

HBOC 1999 Annual Report

Tonight I present the 1999 annual report, which is the 19th such report by HBOC. The full written report, with appendices from the Treasurer, Activities Officer, and so on, is available for you to look after the meeting, and subsequently will be housed in the Club library.

There were many highlights for us during the year, but, in some ways, 1999 could be described as a ***“Year of Living Dangerously”***, in that we had several conservation scares during the year. More on that later. In tonight’s report, I will discuss HBOC’s performance in 1999 against the two stated objectives for the Club. To remind you, these are:

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

Without any doubt, we are meeting our objectives, and HBOC continues to prosper as one of the premier bird clubs in Australia.

1. STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITAT

BIRD SIGHTINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

The Hunter Region is a great one for birds, and as usual there were lots of species recorded during the year. The total will be in excess of 300 species, although we won’t know the exact number until the Annual Bird Report is finalised later this year.

There were lots of rarities too, and our Records Appraisal Committee has received 14 submissions so far for sightings in 1999, with more likely to come in. Many of these submissions are still being evaluated, but already the highlights include Oriental Cuckoo at Shortland Wetlands Centre, Common Noddy at Crowdy Head, Red-winged Parrot at White Box Camp and Black Bittern at Walka Water Works. Also, reports of Australasian Bittern appear to be on the increase.

I thank the members of the Records Appraisal Committee - Sue Hamonet, Ann Lindsey, Jeanette Stephenson, Jim Imrie, Jim Perry and Wilma Barden - for their diligent work during the year. I also note that the Committee has now received over 170 submissions since it was formed in 1993.

BIRD STUDIES

I think that we can be very proud of the involvement by HBOC in bird studies that help to increase the knowledge about Australian birds.

We are actively involved in the Birds Australia Atlas project, with Jim Perry as the Regional Organiser for the Hunter Region and ably assisted by Ann Lindsey. All of our records are now routinely forwarded to the Atlas project, and also to the NSW Bird Atlassers, in support of their long standing project. Incidentally, it was a pleasure in 1999 to welcome Dick and Barbara Cooper to the Club, following their move into our area. Dick has long been the Coordinator for the NSW Bird Atlassers Group.

From April 1999, we commenced a monthly program of surveys of shorebirds in the Hunter River estuary, which continue still. These surveys have involved essentially simultaneous visits by several sub-groups to all of the high tide roosting areas around the estuary. They have generated a wealth of data about these shorebirds, many of which are migratory. The precise counts of numbers that we are now generating serve to confirm the importance of the Hunter estuary to a great many of these species.

HBOC members participated in the national Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot surveys which occurred twice during the year, and also carried out 4 special surveys early in the year. Thanks to Ann Lindsey and Di Johnson for coordinating these activities. In December, for the third successive year we did a survey of Latham’s Snipe at the Cedar Hill Drive Swamp – the numbers were down on previous years but were still significant (115 birds counted). Many members continued to keep weekly records for the Garden Bird Survey, and our 1998 Bird Report was published in August last year, with 94 reporters supplying data about a total of 314 species that were recorded for the year.

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CONSERVATION

We had a tough year on the conservation front. David Kibble as our Conservation Officer was kept very busy, and lots of others were drawn into various of the battles that we fought. Some favourite spots were under significant threat – none of them can yet be considered to have been saved.

Our biggest scare during 1999 was the proposal for an international airport on Kooragang Island. This would have been slap-bang in the middle of both the Big Pond and the main rehabilitation areas on Ash Island, and would also have taken out a part of the Nature Reserve. We fought hard, and Max Maddock was a great ally. Now the threat seems to have lapsed, but we'll need to remain vigilant. We're also still concerned that there are other threats to the Big Pond's future.

Colliery Dam near Mulbring, or John Brown's Lagoon as it is also known, is another favourite spot and probably the southernmost place where Comb-crested Jacana are breeding residents. During the year, Colliery Dam became subject to development plans – a proposal to ring it with tourist cabins and the usual hotel, golf course, and so on. Again, we kept a close watch, and lobbied intensively, and the threat has eased although still hangs over us. Our thanks go to Tom Clarke in particular for his efforts on this matter.

During 1999, Keith Laverick and David Kibble were heavily involved in issues about development around the Belmont wetlands. A new sub-division is planned, and although we probably can't stop this from happening we are certainly putting the case for the main features to be properly preserved. There have been several other conservation issues as well that we have had to deal with, and towards the end of the year we learnt of the plans to develop the Tomalpin State Forest area near Pelaw Main. The proposal causes us some concerns, and looks like being an issue we will need to deal with further during this coming year.

On more pro-active conservation matters, we participated in a weeding day at Stockton Sandspit, and also went there for Clean Up Australia Day. The Club had two teams in the Twitchathon, with the teams raising several hundred dollars towards research for albatross conservation projects. Both teams did well, finishing 3rd and 4th in the state. The Club remains a committed supporter of the NSW Bird Interest Groups Network (BIGNet). We hosted the March meeting, held at the Shortland Wetlands Centre, and Rowley Smith represented us at the meeting held in Wollongong in September. Conservation matters are a major theme at BIGNet meetings, as has also been the Birds Australia Atlas project at the past few meetings.

