

Celebrating 20 years of Hunter Estuary waterbird surveys

In April 1999, the Hunter Bird Observers Club decided to start monthly surveys of shorebirds and other waterbirds in the Hunter Estuary. 20 years on, the club's members are still heading out once per month and they have built an amazing database of records over that time, all of which have been sent in to Shorebirds 2020.

To celebrate the 20 year anniversary, HBOC is throwing a big party on the evening of Monday 20 May at the Shortland Waters Golf Club. We're inviting anyone who has participated in at least one survey, whether a current HBOC member or not. If you're in that category and would like to come along to the party, contact our secretary at secretary@hbo.org.au. There have been well in excess of 150 people who have done at least one Hunter Estuary survey over the 20 year period (and of course, there are the stalwarts who have hardly ever missed one).



Mixed group of shorebirds at Stockton Sandspit (Photo: Chris Herbert)

In the beginning, the surveys were relatively simple although it didn't always seem like it at the time. We had three main areas to survey back then, and our method involved sending three teams out simultaneously during a Saturday morning high tide. That way we could account for any movement of birds between areas, and estimate with reasonable confidence the total numbers present.



Some of the sites surveyed in the Hunter Estuary

Some surveyors when they were just a bit younger (Photo: Chris Herbert)



About ten years ago, two rehabilitation projects in the Estuary were started – these involved restoring tidal flows to Hexham Swamp and Tomago Wetlands. As a result of those and some other changes, we now send out seven teams each survey! By the way, those two

newly restored sites have been spectacular successes, often hosting thousands of shorebirds and waterbirds especially ducks. Sometimes a team has to spend several hours just to get an accurate count of the birds in their area. And if a raptor flies through just before the count is completed, a quiet oath occasionally has been muttered!

Over the 20-year journey, there are clear trends occurring for many migratory shorebirds. The numbers of species such as Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit, Red Knot and Curlew Sandpiper have plummeted, and likewise for some of the smaller shorebirds although their declines had started much earlier. Conversely, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and perhaps Common Greenshanks have benefitted from the rehabilitation works, and there are indications that Curlew Sandpiper numbers may be slowly rising. Often there have been high numbers of the endemic Red-necked Avocet and Black-winged Stilt in the estuary as well, depending on how much inland rain has fallen.

We wonder what changes we will observe over the next 20 years?

Alan Stuart
HBOC Field Studies Coordinator



Bar-tailed Godwits, Black-tailed Godwits and Curlew Sandpipers on the Kooragang Dykes (Photo: Chris Herbert)