

1998 Annual Report

Tonight I present the 1998 annual report. It's the 18th such report by HBOC, and my first. I'd like to say at the outset how much I have enjoyed my first year as President and I hope that it can be the first of several.

The full report, with appendices from the Treasurer, Activities Officer, and so on, is available for you to look at later tonight if you wish, and subsequently will be housed in the Club library.

There were many highlights for us during 1998, and HBOC has continued to grow in strength and reputation. We are truly meeting our stated objectives:

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

I will discuss the past year under these two headings.

1. STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITAT

BIRD SIGHTINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Birds are what we're here for and as usual there were lots of species recorded during the year. We won't know exactly how many species were seen in the Hunter Region in 1998 until the Annual Bird Report is finalised later this year. However, it is likely to be in excess of 300 species, as usual.

In 1998 we certainly had some exciting moments. For a couple of months in the beginning of the year, we had the unusual spectacle of a group of Yellow Wagtail at Ash Island. We thought that this was good – then in April we had that Black-backed Wagtail at Glendale that generated so much excitement around Australia. After that things settled down a bit. That doesn't mean that we had no other rarities for the year. In fact, our Records Appraisal Committee has received 23 submissions so far for sightings in 1998, with more likely to come in. Many of these reports are still being evaluated, but already the highlights include Red-winged Parrot at a couple of locations, Grass Owl at Harrington and Bulahdelah, and an increased frequency of reports of Black Falcon, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and Pectoral Sandpiper.

The importance of the Cedar Hill Drive area of Hexham Swamp for Latham's Snipe was confirmed when around 230 birds were found to be present there in a count we organised in December. This follows the 400+ birds we found there in an initial count in December 1997, when an extended drought had dried up many other local wetlands. The numbers at Cedar Hill represent close to 1% of the estimated total East Asia - Australia Flyway population of Latham's Snipe.

BIRD STUDIES

For around half of the year, we carried out monthly surveys of possible Regent Honeyeater sites. There were also two intensive survey weekends, where Club members visited a range of possible locations for this endangered species. All of these surveys were linked with the long standing national Regent Honeyeater study, now coordinated in Melbourne by David Geering who remains a member of HBOC. Our thanks go to Ann Lindsey who coordinated our local activities – and they did, finally, find a Regent!

In August, the new Birds Australia Atlas project commenced. HBOC is an active supporter of the Atlas project – all of our records are now routinely forwarded to Birds Australia, and Jim Perry has become the Regional Organiser for the Hunter Region. We also continued to forward our records to the NSW Bird Atlassers, in support of their long standing project. In November, several of our members participated in the national survey for beach-nesting species, by surveying the whole of the Hunter Region coastline.

Many members continued to be involved in the Garden Bird Survey which has now completed its 6th year. Our thanks go to Peter McLauchlan who coordinates this survey which is amassing a wealth of data relating to bird movements. The data are complicated to analyse and we look forward to seeing the results of Peter's analyses in due course.

Our 1997 Bird Report was published in August last year, with 68 reporters supplying data about a total of 312 species that were recorded for the year. Every Club member receives a copy of our Annual Bird Report as do selected libraries and bird clubs. We also sell 15-20 per year which helps to defray our production costs.

CONSERVATION

David Kibble has been our active and able Conservation Officer and he has had many issues to deal with. Of greatest concern is the future of the Big Pond on Kooragang Island. We began to worry about this a while ago, when the weir was demolished and water levels dropped. More recently, it is in the middle of the proposed new airport. We are actively oppose this proposal, which is likely to affect the Kooragang Island Nature Reserve as well as Big Pond. The Club was involved in negotiations about the widening of the Five Islands bridge over Cockle Creek, and about the proposed Charlestown bypass, which is likely to affect a Masked Owl territory.

Twice during the year, Tom Clarke organised weeding days at Stockton Sandspit, with several members coming along to help. We also were at Stockton for Clean Up Australia Day. Our efforts have been focussed on the island in the artificial lagoon, which we hope will become a wader roost when suitable vegetation becomes established.

As usual we entered two teams into the Twitchathon, and we raised approximately \$550 which went towards conservation projects for Glossy Black-Cockatoo colonies in the Dubbo and Leeton areas. Our Champagne team did well, coming second with 123 species, but our main team, which usually goes close to winning, had problems finding birds and perhaps we should draw a veil over their efforts in 1998. All the same, the participants all enjoyed themselves thoroughly, as did those other members who attended the end-of-game barbecue.

The Club remains a committed supporter of the NSW Bird Interest Groups Network (BIGNet) and several of our members attended the two meetings held in 1998, at Dubbo and Leeton. Most of the bird clubs in NSW are part of BIGNet, and the meetings are an opportunity to share information and to develop a coordinated approach to important issues, conservation matters in particular.

2. ENCOURAGE BIRD OBSERVING

PROGRAM

Our program of outings and camps was again a comprehensive one. I know of no other club that offers such an intensive program, or for that matter that has the rich variety of habitats that is available to us within reasonably close range.

For the year, we had a total of 33 organised activities:

- 11 regular monthly outings (+ 1 outing canceled due to flooding)
- 11 mid-week outings
- 8 survey days (for the Regent Honeyeater, Atlas and beach-nesters projects)
- 3 camps (+ 3 camps held in conjunction with monthly outings)

Except when weather intervened, all of our activities were well attended and yielded lots of species for us to delight in. The highlights were our trip to Harrington/ Wingham Brush and our camp near Gunnedah. Both were attended by more than 30 people, and had bird counts in excess of 100 species.

