

The *Whistler* – Editorial

The sudden disappearance of the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* from areas of Britain in which it had previously seemed entrenched came as a shock to many residents, and it should serve as a warning to us all that even species that may seem to be abundant may soon face unexpected threats. The Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia* used once to be abundant in south-east Australia, but it is now officially ‘Critically Endangered’ in NSW, the state in which it is strongest. A lack of evidence for successful breeding may be the first sign of problems. Accordingly, we commence this issue with a paper that documents the decline of the Cattle Egret *Ardea ibis* as a breeding species in the Hunter Region, not necessarily because there is cause for immediate alarm, but rather because it reminds us of the remarkable fragility of some species that we have come to regard as abundant and perhaps even as unimportant. In order to balance the picture we have also been able to include a study of a new breeding site for Cattle Egrets in the Gloucester area. Hopefully our experiences in this region will prompt wider discussion and data collection that can build up a better picture nationally of what has been happening to this species.

The fortunes of the Cattle Egret may relate in a variety of ways to those of heron and ibis species more widely, and there is a further paper that deals with the numbers of all such species recorded at Morpeth Wastewater Treatment Works. Like the paper on Cattle Egrets the paper has become possible because of the collection of many years of data, in this case involving monthly surveys.

Hopefully long-term data will eventually become available for the elusive Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens*, and we are pleased to offer a preliminary study of the status of this species on the Barrington and Gloucester Tops. This area has been nominated recently as an Important Bird Area (IBA) because of the relatively high number of this vulnerable high-country species. While it is difficult at this stage to be sure of the benefits to the birds of the IBA designation, it can at least be pointed to as a sign of high conservation status. It is, therefore, most welcome that a short study of Chestnut Teal *Anas castanea* shows, perhaps

somewhat surprisingly, that this species can be sufficiently numerous around the Hunter Estuary to qualify the area for IBA status. We would urge members to continue to ponder whether other species might be present at any site in sufficient numbers to merit this designation.

Our off-shore seabirds, which face a rather different set of threats from the Rufous Scrub-bird, have also lacked the desired regular monitoring because of their inaccessibility. It is pleasing that the resumption of pelagic trips has been able to contribute further data for a paper on this topic.

Many sites close to residential areas are well known as places where birds can be watched, but the keeping of regular records is necessary if their conservation value is to be understood. Two papers in the current issue examine the total bird-populations of specific sites: Blackbutt Reserve within Newcastle and the suburb of Bolwarra near Maitland. A gradual accumulation of local knowledge at these sites now permits observations to be made regarding species that are in decline or are increasing. Changes are likely to reflect wider changes in the immediate area or across the Hunter Region. Monitoring and understanding these fluctuations may assist us to initiate conservation measures for the species involved.

We are particularly pleased to offer several short notes, the majority in some way connected with birds’ diets. Most of these notes concern larger species whose prey items and hunting tactics can be observed easily. The Editors would naturally encourage submission of notes on the diet and foraging techniques of smaller species, but it may require keener observation perhaps aided by photographic techniques. Smaller species, the Jacky Winter *Microeca fascinans* and the Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*, do feature prominently in the notes — two species which have developed a variety of tactics for repelling or avoiding potential predators. We hope the reader will benefit from reading about their behaviours here.

This is now the fifth issue of *The Whistler* to have been published, and the journal has so far been

able to be produced annually. It is our belief that these issues provide a valuable record for future bird observers and ornithologists, of contemporary, and in some cases historical distribution, abundance and behaviour of avian species in the Hunter Region. Hopefully this can provide a snapshot in time for future generations to draw on.

It is important that *The Whistler* is not simply read by bird enthusiasts and specialists, but that its information also reaches those empowered with the management of the environment. It is encouraging that knowledge contained in *The Whistler* has already been used to provide solid evidence to inform the decisions of local and state governments. This is particularly important with regard to the pressures for development upon Kooragang Island, where numerous birds and industry have so far managed to coexist uneasily. The article on Deep Pond in *The Whistler* Number 3 is central to obtaining the best possible outcomes for birds threatened by a development proposal presently under review. Furthermore, even before this issue is printed, it is anticipated that its leading article on egrets will already have been used for a submission opposing a development application.

While mindful that much has so far been achieved, we believe that there is still an enormous volume

of knowledge that has potentially been generated by Hunter Bird Observers Club members as a result of their systematic studies, that yet remains undocumented. We stress that information in notebooks is not yet knowledge, and always needs to be widely shared to ensure that it lives on. Even in the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report series, which is a valuable repository of members' observations, the information remains fragmented. The seabirds paper in this volume demonstrates how it can be integrated to provide an overview of the status of a guild of birds. Similar synthesis is required for other groups and equally importantly for single species. Here is an opportunity for new authors lacking a personal database to make an important contribution to the understanding of the Hunter Region's birds. Hopefully, further systematic studies will be encouraged by the awareness that there are avenues for the publication and dissemination of their outcomes. And we would urge all those observing birds in the Hunter Region to make notes on all incidental sightings of special interest. It is surprising how often such notes can result in greater awareness of bird behaviours, whether locally or nationally. Your perceptive observations may even be the catalyst for professional research.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant
Joint Editors