



# Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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## **Re: Input into the Concept Design for Richmond Vale Rail Trail**

The Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) is the largest bird interest group in the Hunter Region, with a membership base of 350 members. HBOC is affiliated with Australia's peak bird interest organisation, BirdLife Australia, which has a membership of over 12,000 and a supporter base of over 70,000.

The Club's aims are to:

- *To encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat;*
- *To encourage bird observing as a leisure time activity*

HBOC appreciates the various advantages of such walking tracks and cycle ways to tourism in Newcastle and to the added safety for cyclists in avoiding main roads with heavy traffic. In principle HBOC supports the concept of the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail so long as our concerns and conditions are in turn supported and met.

Decision makers must first and foremost take into account the welfare of biodiversity and in particular bird species and populations which already use Hexham Swamp for shelter, foraging and reproduction. Hexham Swamp is a significant and environmentally sensitive area and quiet haven for wildlife and for the already existing visitors who wish to enjoy the benefits it offers.

### **Importance of Hexham Swamp to avifauna and other biodiversity**

Members of HBOC have been monitoring the east side of Hexham Swamp monthly since 2008. Data have also been collected for the western side and members report sightings opportunistically. Local Land Services (LLS) have just released a report in which 131 species have been observed in Hexham Swamp. (Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project – Final Report 2016). The list of bird species for the Hunter Region is 446 as at November 2016 (Stuart 2016). Hexham Swamp supports more than 25% of species occurring in the Hunter Region.

Among them are threatened species listed under *NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act) and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Several species of migratory shorebirds listed under the EPBC Act also occur regularly, often in nationally significant numbers. The Hunter Estuary is recognised as the most important migratory shorebird site in NSW and Hexham Swamp is one of the most important individual sites within the estuary. A full list of threatened and migratory bird species found on Hexham Swamp is provided in **Annexure 1**.

It is likely that the Black-necked Stork, Australasian Bittern, Eastern Grass Owl breed on Hexham Swamp and nests with eggs as well as fledged young still being fed by parents have been observed for White-fronted Chat. All of these are threatened species listed under the relevant legislation.

When Kooragang Nature Reserve was declared a *Ramsar* site in 1984 Hexham Swamp was not included. Since that time however, millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on the Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project which resulted in the opening of the eight floodgates at Ironbark Creek allowing the reinstatement of tidal inundation to much of the Swamp. 443 ha of estuarine vegetation/habitat have been established and this process is ongoing. (Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project – Final Report 2016). Although not listed along with the other areas (Tomago Wetlands, former Kooragang Nature Reserve) under the international *Ramsar Convention for the Wise Use of Wetlands*, Hexham Swamp meets four of its criteria. Only one criterion is necessary to be declared a *Ramsar* site (refer to **Annexure 2** for an explanation of how the Ramsar criteria is met).

Hexham Swamp was included in the 2006 gazetted Hunter Wetlands National Park which encompasses the former Kooragang Nature Reserve and Tomago Wetlands.

Hexham Swamp is listed in the National Directory of Important Wetlands. To be considered nationally important, a wetland must meet at least one of the six nationally agreed criteria.

Hexham Swamp is listed as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA), a program initiated by BirdLife International which commenced in Europe in the 1980s. IBA listing indicates high value for bird and other biodiversity for conservation. To be designated as such, a site must meet global criteria that are assessed during a review process involving panels of experts.

### **Factors to be taken into account in the design process of the Rail Trail**

1. Birdlife and other biodiversity must be protected from disturbance and harassment. Many birds of several species currently use the Pipeline Track as a roosting site particularly at high tides and after periods of rain when water levels are high. If this Track is to become a thoroughfare, then designers will need to install alternative roosting sites at strategic points parallel to the Track.
2. Unfortunately cyclists are gaining a reputation for a lack of consideration for other users of shared pathways and in particular I cite the Fernleigh Track along which are stretches of key habitat for Critically Endangered Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater. HBOC Secretary and coordinator of HBOC mid-week outings no longer schedules outings on Fernleigh Track as it is too dangerous for pedestrians. As a result members are reluctant to search for these species when prime food resources, Swamp Mahogany and Spotted Gum are in flower. Members of running groups such as the '5.30 Runners', 'Night Striders' and 'Tortoise Runners' have been endangered by speeding cyclists according to one of our members. In addition there have been actual accidents involving cyclists and pedestrians (Newcastle Herald 2013; 2016).

Designers will have to find solutions to this problem so that pedestrian and biodiversity welfare and needs are prioritised. Pipeline Track which will run from Tarro to Shortland in a straight line 5/6 kilometres in length and will be a magnet for speeding cyclists. One solution will necessarily involve obstacles – speed humps etc. so that speeds in keeping with this sensitive area are maintained. Cyclists will have to have a separate path from that of pedestrians. In addition, there should be observation points where wildlife and wetland observers can spend time away from both tracks. HBOC has detailed knowledge of the area and should be consulted during the design process to assist in the location of these vantage points.

