



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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Hunter Bird Observers Club 2021 Annual Report

Introduction

The 2021 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 9th February 2022. It is available via the club website at www.hboc.org.au.

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 2021, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact many global activities throughout 2021 and the Club was no exception. Flooding was again a prominent feature, with the Manning River experiencing a 1-in-100-year flood in March, which significantly reshaped the dynamic sand banks at both its entrances. Whilst 2021 proved to be another year of challenges, the experiences of 2020 meant that the Club was better prepared to rise to them.

One improvement on 2020 was having a Club President in place throughout 2021. Dan Williams took on the role and was able to see through the year, much in part to the fantastic job that Mick Roderick (Vice President), Marg Clarke (Secretary) and Helen McCall (Treasurer) perform in the month-to-month running of the Club. Within the confines set by the COVID-19 situation, the committee still managed to meet monthly (either in person or 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.*

Given the success of the remote Zoom Club Meetings during 2020, this initiative was continued throughout 2021, even in the months that were less impacted by the pandemic. The popularity of the remote meetings and the different audience of members that can be reached have resulted in the Club deciding to make them a permanent fixture. Hybrid meetings with an in-person audience at the Hunter Wetlands Centre with concurrent Zoom meeting for wider member (and potential speaker) participation will become the new norm. Whilst this hybrid setup is not without its own issues, these will be ironed out as further experience is gained in hosting them.

During 2021 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, continued the recording responsibilities of membership during 2021. She communicated with new and renewing members and now maintains a membership skills register to help find matches between the needs of the Club and capabilities that the membership has to offer. Helen also provided a comprehensive monthly report from the membership register to the Committee each month.

Club Membership: As of 31 December 2021, there were an estimated 400 financial memberships of HBOC, an increase of 8 from 31 December 2020. Note that family memberships are counted as two members and the totals take into account changes in membership type and members leaving the club. The student membership increased from four to 12 in 2021, confirming its worth as an additional option introduced in 2020.

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 2021 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 member joined the 400 Club in 2021 (Ian Benson) with the sighting of a Tahiti Petrel on a Port Stephens pelagic on 28th February.

Library: The library comprises more than 450 books, 66 reports and issues of journals related to Australian birding. As with 2020, the continued pandemic restricted the level of access to the Club library for members.

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 (<https://hboc-bird-gallery.smugmug.com/>).

2021 was another year of limited activity, although the 'lull' allowed the collection to be updated steadily and at the end of the year the total collection stood at a little over 16,000 (up from 12,000 last year). The Hunter Region sub-set now contains over 6,000 covering about 350 different species. Images are always needed and the club would encourage anyone to look carefully at their photographs and submit any they feel would add to this excellent resource – please contact birdimages@hboc.org.au

2021 saw a continuation of demand for our images in the production of brochures, signs and other publications like the Featured Bird series. The e-News used several images to complement the articles submitted. This valuable resource should continue to be in demand in years to come. Our thanks to the many photographers who contribute.

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. The activity and engagement on the Club Facebook

page declined during 2021. This is a priority area to reinvigorate during 2022 and the Club will be seeking suitable volunteers for Facebook and other social media platforms to utilise these to greater potential.

'Hunterbirding': This online forum for sharing mainly local bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion continued throughout 2021. 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.

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 (Lene Parashou) 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.

As for 2020, a full programme full of balanced activities was planned, but was significantly impacted by a resurgence of COVID-19 midway through the 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.

The planned January camp to Smiths Lake was not so lucky to escape the threat of bushfire as it had been in 2020 and so this popular annual excursion had to be cancelled. The Easter camp to Round Hill NR in the mid-western NSW mallee and Baerami Creek ANZAC day weekend camp both went ahead as planned. The winter camp to Appletree Flat proved to be the last of the year, as the subsequent planned camps were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The regular Club Field Outings took place as planned throughout the first half of the year without incident, although two were cancelled due to rain. However, come July the annual New Members Day at the Hunter Wetlands Centre was initially postponed from July until August due to the emerging resurgence of the COVID-19 (Delta strain) pandemic within Australia. Unfortunately, this (and all other planned events) required cancelling, as the situation in August had escalated.