2. ENCOURAGE BIRD OBSERVING

PROGRAM

Once again we had a comprehensive program of outings and camps. For the year there were a total of 41 organised activities, which is 8 more than in 1998:

- 12 regular monthly outings
- 12 mid-week outings
- 8 wader surveys, 4 Regent Honeyeater surveys, Latham's snipe survey
- 3 camps (plus another 2 camps held in conjunction with monthly outings)
- special weekend program at Barren Grounds Nature Reserve

All of our activities were well attended, except for an outing to Forster in December which was probably too far for people to travel at a time so close to the mayhem of Christmas preparations. The highlight was undoubtedly the Easter camp at Borah Reserve near Barraba where we were wonderfully looked after by local enthusiast Russ Watts and where we recorded 104 species including lots of Turquoise Parrot.

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, to Chris Herbert for coordinating the wader surveys, and to Ann Lindsey for helping out with just about everything.

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CLUB NIGHTS

We held 11 meetings during the year, at the Shortland Wetlands Centre as usual, and with an average attendance of 43 members. The meetings are always tremendous fun, with lots of participation by all. We had main speakers at most of the meetings, and were addressed on a wide range of topics: *effects on birds from land clearing; large forest owls of Lake Macquarie; birds & rafting in Alaska; birds of the Falklands; sound recording for bird identification; Kooragang/Ash Island rehabilitation program; birds of Tasmania*. We sincerely thank all of our speakers for the efforts they went to in preparing such excellent presentations.

At two meetings, we were faced with the late withdrawal of the speaker, but we more than made do with two excellent video programs – *Lord Howe Island, Lure of the Daintree*. Thanks go to Peter McLauchlan, the custodian of our audio-visual library, for quickly recommending these to us.

COMMUNITY

Marion Walker continued to be our telephone contact point and once again fielded many calls. Adrian Ryan re-vamped our Website and has continued to keep it up to date. We apparently now have had the first instance of a new member coming through initial contact through the Web.

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. A number of members assisted with this activity – our thanks go to all of them.

Peter Phillips made sure that all of our meetings were well advertised in local press and radio. Sue Hamonet was once again our ambassador-at-large, being a regular contact for interviews etc that helped publicise our interests.

GENERAL CLUB OPERATION

Membership

Our membership declined by 15 in 1999, to a total of 188 members. This is a disappointing outcome, as our numbers had been fairly stable for several years before. It is a challenge to all of us to find ways to keep the numbers up – for one thing, it helps to keep fees down since our operating costs then are shared over a wider base. Also, we want to be spreading the word about the pleasures from studying the behaviours of birds, and the importance of preserving suitable habitat for them.

Finances

We made a loss of \$631.80 for the year, although this included a grant of \$500 from the Alan Keating Fund for a snipe study that we sponsored. The Keating Fund is dedicated to activities that will provide benefit to Hunter Region birdlife.

Our reserves stand at \$8,955.06, including \$3531.60 in the Keating Fund. In view of our healthy reserves, the Committee has decided that the membership fees for 2000 can remain at the same rate as for 1999. The advent of the GST in July will affect us, but probably not by a lot. We will have to wait and watch.

Our thanks go to our Treasurer Rowley Smith for his stewardship of our funds, and to Lesley Marshall who so ably assists him. We also thank Katrina Thornton who once again has audited our accounts.

General

The Club continued to publish a bi-monthly newsletter, which is issued to all members. Pat Carlton took over as the Editor and it didn't take her long to get into stride, delivering a high quality production. Tom Clarke has continued to look after the printing and distribution of the newsletter. We thank both Pat and Tom for their efforts.

Our three libraries – books, slides, tapes & videos – continued to expand in 1999 and they are terrific resources for all members to access at no cost. For example, we now have 231 books, magazines and reports in the library. In the electronic library, we added 11 new videos (this includes 2 multi-cassette sets) 3 audio cassettes and 2 CD-ROMs. There are now 105 different items in this library. Thanks go to the three librarians: Pat Pountney, John Cockerell and Peter McLauchlan.

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Our Management Committee worked well together all year. Some new faces – Di Johnson, Harold Tarrant and Chris Herbert – quickly settled in along with the stalwarts Tom Clarke, Ann Lindsey and Peter McLauchlan. Our new Vice-President Liz Herbert has weathered her first year in the role and filled in admirably in my absences, and Rowley Smith has the Treasurer's job well under control. Sue Hamonet also attended every Committee meeting where her contributions were always welcomed.

Special mention should be made of Peter Phillips, our Secretary extraordinaire. For the past 11 years, Peter has been the backbone of the Committee and thus the Club. There isn't enough time available tonight to do justice to a description of his services to HBOC – but they have been phenomenal. Peter has indicated that he will step down from the Secretary's position. I'm sure you will all join with me in acknowledging our gratitude to him for his hard work over the past 11 years.

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, and a small army of volunteers helps out with setting up and clearing away each time. Ed Hamonet reformats all of our records and sends them to the Atlas project, while Sue Hamonet just does so many things for the Club all the time. *I apologise to anyone I have left out!*

Finally, I'd like to thank all members for their involvements with the Club during 1999. 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, 1999