

The *Whistler* - Editorial

This volume of *The Whistler* is dedicated to the “Threatened Species” of the Hunter Region. It is the first occasion that a volume of *The Whistler* has had an exclusive theme. The topic is a compelling subject central to the avian conservation priorities of the region. Mick Roderick and Alan Stuart are congratulated on their initiative, enthusiasm and drive which has nurtured the growth of an idea into an invaluable resource.

Their keynote paper “The Status of Threatened Bird Species in the Hunter Region” summarises the legislation protecting the “Threatened Species” of the region as well as providing information on the current status of each individual species. While their paper provides the current definitive statement on this complex subject, the situation is fluid. Indeed during the preparation of their manuscript a number of additional species were listed as “Threatened” under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (NSW) and the degree of threat to some already listed was increased. The expectation is that this trend will continue and it has been foreshadowed that additional species may be listed in the future. The pressure on critical habitats like the mature woodland remnants on the floor of the central Hunter Valley, estuaries and coastal areas are such that it is anticipated the level of threat to many species will increase in the future.

In summarising the status of each Threatened Species Roderick and Stuart draw heavily on the observations of members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC), which are recorded in the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report series. It is the first time that the information in the 17 reports of this series has been integrated to provide an overview of the status of a group of species.

The Birds Australia (BA) Atlas database provides an even more comprehensive source of information on the distribution of the Threatened Species in the Hunter Region, capturing not only the observations of HBOC members, but also the records of others in the community interested in the birds of our region. The second paper in this volume of *The Whistler* supports the keynote paper by providing

detailed distribution maps for many Threatened Species and highlighting the areas where each species is most abundant. Inspection of these maps indicates a wide range of situations, including those of species like the Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera* and Speckled Warbler *Chthonicola sagittata*, which, while uncommon, remain well distributed and reasonably numerous, through to those of species with a very limited distribution like the Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens*.

Travelling through the Hunter Region the impression might superficially be gained that there are vast areas of relatively unspoiled habitat. However, for species of birds which have specialised habitat requirements this apparent wealth of opportunity is frequently an illusion. Unfortunately reserves of mineral resources like coal often occur in areas of remnant woodland essential to our threatened woodland species leading to the destruction and fragmentation of critical habitat. The export of coal requires port facilities which can only be located in the Hunter Estuary, the most important area for threatened migratory shorebirds in NSW. In this instance the conflict is obvious and largely unavoidable. Hopefully the knowledge contained in this volume of *The Whistler* will contribute to striking the best possible balance between environmental needs of threatened birds and development.

In other instances industrial and residential developments are also occurring in mature remnant woodland on the floor of the central Hunter Valley, exacerbating the crisis concerning the protection of the threatened woodland species like the potentially critically endangered Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia*. In this case it is not essential that these developments are located in the habitat of Threatened Species. The zoning of these developments would appear to be based either on environmental ignorance, or blatant disregard for the intent of the environmental legislation. Hopefully this volume of *The Whistler* removes ignorance as an excuse for future environmentally irresponsible land zoning and planning decisions.

A careful perusal of the Threatened Species paper demonstrates how superficial our knowledge is of the threats to individual species and appropriate management strategies for their conservation. There are exceptions, notably the study by Simon Ferrier, carried out almost thirty years ago on the Rufous Scrub-bird. His PhD thesis (University of New England, Armidale 1984) titled “The Status of the Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens*; Habitat, Geographical Variation and Abundance” provides a comprehensive basis for the informed management of this species in its restricted and specialised habitat. Interestingly, Ferrier uses his results to predict fluctuations in Rufous Scrub-bird going back into pre-history, concluding that as a consequence of natural climate change there were periods when the species was less numerous than at the time of European settlement. Since settlement, land clearing, logging and fire regimes have resulted in a decline in abundance, which he suggests could, if unchecked, result in extinction by 2030. Ferrier makes the important point that priority should be given to conservation effort addressing anthropogenic as opposed to natural threats. Fortunately in the case of the Rufous Scrub-bird appropriate action has been taken and much of its remaining habitat is on conservation lands, which have been recently designated Important Bird Areas (IBA) in which the Rufous Scrub-bird, the trigger species for IBA nomination, will be monitored.

An even more optimistic example of detailed investigation resulting in positive conservation outcomes is provided by Gould’s Petrel *Pterodroma leucoptera* where effective manage-

ment of its breeding islands has been so successful that the listed level of threat has been decreased. Such examples are rare and we need in-depth studies on the other species, where our knowledge is less comprehensive, and often scant.

This leads us to the third paper in this volume of *The Whistler*, which demonstrates the impact of changes in grazing regimes on Speckled Warbler numbers in an area of woodland. This example demonstrates the delicate balance between actions which are beneficial and detrimental to a species. The implications for land management are that practices like grazing and hazard-reduction burning when applied cautiously and carefully monitored may be beneficial to some Threatened Species.

We hope that this volume of *The Whistler* demonstrates to HBOC members the value of their contribution to the knowledge and conservation of the birds of our region. Your ongoing contribution to HBOC’s projects together with the recording of your recreational bird observations is pivotal to the future of our birds.

HBOC acknowledges with gratitude the sponsorship of this volume by Port Waratah Coal Services. Their generosity assists our ability to publish high quality publications which provide information important to the conservation of birds and the sustainable management of their habitats.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant
Joint Editors