Club activities were able to be resumed in November, albeit with continued restrictions and impacts from the continued persistence of COVID-19, with the Omicron strain surfacing towards the year's end. The Christmas outdoor social at Walka Water Works was repeated from last year and again proved a success, despite some late scratchings from COVID-19 close contact alerts. A small test case was also held for the planned future kids' activities program at the Walka outing. Thanks go to the Walka Miniature Railway for operating especially on our behalf – their first post-COVID operation.

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 2022 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 the Activities sub-committee for organising the Club's activities program.

4. Club Night

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

The year began the planned program of Club Meetings using the new hybrid system, i.e. an in-person meeting held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, with concurrent remote meeting hosted via Zoom, which then reverted to a Zoom-only format during the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lessons learnt during the experiences of 2020 helped make this a smooth transition, although some issues still need fine-tuning, such as how to best facilitate questions from the floor at the Wetlands Centre and convey these to the audience at home. The option to present via Zoom proved an attractive option to many of the guest speakers, who would otherwise have required to travel to present.

Because of a relatively short planning period and the potential technical difficulties with hosting the regular Christmas Club Night format via the hybrid meeting platform, a casual Club Christmas social was instead held at the Shortland Hotel, in lieu of the December Club Meeting. Members gathered for a couple of drinks and some much-needed socialisation, whilst those that felt inclined also ordered dinner. The event turned out to be a great success, with a diverse section of the Club membership turning up.

Thanks go to Andrzej Karpiel for facilitating and recording the Zoom meetings and training speakers on how to be Zoom-conversant where necessary.

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. The digital format allows 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 continued COVID-19 restrictions.

The many members who contribute articles and photographs to the Newsletter are thanked for their interest, time and effort, and I thank the eNews 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 meets twice per year. Interest in photography amongst members and the wider community has continued to grow. During 2021 the photography sub-committee managed to meet in February and October, despite COVID-19 restrictions.

SmugMug Website:

Members Galleries on the SmugMug website continue to be available to all members to showcase their bird images. There is no restriction on the number of images that can be uploaded. Members who would like to showcase their bird photos, can contact the Secretary at secretary@hboc.org.au secretary@hboc.org.au

Photography Print Collection:

The necessary transition of Club Nights to Zoom only meant the long-standing monthly foyer displays of members photographs did not occur. HBOC has a collection of over 800 A3 sized printed images, that are used for educational and HBOC displays e.g., Tocal.

Jim Smart had been the custodian of this collection for more than ten years and recently the collection was transferred to the care of Liz Date-Huxtable. Our thanks to Jim for his contribution to developing this collection over the years.

Photo Milestone Club:

We have also been updating the Photo Milestone Club and several of our photographers have moved past the 200 and 250 and 300 levels in 2021. Check it out at <https://www.hboc.org.au/milestone-clubs/hunter-bird-photos/>

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.

The year 2021 was a busy year for the HBOC conservation committee with at least twenty-four letters/submissions sent to local council and commonwealth and state government departments. In addition, members of the conservation committee attended several on-line meetings. Members were Ann Lindsey, Robert and Margaret Stewart, Tom Kendall and Mick Roderick.

Two new members joined the committee in 2021: Rebecca Citroni was with us for a short time during which she made several valuable suggestions but was unable to remain on the committee for personal reasons. Graeme Stevens joined in August and will remain in 2022. Brianna Coulter also joined the committee as an interested person.

Local Matters

Many letters were written objecting to a range of proposed developments which, if approved, will involve the destruction of many hectares of high conservation-value woodland with continuous canopy. A brief outline of such proposals follows:

