



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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Submission from the Hunter Bird Observers Club about the Warkworth Continuation Project

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) strongly objects to the Warkworth Continuation Project (WCP).

The NSW Department of Planning and Environment must take into consideration the cumulative impact of land clearing in the Central Hunter Valley and its devastating effect on the woodland avian population, many species of which have decreased to the extent that they are in danger of becoming locally extinct, e.g. Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata*.

Too much native vegetation in the Hunter Valley has already been cleared

“The Hunter region of the North Coast Bioregion is particularly threatened by coal mining. ‘Clearing of native vegetation’ is listed as a Key Threatening Process under the TSC Act in NSW”. Clearing of native vegetation is the major factor for loss of biological diversity. In NSW 61% of native vegetation has been cleared or significantly disturbed. In some areas more than 90% has been cleared. (NSW Scientific Committee 2001). 76% of woodland and forest from the Hunter Valley floor have been cleared leaving only 19% of fragmented remnant vegetation. A mere 0.8% of this remnant vegetation is in protected ownership - national parks, which are situated on poorer soils and have lower bird abundance and diversity (Peake 2006).

The destruction of another 611 ha of woodland, including Endangered Ecological Communities, on top of the 4,200 ha this mine has already cleared the major proportion of which was previously woodland (Peake 2006) will remove habitat for a range of biodiversity including declining woodland birds, 13 of which are acknowledged threatened species.

Too many species populations are being killed

The suite of bird species that inhabit the temperate woodlands of south-eastern Australia is already in serious decline in NSW and the Hunter Region, which is reflected in recent additions to the list of threatened birds and the severity of the threat for some species. It is generally considered that one in five obligate-woodland bird species are now under threat in Australia’s temperate woodlands, with the very real possibility that this could actually be one in four. **Habitat destruction and disruption caused by WCP will exacerbate this decline.**

One hundred and thirty woodland species are listed in the Environmental Assessment as having occurred on this site. Thirteen of these species are listed under the *NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act (TSC Act) 1995*:

Little Eagle *Hieraaetus morphnoides*
Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis*
Glossy Black-Cockatoo *Calyptorhynchus lathami*
Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor*
Little Lorikeet *Glossopsitta pusilla*
Brown Treecreeper *Climacteris picumnus*
Speckled Warbler *Chthonicola sagittata*
Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia*
Grey-crowned Babbler *Pomatostomus temporalis*
Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*
Scarlet Robin *Petroica boodang*
Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata*
Diamond Firetail *Stagonopleura guttata*

In the 2010 Warkworth Extension EA it was noted that it was highly likely that an additional two threatened bird species would have been present on site at some time – Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta* and Black-chinned Honeyeater *Melithreptus gularis*.

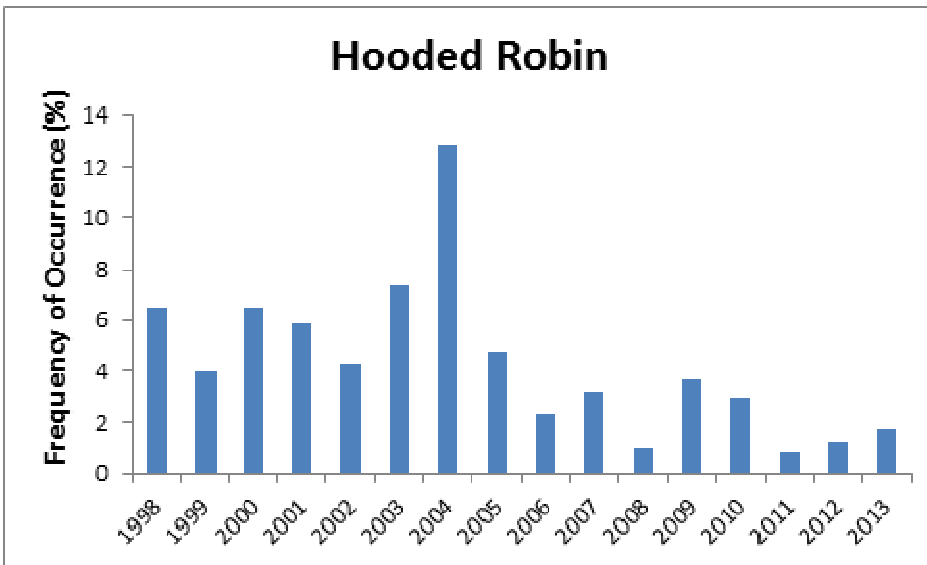
Two of these species are also listed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* – Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot. It is worth noting that the Regent Honeyeater is listed as Critically Endangered under the TSC Act and is facing a real threat of extinction in the near future.

