



# Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc  
PO Box 24, New Lambton, NSW 2305  
[www.hboc.org.au](http://www.hboc.org.au)  
ABN 62 415 889 446

## **Hunter Bird Observers Club 2020 Annual Report**

### **Introduction**

The 2020 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021. It is available via the club website at [www.hboc.org.au](http://www.hboc.org.au). This Annual Report consists of an overview of 2020 in the main body of the report along with detailed reports from Projects, Photography and Conservation co-ordinators attached as appendices.

### **1. Management & Administration**

*This section of HBOC includes management and administrative areas that facilitate all aspects of Club operations through its committee structure and other appointed positions.*

The Annual Financial Report for 2020, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

No one could possibly argue that there was anything ‘normal’ about 2020. From the intensive bushfires that were raging in parts of the Upper Hunter from the first minute of the year through to rains that brought flooding to some areas, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic that re-shaped the world, 2020 was a challenging year.

These challenges also extended to HBOC, functioning for the first time without a President at the helm. Neil Fraser had a brief stint in the role around midyear, but mostly the duties of the President fell into the lap of the Vice President (Mick Roderick; author of this Annual Report) with assistance from the Secretary (Marg Clarke), Treasurer (Helen McCall) and general committee members. Within the confines set by the COVID-19 situation, the committee still managed to meet monthly (mostly remotely) with other devoted members, notably Life Members Ann Lindsey and Alan Stuart, also regularly attending and contributing. As would be expected, many discussions on management matters were made between meetings via email. There is such a vast range of issues, communications and responsibilities that the committee handles that it is easy to underestimate the workload that the committee (and supporting roles) deals with. *The committee and other contributing members are thanked for their support and input throughout the year.*

Despite the challenges thrown at us during 2020, HBOC continued to monitor and improve operating procedures for the benefit of all members. Like undoubtedly most other bird interest groups around the world, HBOC embraced digital technology to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to meeting in-person and Zoom meetings proved to be very popular, particularly with members further afield that were now able to join a Club meeting from the comfort of their living room. We have always kept in mind the key objectives of this club and in 2020 we continued to formalise our sub-committee structures to allow for more effective decision-making. I thank all members of the committee for their efforts and support.

During 2020 HBOC continued to maintain excellent relations with private and public organisations. The promotion of cooperative efforts is an important aspect of the role of Club management and that of the membership in general. The benefits of these collaborations are evident in virtually every aspect of the Club and

we acknowledge the contributions of collaborative organisations and those members who have been involved in this regard. The Club has a deserved and highly respected position as one of the peak environmental organisations in the Hunter. The members are to be congratulated for consolidating this reputation and the vast amount of volunteer effort that goes into helping the Club function is also worthy of recognition.

## **2. Membership**

### ***Administrative, personnel matters and services related to the membership.***

*Membership Secretary:* Our Treasurer, Helen McCall, absorbed the recording responsibilities of membership into her functions during the year. She communicated with new and renewing members and introduced questions to ascertain if members are prepared to volunteer to help the Club and whether they have specific skills that could be of use. This valuable information is still to be fully utilised, but gives the Committee the ability to extend the work being done for birds in the Hunter. Helen also provided a comprehensive monthly report from the membership register to the Committee each month.

*Club Membership:* As of 31 December 2020 there were an estimated 392 financial memberships of HBOC, an increase of 40 from 31 December 2019. Note that family memberships are counted as two members and the totals take into account changes in membership type and members leaving the club. Last year we introduced a student membership and we now have four student members.

*Hunter 300 Club:* A fun component of the Club where those keen birders who have seen more than 300 species in the Hunter Region publish their tallies on the website (though only following peer review for those with more than 400 species on their list). Badges are currently available for those reaching the 300, 350 and 400 species milestones. In 2020 several new people joined the 300 Club and their names, along with their total number of species seen, the date of their latest addition and their prediction for the next new Hunter species were added to the website. One new member joined the 400 Club at tail end of 2020 (Dick Jenkin) joining a flurry of other observers adding Red-chested/Little Button-quail and White-winged Fairy-wren to their Hunter lists.

