

HBOC 2002 Annual Report

It's my pleasure tonight to present HBOC's Annual Report for 2002. I'm presenting a summary – please note that the full report including Appendices from the Treasurer, Activities Officer and so on, is here for you to look at after the meeting tonight if you wish, or it is available from the Club's library in future.

In previous of these reports I've attempted to find a phrase to summarise the year gone by. In that vein, I'd nominate **“Sunshine, Occasional Rain,”** for 2002. Not only does that sum up the weather pattern, but it also describes how the Club fared. Overall, we had a very successful year – membership is at a record high, some good conservation outcomes happened, and the birding was interesting, to say the least. On the other hand, the industrial development plans being bandied about for the Hunter estuary continue to trouble us. More on all of that later in this Report.

As I hope you well know and support, 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 2002 against these two objectives.

1. STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITAT

BIRD SIGHTINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

We had another very successful year for bird sightings in 2002, and once again there will be some additional species in the Annual Bird Report when it is finalised later this year. The total number of species recorded in the Hunter Region in 2002 will probably end up at around 340 species, once all the reports are received and assessed.

Once again our Records Appraisal Committee was kept busy with lots of reports to consider. There have been 21 submissions to the RAC thus far, in relation to birds seen in 2002, and the usual pattern means that several more relating to 2002 are still likely to come in. I thank the members of the RAC – Sue Hamonet, Wilma Barden, Ann Lindsey, Fred van Gessel, Terry Lindsey and Phil Hansbro – for their efforts.

There were many observation highlights for 2002. In many cases, the birds in question were able to be seen by many HBOC members (and often by a host of visitors too). To single out some examples of these – we had Kentish Plover up at Old Bar, Cotton Pygmy-Goose at Minmi, Northern Shoveler and Black-tailed Native-hen at Ash Island, Oriental Plover and Beach-Stone-curlew at Stockton Sandspit, Pied Honeyeater at Paxton, Blue-billed Duck at Minmi, Red-backed Kingfisher at Martindale. Also, the Yellow Wagtail was back again at Ash Island and some Banded Lapwing again roosting out near Bolwarra. There were some interesting sea-birds too, including ongoing debate that one sighting may actually be the first Australian record of Pycroft's Petrel.

BIRD STUDIES

As always, HBOC had a considerable involvement in studies that help increase knowledge about Australian birds. We can all be very proud of our Club's contributions in this regard.

We were very much involved in the extension to the Birds Australia Atlas project. Routinely, all of our Club records were forwarded to Birds Australia, and we also carried out several specific Atlassing surveys. A considerable number of our members are dedicated private Atlassers too.

Throughout 2002, we continued the monthly surveys of the wader populations in the Hunter estuary, which we started in early 1999. Also, we did matching surveys in most months at Swan Bay, an important wader roost site in Port Stephens. These surveys are generating a wealth of information about seasonal movements of waders and about their roosting habitat requirements. The information goes to a host of interested parties – National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project (KWRP), Environment Australia, NWS Wader Studies Group, Birds Australia Atlas.

We participated in the national surveys for Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot and for beach-nesting birds. In December, we once again counted the numbers of Latham's Snipe at Pambalong Nature Reserve (6th year of these surveys). We also did monthly surveys of the birds at Morpeth sewage works, and, from July, of the Tank Paddock, near Minmi. The Morpeth data are sent to Hunter Water, and helps them with their management plans for the site. Similarly, the Tank Paddock data go to Newcastle council, which is considering what will be the future for this area of land. We hope it will continue to be a corridor between the Pambalong and Hexham Swamp Nature Reserves.

I'm pleased to report three publications in the past 12 months. Ann Lindsey and Mike Newman wrote up the results for the 2001 surveys at Morpeth, and I wrote a paper about the birds of Ash Island, based on

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observations made by the Club and by many of our members since 1980. And, our 2001 Annual Bird Report was published in August 2002, with data for the 339 species that were recorded for the year.

CONSERVATION

The Hunter estuary was the main focus for our conservation efforts in 2002. Overall, we had a successful year but there were, and still are, many threats around.

Most importantly, 2002 saw the success of our long campaign to improve the wader roosting sites in the Hunter estuary. Stockton Sandspit has been transformed, and Sandy Island (in the mouth of Fullerton Cove) has also had restoration work done on it. We applied for, and late in the year received, an \$11,000 Federal government EnviroFund grant to rehabilitate Stockton Sandspit. In the meantime, NPWS and KWRP finally saw the light and the work we had long been campaigning for was completed in December. I think most of you will be aware of how successful the outcomes at Stockton Sandspit have been. We're in the process of seeking a variation to the grant, aimed at constructing a viewing platform on the Sandspit and a screened approach to it so the birds aren't disturbed by people coming down to look at them.