Particular thanks go to our Activities Officer, Liz Herbert, for organising the main program, to Keith and Margaret Woods and Max Blanch for taking care of the mid-week outings, and to Ann Lindsey for the survey days.

CLUB NIGHTS

As usual we held 11 meetings during the year, at the Shortland Wetlands Centre and with an average attendance of 46 members. The meetings are always a lot of fun, but what always pleases me most is the spontaneous and enthusiastic response from members during the Observations segment – I love to hear birds being excited about birds.

We had main speakers at most of the meetings, and the topics they spoke on were wide-ranging: Kakadu National Park, birdscaping of gardens, Seasonality, the wind generator on Kooragang, birds of Ecuador, Gould's Petrel, birds of Rennell Island, bird migration, the Mount Annan Botanic Gardens. We sincerely thank all of our speakers, and also those members who contributed to the Bird of the Evening segment which we had at the start of most of the meetings.

COMMUNITY

Several of our members visited schools, community groups and other organisations during the year to foster an interest that was flagged to us. Sue Hamonet, Max Blanch and Ann Lindsey all were towers of strength in this regard. As examples, Ann, assisted by Jim Perry, helped a class at Bolwarra Primary School to set up a bird survey after their teacher expressed interest to us, and now we receive regular sightings reports from this keen bunch of Year 3 students; Max helped train some people at Lemon Tree Passage and now they have become a small but very keen birdwatching group.

Marion Walker continued to be our telephone contact point and once again fielded many calls. Her phone rang hot when the Black-backed Wagtail paid us a visit in April. We used that event, and the earlier visit by a group of Yellow Wagtail, for some birds PR. This was very successful – two articles in the Newcastle Herald, and segments in both NBN and Prime television news bulletins.

In September the Club once again had a display booth at the Wildflower Spectacular held at the Shortland Wetlands Centre and also provided bird walks around the site. Our special thanks to Tom Clarke who once again did a splendid job in organising our activities.

GENERAL CLUB OPERATION

Membership

For several years now, our membership figures have remained more or less constant at around 200 members. Numbers again were stable in 1998, and we finished the year with 203 members.

Finances

Our income was slightly higher than expected, thanks to the stable membership numbers and a significant degree of sales of Club records. As it turned out, our expenditure was somewhat lower than anticipated, mainly because we had no surprises for the year (*most unusual*). As a result, we made a profit for the year of \$926.48, and our reserves now amount to \$9628.36.

Our reserves include \$4500 which is in the Alan Keating Memorial Fund dedicated to grants for activities that relate to or will provide benefit to Hunter Region birdlife. It is timely to remind members and others that applications for Keating Grants are welcomed at any time.

The Committee has decided to maintain the membership fees for 1999 at the same rate as for 1998, since expenditure is likely to be higher this year. Renewal fees were due from January 1.

Many thanks to our Treasurer Rowley Smith for so diligently looking after our finances, and also to Lesley Marshall who so ably assists him. We also thank Katrina Thornton for auditing our accounts. Our previous auditor, Randall Watson, has now retired. He was the Club's auditor from long before I became Treasurer in 1987, and we thank him most sincerely for a great many years of service.

General

The Club continued to publish a bi-monthly newsletter. All members receive a copy, and we also exchange newsletters with a considerable number of other bird clubs around Australia. Tom Clarke has been the editor and distributor since 1994 and has always produced a "good read" for us. It is with regret that we note that he will be unable to continue this coming year.

We made a significant step forward in 1998 when we launched our Website. I've had a number of favourable comments about it from inside and outside the Club. It was largely the work of Adrian Ryan and we much appreciate Adrian's efforts. Peter McLauchlan now takes care of updating the information in the Website.

I believe that the Management Committee this past year has functioned very well. I'd like to firstly thank general members Ann Lindsey, Tom Clarke, Jim Perry, Sue Hamonet and Liz Herbert for their contributions, and also Mike Todd until we lost him mid-year to Cape York where he has gone to study finch populations. As ever, Peter McLauchlan continued to be an effective Vice-President, and Rowley Smith kept us all amused. The only thing that he doesn't find funny is a proposal to spend some money. Peter Phillips is the backbone of the Committee and thus the Club – without him we wouldn't get anything done. I might also add that the style of his letter writing is simply awesome.

We have some tremendous resources for members to use and some dedicated people to look after them. John Cockerell maintains our slides library, and Pat Pountney, assisted by Keith Woods, is responsible for our main library which now has 253 books, journals and reports. Peter McLauchlan

takes care of the audio-visual collection which contains 91 audio and video items and which now also extends to some computer CDs. The utilisation rate for our three library collections remains very high.

Many other members have done their bit to help with the smooth running of the Club. Judith Smith is the welcoming person to attendees at our meetings, and Judy Westphal makes sure we all can have a cuppa and a biscuit at the end of them. Ed Hamonet reformats all of our records and sends them to the Atlas project. Jeanette Stephenson, Wilma Barden and Jim Imrie are valued members of the Records Appraisal Committee. I apologise to anybody that I've left out!

Finally, I'd like to thank all members for their involvements with the Club during 1998. The enthusiasm you show at our meetings, outings and camps is infectious and is the major factor in HBOC being the great club that we know it to be. Thanks everyone.

Alan Stuart
HBOC President, 1998