Hooded Robin, an example of decline

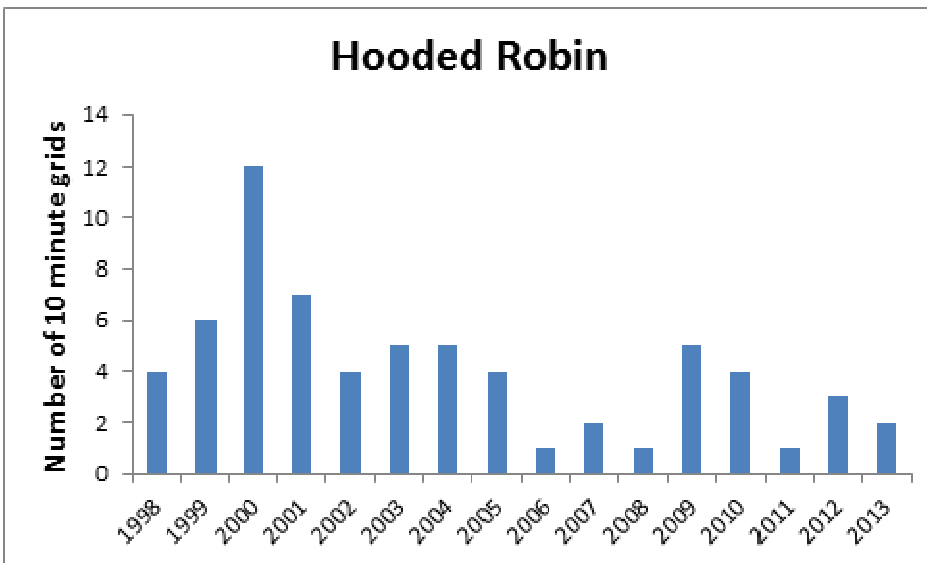
Species such as Hooded Robin are particularly vulnerable to habitat fragmentation and the negative consequences of fragmentation.

“The main threats to the Hooded Robin are inferred to be fragmentation and degradation of habitat”. “.....recolonisation after extinction is considered unlikely” (Final Determination to list the Hooded Robin as Vulnerable, NSW Scientific Committee 2008).

The following two charts, based on records submitted to BirdLife Australia’s Atlas Project demonstrate the extent to which the Hooded Robin has declined in the Hunter Region during the last 16 years. The Hooded Robin has a limited distribution in the Region, with records for 26 (17%) of the 151 ten minute grids which comprise the area. Grids where the robin occurs are primarily in the west of the region; in areas highly impacted by mining developments, including Warkworth. Over the 16 year period 1998- 2013 the reporting rate (frequency of occurrence) of Hooded Robins was 4.8% in 2585 bird surveys conducted in grids where Hooded Robins were found. The first chart demonstrates the dramatic decline in the frequency of occurrence of the robins past 16 years. During the most recent eight years (2006 – 2013) the mean annual reporting rate was 2.1%, which was 68% lower than the 6.5% level during the previous eight years (1998 – 2005).

