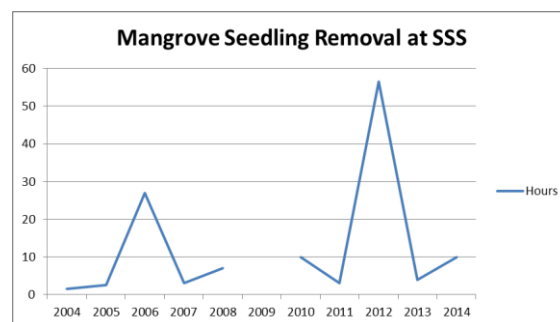


Figure 2. Seedlings of Grey Mangroves lined the Lagoon in January but work was postponed until July.

A permit issued by NSW Department of Primary Industries (Fisheries NSW) was finally received via NPWS in June. Permit PN14/197 (under Part 7 of the Fisheries Management Act 1994) allowed for mangrove seedling removal within a defined zone at the Sandspit and was in force until 30th June 2017 or until combined with the Lower Hunter Wetland Management Plan approvals.

The next opportunity presented itself on 12th July following a Hunter Estuary Wader Survey and 4 HBOC members made short work of removing the established seedlings.

Figure 3. An effort similar to the previous year was all it took to remove the seedlings.



Subsequently, a permit covering all areas of interest regarding mangrove removal within the Hunter Estuary was received in December. Permit PN14/333 is in force until 30th December 2017 and supersedes the previous permit.

Clean Up Day

The first Sunday of March is when a “traditional” Clean Up Australia effort is made at Stockton Sandspit and 2014 was no exception. A small group of die-hards from HBOC (Max, Caryl, Paddy, Juliana & Tom) jumped into it and 4 hours later had collected 20 bags of rubbish plus lots of larger items.



Figure 4. By comparison, this collection was much less than some previous years. Perhaps the message is starting to get through?

Shelly Sand

Shelly sand is preferred by some shorebirds as a place to roost. An additional bonus with this work is that two species of resident shorebirds, Red-capped Plover and Pied Oystercatcher utilise the open sand areas for nesting.

Preparing areas of shelly sand remains the greatest challenge for volunteers each year at the Sandspit and is sometimes referred to as the great winter effort. Three days in May created an opportunity to make a start on this work followed by two low-tide weeks of concerted effort through June.

The first week’s effort was boosted by a team of professional bush regenerators from Toolijooa Environmental Restoration who were contracted through NPWS. The

second week was bolstered by three days of contribution from a Conservation Volunteers team made up of local and international volunteers.

A couple of days later the prepared ground was turned over with a rotary hoe, compliments of NPWS. This work completed the Shelly Sand preparation for 2014 and all was ready for migrant shorebirds to roost and for residents to think about nesting.

Ground Nesting Birds

Sometime on Monday morning (29th September) a newly hatched Pied Oystercatcher was walked from the nest on Big Island to the fringing saltmarsh nearby. The incubation had taken at least 30 days, since the first reported sighting of the hen actually sitting was on 31st August. Over the weekend we had staged a few lengthy vigils in the hope that we might be present for the hatching however the birds had other plans.

In any case, the event gave us much joy.

Having missed the hatching, it was early on Monday afternoon I was able to confirm that at least one fluffy runner had hatched as the female was standing about the saltmarsh "on guard" while the male continued to herd any errant shorebird that dared get closer than 20m from the site. Having managed to get a couple of the briefest looks at a fluffy runner I did enjoy the sight of the male bird bringing a morsel to feed the hidden youngster. Whenever I see this I feel very elated indeed.

We're uncles and aunts again at Stockton Sandspit!

The Pied Oystercatchers have been attempting breeding at the Sandspit every season since 2007. In that year 2 runners were produced and reared to independence. Since then at least 17 breeding attempts have been made (mostly unsuccessful) resulting in only a further 5 runners reared to independence. This latest attempt (19th) has resulted in one runner (the 8th; should we call it "Henry") and by the end of the year was feeding independently while still hanging about with the parents. The chances of oystercatcher runners being raised to independence is pretty high given the wonderful previous track record at the Sandspit of every hatchling surviving to the point where the parents kick them out.

These breeding attempts are a little unusual in that they take place on a prepared open patch in an estuary. The traditional nesting place for Pied Oystercatchers is on ocean beaches but we know that these places offer little opportunity these days (too many people, dogs and four-wheel-drive vehicles). Our plucky oystercatchers have learned to take advantage of the preparation work we do at the Sandspit in order to provide a suite of roosting opportunities for shorebirds in general.



Figure 5. The initial work of clearing the vegetation on “Big Island” was carried out by this team of bush regenerators from Toolijooa.



Figure 6. This team of volunteers from Conservation Volunteers, worked in cold and blustery conditions, while completing the “Big Island” effort on ground where the Pied Oystercatcher later established its nest.

Thanks to all involved in this year’s ground preparations, the successful hatching of a Pied Oystercatcher “fluffy runner” is a wonderful bonus and spurs us on to continue with our restoration work.

Additional Works

With the oystercatchers off the nest by September it was possible to make the most of some low-tide days and catch up with some off-roost restoration work. The various marsh areas dominated by Knobby Club-sedge (*Ficinia nodosa*) were due for some treatment so several days spread over August, October and December were utilised.

After some wonderful contributions from volunteers (CVA) and students (TAFE) all the marsh areas had been cleared of weeds, morning glory removed from near the Bird Hide, exotic palms removed from the Banksia Grove and weeds removed from the under-bridge plantings.

Acknowledgements

The project continues to succeed because of the valuable input by many people and this aspect is gratefully acknowledged. It is a partnership of people and organisations that provides the structure for it all to happen.

Thankyou National Parks & Wildlife Service, Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Project, Conservation Volunteers (Australia), TAFE, Toolijooa and Hunter Bird Observers Club.

To every person who has volunteered and left some part of themselves at this amazing site, your contributions have produced many good outcomes and the Sandspit shorebirds have benefitted greatly.

Tom Clarke

Project Coordinator HBOC

December 2014



Evening setting at Stockton Sandspit – Juliana Ford.