3. It will be necessary to provide vehicular access to the Pipeline Track section of the Rail Trail at a minimum. It is visited by birdwatchers from our region, from interstate and from overseas and the only practical access is by vehicle. In addition, HBOC members have been monitoring bird populations monthly at high tide since 2008. Surveys have been carried out by car (and can only be done so), driving slowly along Pipeline Track stopping at significant points or when birds are seen. This process can take up to three hours if bird numbers are high and because of the tide constraint, time is of the essence. HBOC members have visited Hexham Swamp since the 1970s but the installation of a good road base and the publicity Hexham Swamp will receive as a result of the Rail Trail will attract more people and allow them to enjoy the benefits of this section of the National Park. The vehicular access would not be a thoroughfare and need go only from the entrance of the National Park to Ironbark Creek. Vandalism is not a reason for not implementing this as that will no doubt occur when the cycle way is opened in any case. Fortunately, the former Hunter Water Corporation pipeline and its maintenance track provide sufficient room for pedestrian needs and cycle ways. It should be noted that vegetated edges, where land meets water, must be retained and under no circumstances should the edges be 'kept tidy', mown or interfered with in any way as many birds forage and roost along the vegetated edges where water is often more shallow.
4. It is an acknowledged fact that long-term data sets are of great value to land managers. The Hunter Local Land Services (LLS) is winding down its regular monitoring program of Hexham Swamp as the Rehabilitation Project nears completion. HBOC will therefore be the only organisation monitoring bird population at this ever-changing landscape. Vehicular access will facilitate the continued gathering of such valuable information.
5. Any construction works should be undertaken between the end of April and beginning of September when the majority of migratory shorebirds are in the northern hemisphere
6. Newcastle Council has provided excellent educational signage about local fauna and flora at Nobbys and Stockton Sandspit (for instance) and it is anticipated that similar signs will be created especially for Hexham Swamp. Other signs may be suggest that noise be kept to a minimum and that a 10 kmh speed limit be observed.

Prepared for Hunter Bird Observers Club by A. Lindsey - 17 November 2016  
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Cc; Newcastle City Council; National Parks and Wildlife; Local Land Services

### References

Newcastle Herald articles published 4/03/2013 and 02/02/2016.

Stuart, A. (Ed.) (2016). Hunter Region Annual Bird Report Number 23 (2015), Hunter Bird Observers club Inc., New Lambton, Australia.

Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project – Final Report – Draft for Discussion, November 2016.

## **Annexure 1 – List of Significant Bird Species Found on Hexham Swamp**

**Migratory Shorebirds** – All migratory birds are listed as migratory under the *EPBC Act* and in international agreements with Japan (*JAMBA*), China (*CAMBA*) and South Korea (*ROKAMBA*).

Latham's Snipe <i>Gallinago hardwickii</i>	
Pacific Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>	Vulnerable TSC Act
Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica</i>	Vulnerable EPBC Act
Common Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>	
Marsh Sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	
Red-necked Stint <i>Calidris ruficollis</i>	
Pectoral Sandpiper <i>Calidris melanotos</i>	
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	
Curlew Sandpiper <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	Critically Endangered EPBC Act; Endangered TSC Act
Broad-billed Sandpiper <i>Calidris falcinellus</i>	Vulnerable TSC Act
Ruff <i>Calidris pugnax</i>	
Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>	
Lesser Sand Plover <i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	Vulnerable TSC Act; Endangered EPBC Act

### **Other (Vagrant) Migratory Shorebirds**

Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis*  
Little Curlew *Numenius minutus*

### **Non-migratory Shorebirds**

Australian Painted Snipe <i>Rostratula australis</i>	Endangered EPBC Act and TSC Act
Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus leucocephalus</i>	
Red-necked Avocet <i>Recurvirostra novaehollandiae</i>	
Red-capped Plover <i>Charadrius ruficapillus</i>	
Black-fronted Dotterel <i>Elseyonis melanops</i>	
Red-kneed Dotterel <i>Erythrogonys cinctus</i>	
Banded Lapwing <i>Vanellus tricolor</i>	
Masked Lapwing <i>Vanellus miles</i>	
Australian Pratincole <i>Stiltia isabella</i>	

### **Other Threatened Species**

Australasian Bittern <i>Botaurus poiciloptilus</i>	Endangered EPBC Act and TSC Act
Black-necked Stork <i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i>	Endangered TSC Act
Eastern Grass Owl <i>Tyto longimembris</i>	Vulnerable TSC Act
White-fronted Chat <i>Epthianura albifrons</i>	Vulnerable TSC Act

## **Annexure 2 – Ramsar Criteria that Hexham Swamp meets**

**Criterion 2:** *A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities:*

Refer to lists of threatened species above as well as the Endangered Ecological Community - Subtropical and Temperate Coastal Saltmarsh (EPBC Act); Coastal saltmarsh in the NSW North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner bioregions (TSC Act).

**Criterion 4:** *A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions:*

Hexham Swamp is part of the Hunter Estuary staging area and/or final destination for migratory shorebirds, breeding site and potential breeding site for endangered species (see lists above). The Hunter Estuary is a known important drought refuge for waterbirds.

**Criterion 6:** *A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird:*

More than 1% of the national population of Chestnut Teal *Anas castanea* and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper has been regularly observed.

**Criterion 8:** *A wetland should be considered internationally important if it is an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and/or migration path on which fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere, depend.*

Hexham Swamp is a breeding ground for fish, crustaceans, Eastern King Prawn and other marine life. (Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project – Final Report 2016).