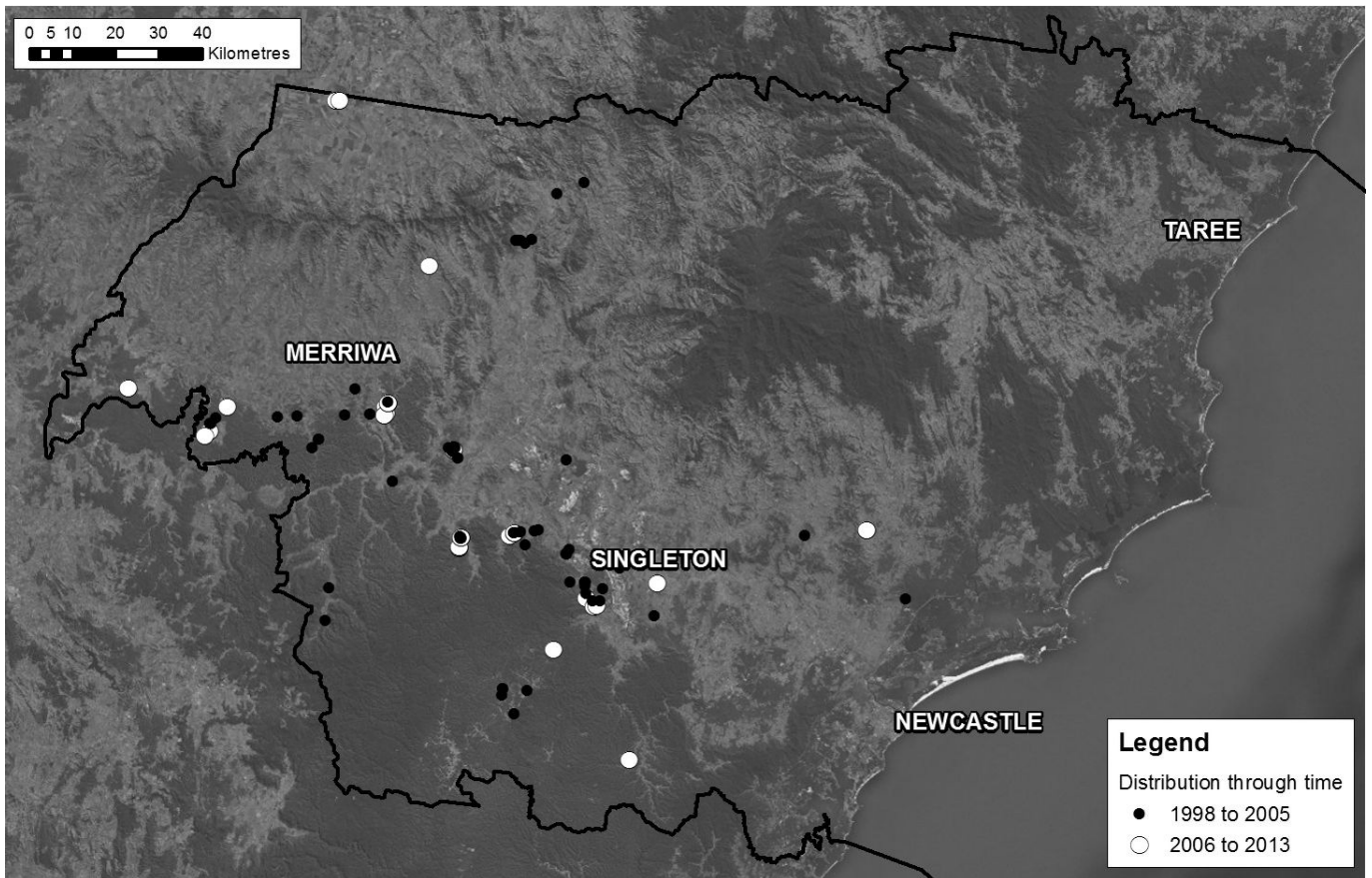


The second chart shows a corresponding decline in the distribution of the Hooded Robin in the Hunter Region based on a fall in the number ten minute grids in which the species was recorded annually. In this instance the mean number of grids in which the robin was found annually fell by 59% in the second eight year period (i.e. from 5.9 to 2.4).



Regional declines exceeding 50% over a relatively short period of time for a species acknowledged to be threatened to extinction at the vulnerable level are of extreme concern. While drought was an obvious factor contributing to the marked declines between 2000 and 2008 apparent in the overall trends of both charts, habitat loss and increasing fragmentation are obvious impediments to the lack of subsequent recovery following a return to more favourable climatic conditions.

The following map shows the contraction of range of the Hooded Robin in relation to mining areas and its habitat preference for the floor of valleys where habitat is richest.



Hooded Robin distribution in Hunter Valley

Similar trends have been found for other woodland species such as Brown Treecreeper and Diamond Firetail.

Rehabilitation and Restoration are not ‘silver bullets’

There are many, many reasons for retaining original native vegetation. Only a few have been listed in this submission. The purported re-establishment of forest on mined areas will not provide suitable habitat for woodland-dependent species for decades after clearing has occurred.

The Warkworth Mine is surrounded by other mining operations: Wambo, Hunter Valley Operations, Mt Thorley, Bulga, which in turn have eliminated thousands of hectares of woodland. **The lack of large tracts of similar woodland in the vicinity means that recruitment of sedentary species would not take place and many species will become locally extinct.**

The proposition that avian species will progressively migrate to new areas put aside as environmental offsets is flawed because if existing habitat were suitable, it would already have a population of similar species. Displaced species would find it very difficult to re-locate to suitable habitat in the vicinity given that the vast majority of habitat has already been cleared. There would very likely be a high mortality of birds, including individuals of threatened species.

Conclusion

An approval for the Warkworth Extension Project (2010) was overturned by the Land and Environment Court in 2013 on the grounds of, among other reasons, “unacceptable negative impacts on biodiversity which would not be avoided, mitigated or compensated”. The avian population forms a highly visible component of biodiversity. HBOC objects to the recent change in legislation and policy, which was crafted to make the ‘significance of the resource’ the principal consideration of the matters the Minister is to consider. This, together with the broken agreement about the Warkworth Mine DA 300-9-2002-i Green Offset Package, reveal the complete lack of regard and care successive governments have for the few remaining sites in the Central Hunter Valley which have functioning ecological attributes.

A balance must be struck between achieving economic prosperity through development projects and preserving the unique biodiversity assets of our region. This balance can be achieved only by the strategic planning of development activities where the effective exploitation of resources and the protection of biodiversity are pursued with equal vigour and commitment. Economic evaluation of developments must fully factor in the long-term environmental cost of biodiversity protection associated with a project. If the cost of maintaining biodiversity is unaffordable, the project is uneconomic and unsustainable and should be rejected.

In view of ongoing avian decline, especially woodland species, ongoing land clearing and habitat destruction in the Hunter Valley, HBOC believes that the Warkworth Continuation Project should be once and for all rejected. The land west of Wallaby Scrub Road must be put aside as an offset to compensate for the extinction of all biodiversity on the current Warkworth site.

Submission compiled by A. Lindsey for and on behalf of the Hunter Bird Observers Club

References

BirdLife Australia’s Ongoing Atlas Project

NSW Scientific Committee (2011). *Final Determination to list “Clearing Native Vegetation” as a Key Threatening Process under the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.*

NSW Scientific Committee (2008). *Final Determination to list the Hooded Robin as a Vulnerable Species under the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.*

Peake, T.C. (2006). *The Vegetation of the Central Hunter Valley NSW.* A Report on the findings of the Hunter Remnant Vegetation Project, Hunter – Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority.