

## **HBOC's Records Appraisal Committee – an Introduction and Summary of Roles**

For the February 2012 newsletter I wrote an article about the NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (ORAC), with a brief introduction on records appraisal committees in general. You can read that article at the link below:

[http://www.hboc.org.au/resources/documents/HBOC\\_Newsletter\\_Feb12.pdf](http://www.hboc.org.au/resources/documents/HBOC_Newsletter_Feb12.pdf)

As I wrote then, records appraisal committees are a part of modern birdwatching nearly as much as binoculars. As our knowledge of the status and distribution of birds increases, there is also a need to 'manage' the reliability of the information that contributes to that knowledge. I also wrote that "you may be aware that HBOC has a Records Appraisal Committee (RAC) that oversees rare or unusual bird records from our region". The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the HBOC RAC (hereafter referred to as "the RAC") and to give some background on its roles, processes and membership.

### **Background**

The RAC was formed at the same time as the inception of the Hunter Region Annual Bird Reports in 1993 (which was in turn a concept borne out of a very early BIGnet\* meeting where Alan Stuart volunteered to take on the task – one he is still performing 20 years later!). Initially there were 6 members in the RAC and this was expanded to 7 members in 2008. To date there have been 14 members of the RAC, with only one original member still sitting to this day (Ann Lindsey). Sue Hamonet was the Secretary of the RAC (as well as being the Club's Records Officer) from the beginning in 1993 right up until the start of 2012 when I took over the Records Appraisal Officer reins.

As I type this, we are currently up to Case # 384, which roughly equates to an average of 20 cases that the RAC assesses each year.

### **Main Role of the RAC**

Whilst many birders keep lists (some keep more than others!), the Club's list and various records of the birds on that list needs to have some sort of 'quality control' to ensure that the list / records are reliable and robust. The Club has earned an incredibly strong reputation not just in the birding world, but with other organisations, government departments and the general public. This has come about over time for a number of reasons, one of which is the integrity of the information we keep and share about the birds of the Hunter Region.

As I wrote in my 2012 article, "*in instances where birds considered to be particularly rare or unusual to a particular area are reported, supporting information may be required to validate the record, with a view to ensuring that the knowledge-base is credible and has been collated through a thorough vetting process. Generally, these [records appraisal] committees carry a list of bird species that require a submission to validate the record (viz. a "review list")*". In the case of HBOC, the RAC generally requires that a record be submitted for review in a few ways, being:

- A Category 3 bird – refer to page 5 of the 2012 Hunter Region Annual Bird Report for a list of these species. The list also includes some birds that are included on 'higher' committee's review lists (i.e. ORAC and the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee [BARC]). These birds are considered rare in the Hunter and need to be validated before the Club can accept them (though there are exceptions as we will see below);
- A species that has not been recorded or confirmed in the Region previously; and/or
- A significant report of any species that might require confirmation. A hypothetical example of this might be a 'western' species reported from a coastal location – regardless of its Category (refer to page 6 of the 2012 Annual Bird Report), the record would be considered unusual enough to warrant review (although in general the report is discussed with the observer and what happens next becomes a case-by-case situation).

Note that the RAC is a committee concerned with “records appraisal”. It is not a “rarities committee” as many people refer to us. We assess all “records”, not just sightings of rare birds. I expand on this in the section called “Other Roles”.

The exceptions that I referred to in the first dot point above are in the instances where numerous observers have seen the bird(s) and there is no doubt about the authenticity of the record. Almost without exception these birds are well-photographed too. In these cases no formal submission is required, though agreement for accepting the records occurs after discussion with RAC members. Probably the best examples of the ‘exceptions’ are Category 3 birds that are seen on pelagic trips where literally hundreds of images of a ‘rare’ bird (for example, a Buller’s Albatross) are taken and the bird is observed by up to 15 people. There are examples of rare birds seen on pelagics that are seen by many observers but an URRF (Unusual Record Report Form) was requested due to the difficulty in confirming identification, such as the Antarctic Prion seen in June 2013. Another example where a formal submission was not required was the spate of Budgerigar records in the Hunter Region in 2013. Had there been only one or two reports, the RAC would have considered requesting confirmation of the records.

