

HBOC 2000 Annual Report

It's my pleasure tonight to present the 2000 annual report, which happens to be the 20th such report for HBOC. Please note that the complete written report with Appendices from the Treasurer, Activities Officer and so on, is available for you to look at after the meeting tonight if you wish, and it will then be housed in the Club's library.

Twelve months ago, when I reported on the events of 1999, I described it as the Year of Living Dangerously. This was on account of the many conservation issues that we faced that year. By contrast, 2000 could perhaps be summarised as **"Back to Birding"**. I'm happy to report that our conservation worries have subsided a little in 2000 and we seemed to have a feast of good birding – more on all that, later.

The objectives set for HBOC from when it was formed are:

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

As I have done in previous years, I will review our performance in 2000 against these two objectives.

1. STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITAT

BIRD SIGHTINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

We had what is best described as a bumper year for birds in 2000, and there will be at least 10 new species included into the Annual Bird Report when it is finalised later this year. The total number of species recorded in the Hunter Region in 2000 will probably end up at around 320 species, once all the reports are received and assessed.

One reason for the increase in species is that we started some pelagic trips towards the end of the year, and we began to see into a world of birds that we previously knew little about. But our Records Appraisal Committee was also kept busy with lots of other sightings. There have been 14 submissions to the RAC thus far, in relation to birds seen in 2000, and more are likely to come in. I thank the members of the RAC – Sue Hamonet, Wilma Barden, Jeanette Stephenson, Jim Imrie and Ann Lindsey – for their efforts.

Highlights for 2000, in addition to the many birds seen during the pelagic trips, included the following: Yellow Wagtail back again at Ash Island, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater at Waratah, Streaked Shearwater seen (from land) off Nobbys Beach, Sanderling at Stockton, Square-tailed Kite at Ellalong, Wood Sandpiper, Black-tailed Native-hen and Painted Snipe at Pambalong Nature Reserve (formerly known as Cedar Hill Drive swamp).

BIRD STUDIES

I feel proud of the extent of involvement of HBOC in studies that help increase knowledge about Australian birds. Where perhaps we are lacking though is in the extent to which we analyse and report on some of those studies.

We are very much involved in the Birds Australia Atlas project – how could this be otherwise given that Ann Lindsey is the Regional Organiser for the Hunter Region? All of our Club records are routinely forwarded to Birds Australia, and we also carry out specific Atlassing surveys each month, focussing onto locations in the Hunter Region that are under-surveyed. A considerable number of our members are dedicated private Atlassers too.

Throughout 2000, we continued the monthly surveys of the wader populations in the Hunter estuary, which we started in 1999. These surveys are generating a wealth of information about seasonal movements of waders and about their roosting habitat requirements. Towards the end of the year we also commenced monthly surveys at Swan Bay, an important wader roost site in Port Stephens.

We also continue to support the long-standing NSW Bird Atlassers project, by sending them copies of all of our Club records. We participated in the national surveys for Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot and beach-nesting birds. In December, for the 4th successive year, we counted the numbers of Latham's Snipe at Pambalong Nature Reserve. Our 1999 Annual Bird Report was published in August 2000, with 86 reporters supplying data about the 310 species that were recorded for the year.

CONSERVATION

Much to our relief, the conservation story in 2000 was somewhat more positive than for the previous year. Threats of an airport on Kooragang Island have subsided, although we need to remain alert. Our objections to a proposed development at John Brown's Lagoon near Mulbring were listened to, with the result that a much more appropriate development has now been approved by Cessnock Council. We

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continue to maintain a watch on development proposals for Belmont Wetlands and in the Tomalpin State Forest: at the moment no formal proposals have been tabled.

On more pro-active conservation matters, we raised a considerable sum of money towards the purchase by Birds Australia of Newhaven Station. Three Twitchathon teams helped raise money for this cause (plus they had a lot of fun out twitching) and we also took up a collection at Club night. In all, these activities raised around \$2000.

During the year, we progressively became more and more involved in trying to maintain and increase wader habitat in the Hunter estuary. Chris and Liz Herbert diligently researched the changes in feeding and roosting habitat over the past 25 years or so. They then put together a powerful presentation that details the decline in habitat, which we can now use to convince others, e.g. National Parks & Wildlife Service, of the need for action. We're also involved in a specific study of wader habitat management, through a Birds Australia project that is focussed on the ponds on the eastern side of Ash Island. Mike Newman and I are members of the Steering Committee for this project.

We also went again to Stockton Sandspit on Clean-up Australia Day. And HBOC remains a committed supporter of the NSW Bird Interest Groups Network (BIGNet) which has a strong conservation theme amongst the topics covered. Club representatives attended the two meetings held in 2000, at Western Sydney and Glen Davis. One very important outcome from BIGNet in 2000 was to propose to the NSW Scientific Committee that the clearing of native vegetation was a key threatening process. The nomination has been accepted for investigation by the Scientific Committee, which will determine whether clearing of native habitat should be included in the Threatened Species Conservation Act.

2. ENCOURAGE BIRD OBSERVING

PROGRAM

We have always had a fairly full program of activities each year. Although it seems hard to believe, in 2000 we managed to cram even more events into the year's program. We had a total of 53 organised activities, which is a 30% increase compared with 1999. And 1999 was busier than 1998! In summary, the program for 2000 comprised:

- 12 Sunday outings, held monthly
- 12 mid-week outings, held monthly
- 12 wader surveys, held monthly
- 8 Birds Australia Atlas survey days
- 3 special surveys – for Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot, beach-nesting birds, Latham's snipe
- 3 pelagic outings
- 3 camps on long weekends

Except where weather intervened, all of our activities were well attended. Our thanks go in particular to: our Activities Officer, Liz Herbert, for organising the main program; Keith and Margaret Woods and Max Blanch for taking care of the mid-week outings; Chris Herbert for coordinating the wader surveys; Ann Lindsey for the Atlassing surveys; and Richard Baxter for arranging the pelagic trips.

