

The *Whistler* – Editorial

The Whistler Number 1 sets an impressive standard for which Liz Huxtable the previous Editor is congratulated. In taking over from Liz our challenge is to sustain that standard and help the journal to become the cornerstone of bird study and conservation in the Hunter Region.

In publishing the Whistler the Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) has three primary objectives:

1. To provide an authoritative record of bird distribution and behaviour in the Hunter Region; this will inform present and future generations, and provide a factual basis for the conservation of birds.
2. To nurture the study of birds by providing opportunities for publication by both professional and amateur ornithologists.
3. To produce a journal, at least annually, which interests, informs and engages the HBOC membership in the range of systematic bird studies undertaken by its members.

This editorial explores the opportunities and challenges associated with delivering a Whistler which fulfils these objectives.

During the last ten years many HBOC members have become involved in the systematic study of birds either as part of group activities like the monthly Hunter Estuary Wader Surveys or through individual studies. Often these surveys have been initiated as part of national projects organised by Birds Australia (BA) such as the Atlas project. HBOC members' efforts provide an important contribution through these projects to publications like "The New Atlas of Australian Birds" and the recently published "State of Australia's Birds 2008", which provide a valuable commentary on the status of Australia's Birds at the continental and regional scale. Arguably this knowledge should drive the direction and priorities for the conservation of birds. However, these publications lack the detail at the regional and local scale which is provided by articles appearing in this volume of the Whistler that describe the bird populations of a variety of habitats including Deep Pond on

Kooragang Island, the Manning River Estuary, "Warakeila" a cattle property in the Allyn Valley and a number of dry bushland sites to the west of Jerrys Plains. These papers contribute to our first objective by providing comprehensive records of the birds of particular parts of the Hunter Region which can be used for conservation purposes.

Bird populations are dynamic with long-term trends in distribution and numbers which can only be understood through enduring studies. Three of the papers in this volume of Whistler involve investigations ranging from seven to twelve years. Through our personal involvement we are acutely aware of the dedication required to sustain ongoing systematic effort of this magnitude. But the satisfaction of getting to know the bird population of an area intimately can amply reward the effort involved. Through the analysis and publication of their results, Whistler authors are not only unravelling intriguing stories underlying their field work, but also discovering that their work poses numerous unanswered questions. In essence documenting what has happened to the birds of your patch unleashes natural curiosity as to why it happened, generating both for yourself and for readers a new set of challenges for ongoing study. Suddenly there becomes a compelling reason to do the next survey and perhaps to be more insightful of what the birds are doing, how their habitat is changing, and how the behavioural changes and habitat changes are interlinked. The short note on the roosting behaviour of Grey-crowned Babblers is an excellent example of how understanding bird behaviour can provide a new dimension to one's interest in birds.

As mentioned earlier most of the papers in this volume of Whistler also feed into national projects run by BA. It is very important that there is local ownership and detailed documentation of the data generated because this identifies complexities associated with data collection and analysis. The article on surveys of the Manning River Estuary is an excellent example. Two other papers involve the interpretation of data submitted to the BA Atlas project in which a 2ha 20 min survey method is used. This is BA's preferred survey technique

because it can be used to discern long-term trends in bird populations at the landscape scale, involving the analysis of very large data sets collected by many contributors. The concern is that at a single site or a small group of sites in close proximity the data set will be too small for meaningful interpretation. However the papers on the bird surveys at “Warakeila” and the Jerrys Plains area demonstrate that meaningful analysis is possible at least to the point where speculative conclusions can be reached. Even more encouraging is the synergy between these two studies which became apparent to the authors during the preparation of these papers. Clearly the publication of papers and notes for Whistler nurtures and invigorates involvement in bird study in line with our second objective.

Our final objective of producing a Whistler which interests, informs and engages the HBOC membership is more difficult because creating a comprehensive and scientifically sound record of the field studies of birds may not result in an article which is easy to write, read or digest. In addition we encourage contributions from both amateur and professional ornithologists, and this will inevitably involve a new experience for some contributors. We would like to see more short notes and this is an ideal starting point for novice authors. In attempting to achieve a balance we have adopted a more flexible attitude to style of presentation,

hopefully without compromising the clarity and scientific authority of the articles, all of which are subject to peer review.

The production of Whistler is supported by an advisory committee the members of which play essential roles in obtaining copy, helping where necessary with the drafting of papers, design of the cover, formatting, soliciting funding and finally expediting printing. We also wish to thank referees for their timely contribution to the peer review process. We are especially indebted to Liz Crawford for her meticulous attention to detail in the formatting and layout of Whistler Number 2.

Finally we wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority, who have sponsored this volume of the Whistler. Without their support it would be difficult for HBOC both to produce a journal of the standard set for the Whistler and to distribute it more widely than our membership. A wider distribution will ensure that it reaches and informs those charged with making decisions and taking actions which conserve birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region, and hopefully beyond. This is the primary purpose of our endeavours.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant
Joint Editors