I know what some of you may be thinking – there are some “grey areas” here – and that’s true. But ultimately there has to be some discretion used by the RAC and in particular the convener of the RAC, otherwise the tasks would be too difficult to track, especially as each member of the RAC gives their own time to assessing RAC cases. I like to think that this “discretion” can be questioned when an observer feels it is appropriate.

### **The Assessment Process (in a nutshell)**

A rough outline of the process that we follow for records appraisal is outlined below.

1. If a rare or unusual record (as described previously) is reported or made aware to the RAC, we decide if an URRF is required. This is where the “discretion” I referred to earlier is usually applied and I (as the Records Appraisal Officer) am mostly responsible for this. If there are multiple observers / images (e.g. Budgerigars in 2013 and the Pacific Gull at Nobbys in June 2013) an URRF is not usually required.
2. Where an URRF is required, the observer is consulted to see if they’re interested in submitting an URRF and at this point a Case Number for the bird/record is applied.
3. Once an URRF is submitted it is distributed to all RAC members for appraisal.
4. Each member makes an independent assessment on the information provided and lodges their decision. They are unaware of what other members have recorded. Once all verdicts have been received a decision (in the form of a memorandum) is issued to the observer(s), summarising the feedback given from the RAC members (predominantly for non-accept cases) and RAC members are included in that communication.

The HBOC RAC follows the same rules as NSW ORAC, which can be seen on the HBOC website under Records Appraisal.

Note that when a member of the RAC submits an URRF (which does happen), they do not assess their own record.

### **“The URRF”**

The main “vehicle” for records appraisal is usually a form that can be used as a template for the observer to fill in and submit. These forms vary in fine detail, but generally they all seek the same things and they are for the observer to:

- give details on the location, time and other circumstances of the observation;
- describe the subject bird(s) and whether the description came from notes made in the field or from memory **before** consulting a field guide;
- consider potential confusion species;
- provide details on the experience the observer has with the subject species; and
- provide various other information about the bird(s) and the observation.

The need to take field notes at the time of the observation cannot be stressed too highly. These notes should describe exactly what you noticed at the time, and carry much more weight than notes made from memory. Ideally an observer should recognise the need for an URRF based on field notes. There are many occasions when this does not happen and I as convener of the RAC need to approach the observer(s). In such instances the evidence is likely to be less convincing when an URRF is done retrospectively because of the tendency to report what you know the bird to look like rather than what you saw.

Technically, you don't have to use this form. If you feel you can provide the necessary detail, you can submit a document that provides the pertinent information outlined in the URRF. For example, each submission I have made to BARC and ORAC in the past has been a document in the form of a very short report. But I have always included all of the details outlined in an URRF document. As I have said above, the URRF serves as a template but you can submit your observation in the format that you're most comfortable with. Another approach is to use the URRF to outline all of the details such as location, date etc, but append a short report to it. This also works well.

The HBOC URRF can be found on the Records Appraisal page on the HBOC website. I intend to post some "example URRFs" from previous cases onto the website soon as well. It is also recommended that you read the "guidelines for submissions" document provided by NSW ORAC, as this gives some good "informal" hints about how to go about filling in an URRF. There is a link at the end of the "guidelines for submissions" to a similar document put together by BARC, so there is plenty of background out there to help you in the process. If you're still unsure, please ask me or a member of the RAC.

#### **“Accept versus Not Accept”**

The role of the RAC in appraising URRFs is not to try to “increase the Hunter list” or to “bring doubt on rare bird records” – it is to verify any sightings of birds which do not usually occur in the Hunter Region or are seen in an unusual location or habitat. It is very important to note that no report is ever “rejected” and I want to stress that although an observer may be satisfied that they have identified a bird sufficiently for their own purposes, the RAC has the responsibility to either accept or not accept the sighting for the Club's records. This is an important distinction to make. Furthermore, the RAC does not ever attempt to try and say what a reported bird may have been if the record was not accepted (though potential confusion species are obviously taken into consideration and often included in the returning comments from committee members).