The process of applying for the EnviroFund grant, and then doing the rehabilitation work, involved close liaisons with NPWS, KWRP and NSW Fisheries, and also Green Corps (who pulled out lots of weeds and young mangroves). There's no doubt that we have strong links now with these organizations, particularly the first two.

Two other positive outcomes during the year were the news that Belmont Wetlands is to be conserved, and that Shortland Wetlands is to become a Ramsar site (incorporated with Kooragang Nature Reserve to become what will be called the Lower Hunter Wetlands).

2002 saw a continuation of announcements about various development plans around the Hunter estuary. The most significant is for a new steel plant, by Austeel, to be located somewhere around the estuary and processing iron briquettes that would be brought in from W.A. A few locations have been suggested for the Austeel plant, including at Tomago and behind the Kooragang dykes. We have concerns about the impacts on birds, especially waders, from an industrial plant at these particular sites, especially when considering the other infrastructure that would be required. These concerns were the reason for me preparing the paper about the birds of Ash Island – we sent copies of the paper to all the stakeholder organisations. And in 2002 the Club supported Max Maddock who developed an extremely thorough and detailed analysis of the threatened and near-threatened species occurring in the Hunter estuary and of our international, national and NSW state obligations to protect them.

Two other significant conservation concerns that we have been working on in 2002 are to do with the Tank Paddock and the Tomalpin forests. We consider that the Tank Paddock at Minmi is an important corridor between Pambalong and Hexham Nature Reserves. Newcastle City Council is considering rezoning this for residential development, and we have joined with other conservation groups in arguing that it should instead be conserved. 1700 hectares of forest and bushland at Tomalpin, near Kurri Kurri, have been rezoned to create the Hunter Employment Zone. This area is one of the most important mainland sites for Swift Parrot as well as several other threatened species.

There were lots of other conservation related activities in 2002. We had four teams enter into the 2002 Twitchathon, raising well in excess of \$1000 in sponsorship monies which went towards a project associated with rehabilitation of dry woodlands near Cowra. On Clean-up Australia Day we tackled the Stockton Sandspit after a two year break from this site. We continued our association with the NSW Bird Interest Groups Network (BIGNet), which has a strong conservation theme amongst the topics covered. Club representatives attended the two BIGNet meetings at Cowra and Sydney's Millennium Park.

There are many people to thank in regards to HBOC's significant activities in conservation, but particular mention should go to Jenny Powers, Max Maddock, Chris Herbert, Liz Crawford and Ann Lindsey.

2. ENCOURAGE BIRD OBSERVING

PROGRAM

As usual, we had a massive program of activities – a total of 56 of them:

- 12 Sunday outings, held monthly
- 11 mid-week outings, held monthly
- 12 wader surveys, held monthly
- 6 Birds Australia Atlas survey days

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- 3 special surveys – for Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot (twice in the year) and for beach-nesting birds, Latham's snipe survey at Pambalong Nature Reserve.
- 7 pelagic outings
- 5 camps on weekends/long weekends

All of these activities were well attended. Our thanks go in particular to: our Activities Officer, Di Johnson, 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 Atlas surveys; Richard Baxter for the pelagic trips; and Steve Roderick for the Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot surveys.

CLUB NIGHTS

We held 11 meetings during the year, all of them at the Wetlands Centre as usual. The average attendance was 49 people. As usual, the participation rate at the meetings was just tremendous, and the meetings were always loads of fun. The *Observations/General Discussion* segment was always popular and valuable, as was the *Bird of the Evening* segment that we had in most months – our thanks go to convenor Di Johnson and the volunteers/conscripts!

We had main speakers at all bar the December meeting, and we were addressed on a wide range of topics: *Birding in P.N.G.*; *Birds of the Antarctic Isles*; *The Galapagos Isles*; *Some Results from the BA Atlas*; *Cranes of the World*; *Birds in Backyards Project*; *Shortland Wetlands Ramsar Site*; *Stockton Sandspit Rehabilitation*; *Crabs of the Hunter*; *Bird Photography*; *Naturewatch*. We are very grateful to all of our speakers for the efforts they went to in preparing some truly excellent presentations.

Our December meeting was the usual fun of members' slides and videos, a raffle, and a wonderful supper. We also watched the BBC program about the Iolo Williams visit to Australia in 2001, and had a great time picking out HBOC members amongst the footage.