*Library:* As of 2020 the library comprises more than 450 books, 66 reports and issues of journals related to Australian birding. An updated computerised list on the website has facilitated greater accessibility to the Club's resources. As club nights were conducted by Zoom rather than at the Wetlands Centre for most of the year, members have not had access to the collection, except by special request. Very little work was able to be done on the collection. The most significant addition to the library was Volume 3 of the *Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT* published by the NSW Bird Atlassers.

### ***Bird Image Library***

Images contributed to HBOC's Bird Image Library (BIL) are managed by Rob Palazzi (BIL Manager) and most of the images held are now on display in the BIL section of the SmugMug website. The collection continues to grow with the total images held now more than 12,000. The sub-set of Hunter Region images totals 5,000 and consists of about 350 different species. A steady stream of images has been contributed by several photographers during the year and incorporated into the collection. At the same time, some older images have been discarded.

Requests have also been received from photographers requesting help with identifying birds in their images. 2020 was a quiet year for requests to use images from the BIL with requested images being used in publications, promotional material for local councils and for HBOC publications including the HBOC Featured Bird series.

*E-mail Service:* The e-mail service has again continued to play a vital role in Club communications. This efficient means of distributing important messages and information keeps members informed, especially between Newsletters. It also provides the means by which members receive their eNews. Thanks go to Rob Kyte for his maintenance of this service to the membership.

*Facebook*: Electronic social media has become an increasingly popular means for birders to share and catch up on what is occurring locally regarding the Hunter's birds. This is reflected in the growing number of people joining the HBOC Facebook page. By the end of 2020 the number following the HBOC page increased to 913 and we maintained a healthy frequency of interesting postings.

*'Hunterbirding'*: This online forum for sharing mainly local bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion continued throughout 2020. Hunterbirding has become firmly established as the important go-to place where local issues, such as identification and interesting sightings are first disseminated to the wider Hunter birdwatching community. During the March-May 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, Hunterbirding played an important role for birdwatchers who were unable to leave home to go birding. A combination of quizzes, crosswords, shared photos and reports of backyard bird highlights helped many people to get through that challenging time.

Members are encouraged to join the forum, either with a view to read posts or to contribute to discussions. The Club recognises the efforts of the Hunterbirding moderator (Dan Williams) and thanks all contributors that make Hunterbirding happen.

### **3. Activities**

**This includes the planning, organisation and participation in the leisure-based birdwatching and social activities of the Club.**

We started our activities in 2020 with a full programme full of balanced activities as we have in any normal year. Outings and camps covered a wide variety of locations especially selected to cater for the four seasons and volunteers had come forward to assist with all events.

Alas, the January outing was cancelled because of the danger of bushfires and the January long weekend camp to Smiths Lake was lucky to go ahead after rains which enabled Myall Lakes National Park to be re-opened.

The next three Club outings proceeded as planned, before the onset of COVID-19. All activities were then cancelled until mid-June. These included the Easter camp to Windy Station, Tocal Field day, bird-banding on Broughton Island, Club nights and many of the monthly surveys. Clearly, our activities were highly disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown and subsequent restrictions. All outings were cancelled from the 15<sup>th</sup> March.

By June outings resumed with pre-registration and reduced numbers mandated by Government restrictions. This enabled a few people to catch up with friends and enjoy social birdwatching. For the remainder of the year we were able to at least get together for 'new look' Sunday and midweek outings that followed government health guidelines. The New Members Day, normally held in June, was moved to the 19<sup>th</sup> July at the wetlands centre and attended by recently joining members, ably guided and welcomed by eager existing members. Activities that remained cancelled were larger events organised by external parties and included the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater survey, Cessnock Bushland Festival (Bioblitz) and Biodiversity Day.

The mid-week camp in September at Old Bar had the lowest number ever in attendance. The October camp to Fossickers in Goulburn River National Park had the maximum numbers allowed with a standby list of a few unfortunate members who missed out on a very good camp led by Tom Kendall (with the added excitement of having a resident pair of Barking Owls also camping nearby). The mid-week December outing was held but without the normal enjoyable lunch at a nice venue as a Christmas /end-of-year celebration. However, lunch was still arranged as a BYO and social distancing measures applied.

Once again it is volunteers who organise and lead the camps as well as provide the necessary facilities. Thank you. One of the pleasures of these camps, besides the company and the birds, is that the properties are left as they are found – rubbish free. Throughout the COVID-19 period all members have complied with the

requirements of pre-registration and social distancing which has enabled the events to carry on. We hope that the planned 2021 programme will eventuate without further disruption.