CLUB NIGHTS

We held 11 meetings during the year, all of them at the Wetlands Centre as usual. The average attendance was 55 people, which is about 20% higher average than for the past several years. The participation rate at the meetings was just tremendous, and the meetings were always loads of fun to go along to. We had main speakers at the 9 meetings from March to November, and we were addressed on a wide range of topics: *duetting by Magpie-larks; birds of Western Australia, Regent Honeyeater recovery program; birds of Iron Range; Lord Howe Island; birds of Canada; Newhaven Station; Hunter estuary waders; birds of Africa*. We are very grateful to all of our speakers for the efforts they went to in preparing what invariably were excellent presentations.

COMMUNITY

A highlight for the year was the amount of publicity that was generated about birds and their needs, and about HBOC. There were several newsworthy events that we were able to take advantage of – the best example being those Powerful Owls nesting at Blackbutt. During the year, Paddy Lightfoot, Liz Herbert, Ann Lindsey, Chris Herbert and Peter Phillips all were interviewed on ABC Radio about various matters, and there were several newspaper articles as well. Even I was in on the act, with my picture appearing in

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the Newcastle Herald above the caption "Unspoilt Beauty". Of course, it's possible that this caption referred to the Belmont Wetlands, which were in the background and were the subject of the article!

In part, this burst of good PR was because we were fortunate enough to have Nick Talbot as a Club member during the year. We benefitted considerably from Nick being a news reporter for ABC Radio. Unfortunately, he has now transferred to Adelaide – our loss and their gain.

Once again in September the Club had a display booth at the Wildflower Spectacular held at the 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, and especially to Di Johnson who produced some wonderful posters for us to use. We spread our wings further in 2000, by also running stalls at fairs at the Botanic Gardens and Belmont Wetlands.

There were some other new initiatives too. Firstly, a course - "*An Introduction to Birdwatching*" – that we ran in conjunction with the Wetlands Centre. Sue Hamonet did a splendid job in preparing and presenting this, with Neil Granter as her willing offside. Also, I started writing articles about wetlands birds for the Wetlands Centre's quarterly newsletter. And we have started to produce a series of pamphlets about *Birding Routes of the Hunter Region*, with the pamphlet for Route #1 finalised and ready now for printing, and half a dozen others in various stages of planning. Many people have contributed to this effort, but it is Chris Herbert who has been the driving force behind them.

We didn't lose sight of our regular activities either: Marion Walker continued to be our telephone contact point and once again fielded many calls, while Adrian Ryan continued to be the master of our Website and Peter Phillips made sure that all of our meetings were well advertised in local press and radio.

GENERAL CLUB OPERATION

Membership

Our membership increased by 13 in 2000, to a total of 201 members. Happily, this reversed the downfall we experienced in 1999, and returned us to the membership levels of several years prior to 1999. 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.

A new initiative for the year was to put on a special breakfast for new members, in December. This gave a chance for people to meet each other, and most of the Committee members, in rather more relaxed conditions than the normal hurly burly of Club nights. Our thanks to Ann Lindsey for making her house, and its beautiful garden full of birds, available for this event. Also to all the cooks and cleaners that turned up to help with the organising of it.

Finances

We made a loss of \$685.14 for the year, due in part to our purchase of two new camp toilets and toilet tents and a donation towards the Newhaven Station purchase. Our reserves stand at \$8,296.92, but this includes \$3431.60 in the Alan Keating Memorial Fund (this Fund is dedicated to activities that will provide benefit to Hunter Region birdlife). It was our second loss in succession, and we are facing a full year of the GST ahead of us. So, the Committee has decided to change the membership fees for 2001 such that both single and family memberships will be the same – i.e. \$20. Junior membership fees, for high school students and younger, are unchanged.

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 consistently produced a high quality production, and Harold Tarrant maintained the standard when he filled in while Pat had her trip away. Tom Clarke continued to look after the printing and distribution of the newsletter. We thank Pat, Harold and Tom for their efforts.

Our three libraries – books, slides, tapes & videos – continued to expand in 2000 and they are terrific resources for all members to access at no cost. For example, our audio-visual library now contains 128 items (audio and video cassettes, CDs and CD-ROMs) and there were 173 loans during the year. Thanks go to the three librarians: Pat Pountney, John Cockerell and Peter McLauchlan.

Our Management Committee worked well together all year. Di Johnson, Harold Tarrant, Chris Herbert and Ann Lindsey continued to make their very positive contributions, and two new members – Neil Granter and Phil Rankin – quickly settled in. Also, Sue Hamonet attended every Committee meeting,

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where her contributions were always welcomed. Liz Herbert as Vice-President filled in admirably in my absences, while Rowley Smith continues to have the Treasurer's job well under control. Tom Clarke took over as our Secretary in 2000 and soon had the Committee under his firm control. He also taught us to become more flexible, thanks to a couple of last minute changes of meeting venue that we had to make.

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.

Finally, I'd like to thank all members for their involvements with the Club during 2000. 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.

I don't think there can be any doubt at all that we met our two objectives in 2000 and that it was another successful year for the club. Looking ahead, we will be celebrating our 25th anniversary later this year, and we can all be happy that HBOC remains a viable club after all that time.

Thanks everyone.

Alan Stuart
HBOC President, 2000