COMMUNITY

A highlight for the year was the production of two colourful brochures describing birdwatching routes around Lake Macquarie. We received a grant of \$1856 from Lake Macquarie City Council for this, which covered the printing costs. Chris Herbert did a fantastic job of designing the brochures and arranging their production. The Council is helping us to distribute them – copies will be placed at many community and tourist centres around Lake Macquarie, and at some other tourist centres in the Hunter region.

We see the brochures as being a great way to raise people's awareness about the birds in their area, that will in the end will lead to better protection of important habitats. And of course, HBOC's name and contact details are being publicised and perhaps we'll gain some new members as a result. We've recently contacted a couple of other councils about generating some birding routes for their areas – it's too soon yet for responses.

In December, the Newcastle Herald had a full page article about birdwatching in the Hunter, featuring quotes from several of our members and a great photo of Ann Lindsey. It was a tremendous message about how important our region is for birds. The article also appeared in the central coast edition of the paper. And just recently we had a very positive and prominent story presented on NBN news, about the success of the rehabilitation work at Stockton Sandspit. ABC Radio also did a similar report.

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. We were there again in October, for Catchment Management Day. This was our first involvement with this event, and it went very well. The crowds were large and enthusiastic. Telescopes are a great lure, especially for kids! We also had a stall at the Wetlands Centre a couple of weeks ago, on a day to celebrate their recent Ramsar listing. Once again, this was a very successful day with large and enthusiastic crowds present.

Several members assisted at these various public displays – our thanks go to all of them. We didn't lose sight of our regular activities either: Marion Walker continued to be our telephone contact point and 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 10 in 2002, to a record total of 223 members. This is tremendous news, but even so the turnover rate is higher than we would prefer and we'd definitely welcome thoughts from anyone as to how to retain members and also how to attract new ones. 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

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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

On paper, we made a sizeable profit in 2002: a bit over \$1900. However, there are still some costs to come in to do with the Lake Macquarie birdwatching brochures, plus we are still working out what to do with the funds raised in the very successful mid-year raffle. Some of that money we used to install two fans into the Lecture Theatre at the Wetlands Centre but the bulk of it is untouched while the Committee decides what to do with it. There are quite a few ideas, and it shouldn't be much longer before it is spent.

Our reserves stand at \$10,449.49, although this includes \$2,541.10 in the Keating Fund (which is dedicated to activities that will provide benefit to Hunter Region birdlife).

The Committee has decided to raise the membership fees by \$2. This might seem anomalous in view of our profit in 2002, but that was largely due to one-off circumstances and we are expecting that the Public Liability insurance costs will rise significantly this coming year.

Our healthy financial situation is largely due to the efforts of our Treasurer Rowley Smith. We are very grateful to him, and our thanks also go to 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 as well as an exchange program with many other clubs. Pat Carlton consistently produced a high quality production, and Tom Clarke maintained the standard when he filled in while Pat was away. Tom also continued to look after the printing and distribution of the newsletter. We thank Pat and Tom for their efforts. Because of travel plans, Pat has now stepped down from the editorship, and the current newsletter was produced by Peter Phillips who has agreed to take on the role permanently.

Our three libraries – books, slides, tapes & videos – continued to expand in 2002 and they are terrific resources for all members to access at no cost.

The Management Committee worked well together all year and I thank everyone involved for their efforts – and our meetings were always both constructive and enjoyable. Vice-President Liz Crawford filled in admirably in my absences, while Rowley Smith and Tom Clarke have the Treasurer's and Secretary's job well under control. Tom's efforts are largely done "behind the scenes" for most members and perhaps are a bit unthanked at times. It's my pleasure to acknowledge them here tonight.

Committee members Di Johnson, Chris Herbert, Ann Lindsey, Phil Rankin and Steve Roderick continued to make their very positive contributions, and new member Nick Livanos quickly settled in too. The Management Committee meetings are open to anyone from the Club to attend and participate. In 2002, both Sue Hamonet and Jenny Powers attended most of the meetings, where their contributions were greatly appreciated.

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 don't think there can be any doubt at all that we met out two objectives in 2002 and that it was another successful year for the club.

For my part, I've now been President for 5 very enjoyable and satisfying years. I indicated last year that this would be my final 12 months, and I still think this way. It has been a privilege to serve the Club and I'd like to thank all of you for the enthusiasm you always show. That's what makes HBOC the great club that we know it to be, and it certainly made my task a lot easier and, mostly, a lot of fun.

Thanks everyone.

Alan Stuart
HBOC President, 2002