Finally, all club members are kept up to date with the outcomes of each event by postings to Hunterbirding, Facebook and the club eNews. Thank you to Andrzej Karpiel for organising the Club's activities program.

#### **4. Club Night**

*The monthly Club Night is one of the feature activities of HBOC.*

Being the most social activity on the HBOC calendar, Club Nights in 2020 had to quickly adapt to COVID-19 realities, but not before we were able to hear an inspiring talk on Night Parrots by PhD researcher (and ex-Novocastrian) Nick Leseberg at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. After the cancellation of the April meeting, the committee soon followed the lead of many other clubs and workplaces (and even government departments) in arranging to meet online. Using 'Zoom', monthly meetings were held remotely and resulted in members joining from as far-flung places as the UK and a yacht moored off the New Zealand coast. The atmosphere was always convivial and alongside the standard Bird of the Evening, Main Speaker and Observations sections, there was good general discussion amongst attendees. So popular has the Zoom format been, that the committee is considering ways of merging face-to-face and online meetings when meetings return to 'normal'.

Whilst not exactly a "Club Night", the December *Christmas Meeting* was not held on the second Wednesday evening, but instead moved outdoors to a picnic held at Walka Water Works. The afternoon was well-attended and we held a Christmas raffle, with proceeds going to the Twitchathon beneficiary in 2020.

Thanks go to Andrzej Karpiel for facilitating and recording the Zoom meetings and training speakers on how to be Zoom-conversant where necessary. Thanks also to Lorna Mee, Kristy Peters and Marg Clarke for arranging the Christmas picnic.

#### **5. Newsletter / eNews**

*HBOC's regular newsletter communicates Club news, the events calendar, interesting sightings, Club outings and other reports and birding articles of general interest, to members, selected birding organisations and the public, either directly or via the HBOC web site.*

The Newsletter, which has now gone fully digital and become an eNews, continues to be a quality publication and an important means of communication, which links members within the Club through its news reports and other birding articles. In 2020 we formed a five-member team to produce the e-News. This spreads the burden of production and will hopefully ensure its continuity even if team members change. The digital format has allowed us to be flexible while at the same time encouraging members to read further. The newsletter has also contributed to the club's efforts to keep members engaged during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Further, in 2020 a full set of newsletters from 1978 onwards was digitised so that we now have a valuable archive of club activities. The many members who contribute articles and photographs to the Newsletter are thanked for their interest, time and effort, and I thank the newsletter team for their contribution.

#### **6. Photography**

*This section offers the opportunity for members with a special interest in bird photography to develop their bird watching and photographic knowledge / skills while promoting birds and the environment.*

The HBOC Photography sub-committee was formed in 2018 and meets twice a year. Interest in photography amongst members and the wider community has continued to grow. In early 2020, the Photo Badge Awards

program was re-introduced with new badges available for 200, 250 and 300 Hunter Birds photographed. The promotion of this program during COVID-19 isolation, enabled members to sort and list their photographs and caused a flurry of activity and badges were mailed to qualifying members. The HBOC website was also re-organised and lists of those people achieving milestone events (such as 200 bird species photos taken in the Hunter Region) are now online.

The lighting for the foyer displays on Club Night at the Hunter Wetlands Centre was also upgraded in April but unfortunately due to COVID and the cancellation of physical Club nights, we have yet to see the change in operation.

#### *SmugMug Website:*

Members Galleries introduced in 2019 are managed by Alwyn Simple and contain collections of members' photographs, not necessarily available in the BIL. There is no restriction on the number of images and individual members can upload and remove their own images. This has proven highly successful, particularly during the initial period of COVID-19 isolation, when links to individual members' galleries were published each day and resulted in 14,000- 16,700 page views each week during April and May. Many positive responses from members were received.

#### *Photography Print Collection:*

This collection of printed images managed by Jim Smart has continued to receive a steady flow of requests. The images are being used as visual aids for talks to groups and reference for artists etc. The quality of images now contained in the BIL has meant that new images of species requested are frequently re-printed. Thank you to all members of the photography sub-committee. This information is also found in Appendix B, HBOC Photography Sub-committee Report.