- Kings Hill Residential Development, Raymond Terrace; no decision has been made until Koala habitat is re-examined. Ongoing.
- Letters were written to Newcastle City Council and Lake Macquarie City Councils objecting to proposals to rezone woodland for residential purposes and acknowledgements were received. These included:
 - The Eden Estates (Link Road) proposal involves 572 ha of woodland. M. Roderick spoke per zoom at a public meeting initiated by Hunter Community Environment Centre on behalf of HBOC. A reply to our letter from Newcastle City Council advised that Council had not made any decision and that any rezoning proposal would be put on public exhibition after consultation with other State agencies.
 - The Fennel Bay rezoning involves 265 ha of woodland and the Wyee Point – Ramsgate Estate – rezoning involves 18 ha of woodland.
 - At 505 Minmi Road, Fletcher 26.2 ha of bushland are currently zoned E4. In reply to our enquiry Newcastle Council stated that it had decided not to proceed with rezoning and had no further plans for the site. This decision was subsequently overruled by the Joint Regional Planning Panel which is allowing the land to be assessed under the State Government Gateway rezoning process.
 - Note that many hectares including creek lines were destroyed along Minmi Road this year.
- A rare win for the local action group involved Arcadia Park, The Hill, which contains the only piece of remnant woodland and littoral rainforest in inner city Newcastle. Fortunately, the Park is to be preserved in its entirety.
- During the year, Ellalong Lagoon and its adjacent high conservation-value forest was offered for sale by Port Waratah Coal Services. Letters to the Minister for the Environment failed to secure it for the

national park estate and it has become an offset for the proposed Eden Estates Link Road Development.

- Martins Creek Quarry Expansion will destroy 36 ha of woodland. Ongoing.

Other issues included:

- Tree felling on a development site at Chisholm which took place in November 2020. It was claimed that illegal tree felling had taken place. HBOC wrote to Maitland Council and a response was received in February 2021 pointing out that “clearing was in accordance with consent”.
- HBOC wrote to Cessnock Council with regard to issues relating to the Hunter Economic Zone at Kurri Kurri. Copies were sent to MP Mr Barr and Mayor Mr B. Pynsent. The reply from Cessnock Council did not address the key issues.
- Richmond Vale Rail Trail: Approximately 13 kilometres of the path located within the Newcastle Local Government Area was approved. Two kilometres of the trail that goes through the Hunter Wetlands National Park will undergo further assessment in 2022.
- HBOC wrote to Singleton Council objecting to reopening Redbank power station and using biomass as a source for fuel. Ongoing.
- Modifications to Hillsborough Road, Warners Bay are proposed. HBOC asked Transport for NSW to consider including an overpass for wildlife. Ongoing.
- Woodlands Estate Reserve at Thornton is important for Latham’s Snipe among other species. The site is being affected by illegal vehicular use and rubbish dumping. HBOC requested Maitland Council to install appropriate signage. Ongoing.
- HBOC has been asking Newcastle Council for several years for signage for the management of dogs and people around Stony Point, Port of Newcastle. Ongoing.
- At the request of NSW Government Saving our Species representative, HBOC suggested two sites, Shortland Waters Golf Club and Horizon Golf Resort at Salamander Bay/Port Stephens, to be considered for inclusion in an initiative to make golf courses more biodiversity friendly. No further action and no information about outcomes have been received.
- HBOC provided advice on use by water birds to Singleton Council re proposed changes to the sewage Treatment Plant which will affect water flows to Doughboy Hollow, an important water bird site especially for Plumed Whistling-Duck.
- Some good news from Ausgrid in that bird diverters were installed on power lines at Ash Island after NPWS ranger reported the deaths of 6 swans associated with power lines.
- Matters addressed outside the Hunter Region affecting birdlife.

Matters Outside the Hunter Region

In response to request from BirdLife Australia HBOC wrote to the Deputy Premier, the Hon. J. Barilaro and the Hon. Ms S. Hornery with regard to logging of Swift Parrot habitat on the south coast of NSW asking that these habitats not be logged. In response, a letter was received from the Parliamentary Secretary indicating that the Natural Resources Committee is to develop monitoring programs specifically for Swift Parrot. So far as HBOC is aware, logging went ahead.

HBOC wrote a submission to the Department Planning Industry Environment objecting to Warragamba Dam Raising Project. In January 2022, the proposal was rejected in its current form.

HBOC joined the campaign to prevent the Hawkins-Rumker area near Rylstone being identified as a coal release site. The campaign was successful.