I repeat – the RAC merely chooses to accept or not accept a submitted record for HBOC records. Some cases are more difficult than others. The bottom line is though, that we can only assess each record on the information provided. In some cases, if further information comes to hand, a case can be re-examined. To avoid getting into too much detail here, I refer you to the Records Appraisal page on the website where this information can be found.

#### **Other Roles**

The RAC has other roles other than records appraisal. It also keeps abreast of the latest changes to taxonomy and nomenclature and makes recommendations to the general HBOC Committee about how the Club should deal with these changes. For example, the recent move from Christidis and Boles (2008) taxonomy to the BirdLife Australia Working List of Australian Birds was considered and discussed by the RAC before the Club made the decision to switch to the “new list”.

Every year, the RAC reviews a draft version of the Annual Bird Report, sent around by the editor Alan Stuart. Once the review is complete, Alan and the RAC get together to run through the report content. This is usually a pretty candid affair, with plenty of coffee and pizza (and probably a beer or wine for some of us!) and amongst other things, much discussion on the status of many of the Region's birds. And it means that we do assess all records that are published in the Bird Reports, although of course it is the rare or unusual records that receive the closest scrutiny. It is largely at these meetings that the Categories for each Hunter bird species (i.e. 1, 2 or 3) are reviewed as well.

A summary of RAC-reviewed cases for 2013 will appear in the Annual Report and I hope to be able to provide this annually from this point on.

### **Membership**

Generally, records appraisal committees are composed of members that have advanced knowledge of the identification and distribution of bird species in a given area. As with BARC and ORAC (and presumably other records appraisal committees worldwide), members of the RAC are appointed by the committee. The ORAC rules (which we follow) state that a “*candidate for membership shall be a person who in the estimation of the existing Committee, has demonstrated an expert ability in and knowledge of the field identification of birds*”. The Club’s RAC includes / has included local field ornithologists that have demonstrated that they possess this knowledge-base within the Hunter Region. We are always looking for people who might be suitable as future members! The current RAC membership is highlighted in the RAC timeline below.

#### *HBOC RAC membership timeline (current members are in **bold font**)*

Sue Hamonet	1993-2012 (Secretary 1993-2012)
David Geering	1993-1996
<b>Ann Lindsey</b>	1993-current
Jeanette Stephenson	1993-1999
Wilma Barden	1993-2007
Jim Perry	1993-2000
Jim Imrie	1997-1999
<b>Phil Hansbro</b>	2000-current
Terry Lindsey	2000-2005
<b>Fred van Gessel</b>	2000-current
<b>Mike Newman</b>	2006-current
<b>Mick Roderick</b>	2008-current (Secretary 2012-current)
<b>Craig Anderson</b>	2008-current
<b>Allan Richardson</b>	2012-current

Note that Alan Stuart is deliberately not a member of the RAC. In his own words, he “*would have a conflict of interest*” – he wants the Annual Bird Reports to be as exciting as possible and at times that might make him less impartial than he would need to be.

### **Concluding Remark**

The final point that I would like to make is that the RAC is part of the Club and not external to it. We are more than willing to hear suggestions and feedback on how we operate. We also do not wish for the membership to see us as disengaged from the rest of the Club. We serve a purpose within the complex structure of this amazing club and we work very hard in our own time to undertake this. We look forward to working closely with the rest of the membership into the future.

**Mick Roderick**  
**HBOC Records Appraisal Officer**

\*BIGnet stands for 'Bird Interest Group Network' and comprises bird-watching clubs from NSW and the ACT. Representatives from the clubs meet twice yearly to discuss issues of common concern.



An Antarctic Prion (with Fairy Prion in the background) seen off Port Stephens in June 2013 – an example of a difficult to identify bird where an URRF was requested to confirm the record. (Mick Roderick)



Budgerigars at Martindale in April 2013 – an easy identification of a bird seen by many observers over a protracted period of time. The RAC accepted the records, though no URRF was submitted. (Mick Roderick)