## **7. Conservation**

***This section is primarily concerned with issues relevant to the protection of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region and beyond. It helps link the areas of HBOC endeavour and the community through its collaborative partnerships, networking and advocacy.***

There are now more than 90 species or subspecies of birds in the Hunter Region that are listed as threatened under either State or Commonwealth threatened species legislation. Further, those habitats that provide home for a diversity of currently non-threatened bird species are also under threat; thus, the conservation arm of the Club remains vitally important. A Conservation sub-committee was formed in 2020 to deal with the ever-increasing number of conservation issues. Members are Ann Lindsey (co-ordinator), Bob and Margaret Stewart, Tom Kendall, with Mick Roderick in an advisory capacity.

Although the Club's concerns mainly revolved around the loss of habitat through various planned developments, submissions were also made to the Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and the Draft Strategic Plan for Crown Land. The outcomes from these reviews will be of utmost importance to the future of bird species and their habitat. Some of the more notable submissions or representations are listed below. A complete list is provided in the Conservation Report, as Appendix C.

- 9/03/2020 EPBC Act Review. Submission
- 27/03/2020 Fernhill Estate Mulgoa – letter supporting BirdLife Australia's submission for protecting Regent Honeyeater breeding habitat.
- 1/04/2020 Kings Hill Development, Raymond Terrace. Port Stephens Council. Objecting to aspects of project.
- 9/04/2020 Stockton Sand Quarry Dredging. Submission.
- 20/06/2020 Shortland Waters Golf Club. Requesting ongoing treatment of Water Hyacinth.
- 30/06/2020 Santos Coal Seam Gas project at Narrabri. Independent Planning Commission. Submission objecting to development.

- 29/07/2020 Walka Waterworks. Maitland Council's Destination Plan. Objection to aspects.
- 16/08/2020 Draft State Strategic Plan for Crown Lands and DPIE. Submission on reservation of suitable land.
- 16/08/2020 Macquarie Pier (Stony Point/Nobbys) Revitalisation Project. Port Authority. Submission requesting information and pointing out importance of Stony Point.
- 28/08/2020 Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Newcastle Council. Submission requesting modifications to project.
- 10/11/2020 Sport and Recreation Lake Macquarie. (Lake Eraring issue). Objection to status change of project to State Significant Infrastructure Development.
- 22/12/2020 Kings Hill Development, Raymond Terrace. Independent Planning Commission teleconference.

## **8. Field Studies, Data Management and Records Appraisal**

*This section of HBOC addresses collection of data, monitoring of bird populations and maintenance / appraisal of records which underpin the HBOC research and conservation effort while at the same time making a worthwhile contribution to members' leisure-based bird watching.*

Field studies and data management are inherently linked - no field studies program has any significant value unless the data from it are appropriately managed (including storage, analysis, and dissemination of results). Records appraisal is undertaken by a Records Appraisal Committee that oversees the assessment of rare and unusual reports of birds in the Region.

This part of HBOC is particularly strong and underpins many of the conservation efforts and published work in *The Whistler* and the Annual Bird Report.

### *Field Studies*

Our regular field studies projects continued in 2020: the Hunter Estuary waterbirds surveys; Port Stephens waterbirds surveys; Tomago Wetland surveys; Rufous Scrub-bird surveys in the Gloucester Tops; quarterly land bird surveys and bird banding on Broughton Island; monthly surveys at Earthcare Park in Tenambit and the Shortland Waters Golf Club; quarterly surveys in the Martindale Valley; and the national Latham's Snipe and Regent Honeyeater / Swift Parrot monitoring projects.

As always, those official club field studies projects were supplemented by survey efforts from many dedicated individual Club members. Special mention should be made of the monthly surveys, usually involving multiple members, done at Gir-um-bit NP / Swan Bay, Shortland Wetlands Centre, Walka Water Works and Swansea Channel / southern Lake Macquarie. Each of those projects has been running for well over a decade, producing valuable databases about our local birdlife. Many other sites were surveyed regularly (usually monthly) by individual members.

We continued to emphasise Birddata as the preferred way for the Club and individual members to archive their records. Birddata is a national database managed by BirdLife Australia and with a key use of the data being for purposes of conservation of Australian birds and their habitat. It is pleasing to note that for 2020 we had a record number of Birddata surveys submitted for the Hunter Region (more than 6,700 surveys) and also a record number of active observers (345 observers). In part, the sharp increase in surveys and surveyors was from promotional activities by Hunter Local Land Services; it will be interesting to see whether the record participation levels continue into 2021.

Our field studies program was bolstered through our interactions with other organisations, which are continuing to grow. As always, we worked closely with all the local offices of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). We also continued to work closely with Hunter Local Land Services (HLLS) in the Hunter Estuary and our interactions with them have spread to Port Stephens and the Manning Valley, where bird monitoring

projects and educational activities are being rolled out. We were involved with several of BirdLife Australia's projects including their woodland bird program, and with the Landcare group at Martindale.

There were two new projects/interactions for us in 2020. Several of our members participated in workshops to develop priorities for migratory shorebird conservation in the Hunter Estuary, Port Stephens, Worimi Conservation Lands and Manning Estuary. The workshops, organised by BirdLife Australia on behalf of HLLS, led to the formation of three estuary-specific Working Groups, with several HBOC members co-opted into them. Also, we began working with HLLS on surveys for Australasian Bitterns. The surveys are drone-based, with all the required permits arranged. Originally we used a standard visual imaging drone owned and operated by club member Bob McDonald, then later progressed to using a thermal imaging drone which we purchased with funding support from HLLS. Four HBOC members have been trained to fly the drone.

#### *Data Collection and Management:*

Important ways for us to document our field studies program include the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report and our journal *The Whistler*. Results with a clear national significance were published elsewhere (*Corella*, one Hunter-related paper in 2020). Our new Bird Report editor Dan Williams has re-vamped the data collection process to reflect the growing tendency for observers to report their records solely into electronic databases, and now publication of the 2019 bird report is imminent. The latest issue of *The Whistler* was finalised in December 2020, with 13 separate articles about Hunter Region birdlife, and it will be available shortly for distribution. Also, two HBOC Special Reports were published in 2020: a summary of birdlife at Belmont Wetlands State Park / Belmont Lagoon, and a summary of the 2017-2020 field studies on Broughton Island. Both those reports are available on the HBOC website.

#### *Records Appraisal and Vetting:*

Records appraisal committees are an important part of modern birdwatching. As our knowledge of the status and distribution of birds increases, there is also a need to 'manage' the reliability of the information that contributes to that knowledge. This is done within HBOC by the Records Appraisal Committee (RAC). In 2020 RAC members remained as Mick Roderick (Records Appraisal Officer), Ann Lindsey, Dan Williams, Phil Hansbro, Dick Jenkin, Craig Anderson and Allan Richardson.

In some cases, the rarity of a bird can be such that it needs to be assessed by a higher authority. There are two records committees that assess such species and when they are recorded in the Hunter Region, their review is referred to them. For nationally rare birds, the Birdlife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) is the authority, whilst for state-significant birds, the NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (ORAC) is the authority. Both committees maintain a review list of species required to be submitted when a sighting is claimed.

Further to the appraisal of rare and unusual reports, there is a great deal of day-to-day vetting of Birddata and eBird lists, primarily done by Ian Benson and Mick Roderick. This provides further reassurance that the data underlying the production of the Annual Bird Report is accurate.

Only 9 cases of rare birds were reviewed by the HBOC RAC during the year, with two cases assessed each by BARC and NSW ORAC for birds recorded within the Hunter Region. Both of the BARC cases relate to Pycroft's Petrel, with the well-documented bird on Broughton Island in October 2019 being accepted as the first Australian record, but with the October 2002 report at sea off Swansea not being accepted. NSW ORAC accepted the report of a Roseate Tern at Farquhar Inlet in early January 2020 but did not accept a claim of two Little Shearwaters seawatched off Crowdy Head in February.

The small number of cases is likely a reflection of both the inability for observers to explore the Region during parts of the year due to COVID-19, combined with a reclassification of some 'Category 3' species hitherto considered rare enough to warrant appraisal of every record which now have been set as a 'Category 2R' in the bird reports. Two new species were added to the Hunter list during 2020, being the Roseate Tern mentioned

above and a small population of White-winged Fairy-wrens found late in the year along Cattle Lane, west of Willow Tree.

