The *Whistler* - Editorial

How will information about birdlife in the Hunter Region contribute to the serious study of birds and their environment? The short answer is that we do not know. A casual observation might open the door to a new understanding of a species, with ultimate implications for its preservation. One recognises that such important moments of discovery will be rare, but there are many other uses to which casual observations may ultimately be put, especially when the information is combined with related information: other records of an observed behaviour in the same species, records for this behaviour in a new species, indications of an extension or contraction in the range of a species, or of the effects of habitat modification on a species. All observers have the capacity to provide pieces of the overall jigsaw, and we must continue to encourage readers to supply such insights in the form of short notes when they stumble upon them. As this issue twice demonstrates, a small observation concerning a particular species may often accompany articles that deal with that species at greater length.

Inevitably, longer-term studies are extremely valuable, often essential, particularly for mapping and understanding changes in bird distribution. Studies beyond two to three years are generally not suited to higher degree theses, or indeed other academic research projects that receive funding for the same sort of period or less. Without long-term records the connections made by Mike Newman's paper linking the Noisy Miner *Manorina melanocephala* with the Grey Butcherbird *Cracticus torquatus* would remain undocumented. There may be new aspects of a long-term study that become ideal material for an article in this journal when data are exploited from a different perspective. The on-going work of Liz Crawford and Chris Herbert on the shorebirds of the Hunter Estuary, combined with other long-term work being carried out at other sites, both national and international, has enabled the production of what we hope will be the first of a number of articles relating to Hunter sightings of flagged shorebirds; in this case the Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*. Their paper provides evidence of how the Hunter Estuary supplies seasonal habitat to both exhausted godwits on passage at the end of their southward migration and permanent habitat for some throughout the austral summer. This paper not only demonstrates the conservation importance of the Hunter Estuary, but also provides the methods and analysis required to replicate the approach at other sites in the flyway. Further north, on-going work in Port Stephens by Lois Wooding and Alan Stuart has demonstrated a different estuarine site's importance for another non-breeding shorebird, the Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*.

The kind of study that is necessarily completed over a limited time-span is exemplified in the study by Rob Kyte and Mike Newman of the effects of fire on saltmarsh at Ash Island. Habitat is changed dynamically over a comparatively short period, during which the changing responses of different bird species to burnt areas must be assessed. Still more truncated are studies of the impact of short-term extreme weather events. Given the predicted increase in such events it becomes important to document which species are primarily affected and in what ways. The study of unusual observations resulting from ex-Tropical Cyclone Oswald, by Mick Roderick and Allan Richardson, is of this kind; to compensate for the short-term nature of the study it draws, like the study of Dollarbird departure dates by Mike Newman, on data from many observers. These short-term studies stand in contrast to the note by Mike Newman on the disappearance of Noisy Miners from woodland at Green Wattle Creek a decade after cattle were removed allowing understorey vegetation to regenerate slowly; a classic example of the value of long-term data sets.

A set of data acquired from many observers is also central to the study by Dan Williams on *Zoothera* thrush species. This is the second of our 'species accounts', dealing with the distribution of one or more species within the Hunter Region. Although such an article might be seen superficially as indicating where these species can be sought, it critically examines the evidence, places on record the known distribution in recent years, and raises the issue of seasonal migration, thus adding to our knowledge of these birds and indicating where our knowledge is inadequate and further data is required. Ultimately, we may need to build further on the current picture to guarantee free passage for this bird between its breeding areas and its winter habitat.

Last, but not least, is the second of a series of articles by Alan Stuart reviewing the historical literature of the birds of the Hunter Region. How things have changed over the last 100 years! That Alan is able to synthesise a view of the bird populations of that time is a tribute to the authors of that era. Hopefully, future generations will hold the current *Whistler* authors in similar esteem and applaud their vision in providing detailed documentation of the Hunter Region's birds at the start of the 21st Century.

We are delighted to again receive generous financial support from the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority towards publication of this edition. Their support is tangible evidence of the value land managers and by inference the community, place on the commitment of Hunter Bird Observers Club members to monitoring and studying the bird populations of the Hunter Region. The availability of a public record of their findings is of paramount importance to the conservation of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region. It is opportune to congratulate all the authors for their endeavour in completing an exacting task, particularly those who are not experienced in the preparation of scientific papers and dealing with critical peer review. Well done!

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Joint Editors