A detailed account for each species assessed by the HBOC RAC, as well as cases reviewed by NSW ORAC for birds seen in the Hunter Region, will be found in the Records Appraisal Committee Report for 2020 (which will appear as an appendix to the 2020 Annual Bird Report).

## 9. Projects

***Comprises the “hands on” conservation projects that restore selected areas of bird habitat in the Hunter.***

Since 2003, members of Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) have maintained a constant volunteer effort with various restoration works in the Hunter Estuary. These projects all focus on shorebird habitat and the project sites have been chosen for their strategic importance to the birds. Project sites exist at Stockton Sandspit, Ash Island (Milhams Pond, Phoenix Flats, Wader West, Wader Pond and Swan Pond) and a collection of remote sites (Smith Island, Sandy Island, Fullerton Cove Beach and Dyke Pond #4) within the estuary. Much of the volunteer work carried out involves removing mangrove seedlings that invade beaches and saltmarsh areas within the sites.

To do this, permission from NPWS and Department of Primary Industries and Environment (DPIE) is required. A renewed permit (PN20-194) under Part 7 of the Fisheries Management Act 1994 allows “*harm to marine vegetation associated with mangrove management at Hunter Wetlands National Park, Hunter River, multiple sites*”. This latest permit has been issued for five years and is in force until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

Currently the combined projects cover over 150 hectares of the Hunter Wetlands National Park and since early 2003, just over 10,300 hours of volunteer effort has been accrued in these endeavours. The combined volunteer effort in 2020 across all the projects amounted to 356 hours of willing contribution. It was significant that the 10,000-hour milestone was broken during 2020 and a testament to the diligent coordination of these projects under Tom Clarke (see Special Recognition below).

*Remote Sites* (Smith Island, Sandy Island, Fullerton Cove Beach and Dyke Pond #4):

Previously reported as Threatened Species Recovery Fund (TSRF 06) project, this area of endeavour continues to be serviced as an ongoing volunteer program since the funded component of this project was successfully completed in June 2018. Recruitment of mangrove seedlings since 2018 in all the remote sites has been, by any standard, very low and the follow-up sweeps over all beaches and saltmarsh have been easily completed.

The follow-up sweeps for 2020 were conducted across three separate days that coincided with favourable low tides. A day in March successfully dealt with Fullerton Cove Beach, a day in April accounted for the three beaches on Sandy and Smith Islands and a day in June was spent sweeping all the saltmarsh areas previously cleared on Smith Island. It was plain to see that due to the recovering weather conditions since the breaking of the drought that mangroves continued to produce and drop seed. In fact, every month we were discovering newly deposited seeds on the various beaches.

Regular monitoring at high tides of these sites continues with kayak access to the island sites and walking access to Fullerton Cove Beach. The beaches on Smith Island and at Fullerton Cove have shown good improvement in occupancy by shorebirds roosting over the high tides.

*Ash Island:*

The main focus over the Ash Island sites (Milhams Pond, Phoenix Flats, Wader West, Wader Pond and Swan Pond) is the treatment of mangrove seedlings. Since all the primary felling of the trees several years ago it is solely the detailed picking of each subsequent season’s seedlings that form the bulk of the work.



The combined aggregate of almost 114 hectares was covered during 2020 in just over 90 hours (actual time spent removing mangrove seedlings) and represents an above average year for mangrove seedling recruitment. The last two years has seen a steady rise in effort required and 2020 went closer to the limits of sustainability than it has for the last four years. Anything under 100 hours has been our benchmark for volunteers to achieve.

#### *Stockton Sandspit:*

This site is the most visible to the general public and probably one of the most visited. Restoration work at this site takes on several facets but the underlying focus is that of maintaining a shorebird roost. The volunteer effort at the sandspit during 2020 amounted to 209 hours on this 4ha site.

Thanks to Paddy and Caryl Lightfoot, the usual 'Clean Up Australia Day' at Stockton Sandspit was able to go ahead. An energetic team comprising eight HBOC members and four interested people from the general public collected various rubbish items and marine debris. It was completely disturbing to find newly dumped rubbish in the car park under the bridge so soon after this great effort.

#### *Acknowledgements*

These estuary projects continue to succeed because of the input of many people with a common interest in estuary health and shorebird habitat restoration. All the works planning and implementation are the result of enduring partnerships that provide the organisational structure to make it all happen. The contributions of NPWS, HLLS (formerly Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Project) and HBOC are ceaseless and much appreciated. Thanks also to those TAFE students who incorporate the estuary in the practical application of their studies.

Particular acknowledgement is due to Boyd Carney (NPWS) for his constant availability and interest. The potential disruption as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions was a challenge that was well met and the ensuing negotiations culminating in an Activity Consent for our ongoing efforts is immensely appreciated.

### **10. The Whistler**

***HBOC's research-based, occasional periodical of refereed papers and notes that places on record observational details and analysis of HBOC members' field studies.***

The latest issue of *The Whistler* (Volume 14) was finalised in December 2020, steered through by the joint editors Neil Fraser and Alan Stuart. It will begin to be distributed in February 2021. Volume 14's 89 pages contain thirteen separate articles about Hunter Region birdlife and involve eleven different authors. Copies of *The Whistler* are sent to libraries around the world and every article is published separately on our website and hence publicly available.

### **11 Education & Promotion**

***To equip club members, the organisation and the broader community with the knowledge, skills and capacity to not only enhance the bird watching experience, but also to support the conservation of Hunter birdlife and its various habitats. This section includes avenues for members to champion birds, the environment and HBOC to the broader community.***

The effectiveness of displays and activities directed to community education is always difficult to evaluate, however in 2020 HBOC was invited to participate in a variety of community and school-based events, including Muswellbrook Connect, Our Lady of Lourdes-Tarro 'Birds in Schools' activities, Gresford Public School and Landcare revegetation initiative, Tocal Field Days, Biodiversity Day, Cessnock 'Our Bushland' Festival and BirdLife Australia's Aussie Backyard Bird Count. Unfortunately, most of these events were cancelled due to COVID-19. This section will detail some of the preparation undertaken in anticipation that the events would run.

*Muswellbrook Connect:* This event was organised by Muswellbrook Shire Council to encourage local schools and pre-schools to participate in environmental education. Ten schools and pre-schools agreed to participate in the event which was to be held on 26<sup>th</sup> March. HBOC prepared a bird identification activity for the students, a brief information session for students and teachers about the Aussie Backyard Bird Count and a 'sample bag' for each school of ABBC information and HBOC birding route brochures.

*Our Lady of Lourdes-Tarro:* The student welfare co-ordinator contacted HBOC for assistance with identifying birds on the school grounds and potential for providing habitat for native birds. One school visit occurred in February to provide information and to encourage them to prepare for the Aussie Backyard Bird Count and/or to implement BirdLife Australia's 'Birds in Schools' program. It is anticipated that further assistance will be offered when COVID-19 restrictions allow.

*Gresford Public School and Landcare revegetation initiative:* Based on successful interaction between Gresford Public School and BirdLife Australia's Woodland Bird Program in 2019, Gresford Landcare Group contacted HBOC for assistance with identifying suitable bird-attracting plants for a revegetation project that students of the school could participate in. Plant lists based on indicative plant community types and information on BirdLife Australia's 'Birds in Schools' program were sent to the contact person for the project. Gresford Public School subsequently applied to BirdLife Australia to participate in their program in 2021.

*Tocal Field Days:* We once again prepared for a display stall at Tocal Field Days, inside the Hunter LLS marquee which they provide free of charge for community groups.

*Biodiversity Day:* This event is organised by the NSW DPIE in conjunction with NPWS and held at Blue Gum Hills Regional Park in Minmi in late September/early October. HBOC usually prepares a display jointly with BirdLife Australia and a backyard/school yard census-style activity for the school children who visit the club's display

*Cessnock Bioblitz / Our Bushland Festival:* In 2019 HBOC participated for the second time in this event as part of a long-running relationship with this project, and HBOC planned to participate in the 2020 event, which was expanded to be a festival (building upon the Bioblitz concept). The popularity of the event is increasing and some useful partnerships have been formed.

*Aussie Backyard Bird Count:* This national week-long event, organised by BirdLife Australia, is aimed at getting broader participation in birding from the non-birding community. This event was possible even under COVID-19 restrictions. The club was heavily involved in encouraging individual members and non-members to participate.

*Club T-shirts:* During 2020 the committee engaged Hip Pocket Workwear to provide polo shirts, T-shirts and fleecy jumpers monogrammed with the HBOC logo. These went on sale in December 2020 and are available for members to order directly from the retailer. A percentage of the profits will be donated to HBOC.

*Website:* The HBOC website continues to be an indispensable interface between the Club, its members and the rest of the world and we saw increased activity during 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to receive positive comments about it from external parties. Steve Merrett, our dedicated 'Webmaster,' works tirelessly behind the scenes to not only enhance the security of the website, but also to make improvements and facilitate regular updates relating to Club activity. The combined efforts of a dedicated team ensures the website is kept up-to-date and running smoothly which is crucial for keeping members informed and in providing information and Club news to the general viewer.

*Publications:* Our new bird report editor Dan Williams has re-vamped the data collection process to reflect the growing tendency for observers to report their records solely into electronic databases, and now publication of the 2019 bird report is imminent, the production team and field observers are to be congratulated for this

respected publication. The latest issue of *The Whistler* will begin to be distributed in February 2020. Four members co-authored a paper dealing with Silvereyes on Broughton Island that was published in the well-respected ABSA journal *Corella*. Two HBOC Special Reports were published in 2020: a summary by Grahame Feletti of bird life at Belmont Wetlands State Park / Belmont Lagoon, and a summary by Alan Stuart of the 2017-2020 HBOC field studies on Broughton Island.

*Birding Routes:* No new HBOC birding routes were produced during 2020, though a start was made on the third Cessnock birding route. Additionally, the “Birding Guide to the Cessnock Woodlands” was finalised in late 2020 and will be ready for distribution in early 2021. This exciting project is a collaboration between HBOC, BirdLife Australia, NPWS, Cessnock Council and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council.

In 2020, as for previous years, the birding route brochures were the most frequently downloaded of any of the items available from our website. They are one of the important ways by which we engage with local and visiting birdwatchers.

*Featured Bird factsheets:* We started a new initiative in 2020: a monthly Featured Bird factsheet that is sent exclusively to all the then-current club members. Each month presents a new species and draws heavily upon existing HBOC resources – the distribution maps and timelines used by Dan Williams in the Annual Bird Report and the wonderful photos in our Bird Image Library (BIL). We thank Alan Stuart for the research conducted each month and Rob Kyte for the wonderful layouts, and of course, the many talented photographers who have donated images to the BIL.

## 11. Special Recognition

Alan Stuart was awarded the coveted J N Hobbs Memorial Medal for 2020 for outstanding contributions to Australasian ornithology by an amateur ornithologist. A good portion of this recognition was due to the contributions Alan has made to building HBOC to the incredible organisation it is today. Having worked closely with Alan on a number of Club-related matters I was personally delighted to see him awarded the Hobbs Medal (the dissertation for which can be found [here](#) ). Alan becomes the 3<sup>rd</sup> HBOC member to receive the Hobbs Medal following Mike Newman in 2012 and Dick Cooper in 2019.

Further recognition was to come for Alan during 2020 when he and Margaret O’Leary received the Australian Bird Study Association (ABSA) Durno Murray Award for Best Paper in ABSA’s journal *Corella* on using automated recording and data analysis techniques for Rufous Scrub-bird calls.

Ann Lindsey and Tom Clarke were both afforded recognition for their tireless work in bird conservation in the Hunter, with official acknowledgement of them being “Hunter Heroes”, tabled in NSW parliament and write-ups appearing in the Newcastle Herald. Ann was acknowledged for her ongoing contributions to bird conservation issues, not only in the Hunter but beyond as well; giving a voice to the birds that we all love so much. Tom was acknowledged for championing the rehabilitation and ongoing management of shorebird habitat in the Hunter Estuary.

## 12. Acknowledgments

Whilst not expecting to have taken on the responsibility of effectively being an ‘acting president’ during 2020, I certainly could not have achieved anything without the support of so many committee and general club members. In the face of such challenging circumstances, I feel that HBOC epitomises the expression that the *whole is greater than the sum of its parts*. And collectively we look forward to what 2021 brings.

**Mick Roderick** (HBOC Vice President 2020) 10 February 2021