HBOC supported the BirdLife Australia campaign to have “second generation” rodenticides removed from shelves of Bunnings Warehouse. Reply from Bunnings Warehouse outlining their actions but no indication that they would remove rodenticides. HBOC also wrote to the Veterinary Medicines Authority with regard to use of bromadiolone on farms. Fortunately, the VMA rejected the use of this chemical on farms.

Government Policies

One submission to the Commonwealth Government was made in 2021. Some background to this complex issue: In 2020 HBOC had made a submission to the Commonwealth Government with regard to the *Review of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. The results of that Review showed that “The final report from the review of the laws finds the environment is suffering from two decades of failure by governments to improve protection systems meant to ensure the survival of the country’s unique wildlife.”

Since then, two further Bills have been introduced. The EPBC Amendment (Standards and Assurance) Bill 2021 was introduced in February 2021 to create a National Environmental Standards framework and a position for a National Environment Assurance commissioner. This bill was introduced to garner support for the EPBC Amendment (Streamlining Environmental Approvals) Bill of 2020. That Bill was introduced in August 2020 prior to the release of the EPBC Review Final Report; it would facilitate the devolution of Commonwealth approval powers to states and territories.

HBOC made a submission to Senate Enquiry into EPBC Amendment (Standards and Assurance) Bill 2021 asking for strong environmental laws; the introduction of national environmental standards able to be reviewed by independent scientific experts and to establish an environment assurance commissioner with powers to ensure compliance and enforcement of approval conditions.

Two submissions to the NSW Government were made: one to the Inquiry into the Integrity of the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Scheme with regard to the effectiveness of the Scheme to halt or reverse the loss of biodiversity values and one to the Minister for Environment objecting to changes to the Rural Boundary Code which would allow clearing of vegetation within 25 metres along boundaries with no assessment or controls.

All submissions are available for more detailed reading on the HBOC website under the Conservation tab. Members of the conservation committee have shown dedication and perseverance and I thank them for the time they have invested in the interests of the welfare of Australian birdlife and their habitats. A special thanks goes to Ann Lindsey, who is retiring as coordinator of the conservation team after several years of service. Conservation is a core activity of the Club and requires dedicated effort from volunteers such as Ann to fight on behalf of the community for a better future for our birds.

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

The Field Studies program suffered some blows in 2021, mainly because of travel restrictions in place often during the year plus wild weather in the first part of the year.

Because of travel restrictions for COVID-19 management, the August survey of the Hunter estuary did not happen at all (it was only the second time in 23 years that there was no monthly survey). In several other months, each team was restricted to just one surveyor and in September the Kooragang Dykes had to be surveyed from land as the boat could not be collected from the Hunter Local Land Services depot. For almost all

year, Deep Pond could not be surveyed normally because of COVID-related access issues. The fact that reliable data for the estuary were collected for 11 of the 12 months, in the face of all the difficulties, is a tribute to the determination of the regular surveyors.

The February boat survey of Port Stephens happened to schedule, taking place slightly before the constant heavy rains of the February-March La Niña event. However, the July survey had to be cancelled, because of COVID restrictions.

Only two of the intended five 3-day expeditions to Broughton Island eventuated – the autumn (May) and winter (July) ones. There also was a day trip in mid-December, with limited time for most of the normal activities. Numerous scheduled trips were cancelled – firstly because of the La Niña weather conditions in the beginning of the year and then because of the COVID-19 restrictions in place from about mid-year.

The annual Rufous Scrub-bird surveys also did not happen. About two weeks before they were scheduled to take place, the bridge across the Gloucester River in the National Park was declared unsafe and there was no access to the Gloucester Tops for the remainder of the year (with that situation expected to continue well into 2022).

Club members also participate in various other surveys, as are advertised on the website. Mostly those surveys were able to be done, although some of them were cancelled occasionally because of COVID.

HBOC continued to work with Hunter Local Land Services and BirdLife Australia on the Australasian Bittern project. Three additional members joined the drone team (which now has seven members) and many drone surveys were carried out. Several other HBOC members took part in the community nocturnal Bittern surveys carried out in November and December. Similarly, many club members participated in the several national Latham's Snipe surveys held during the year.

There was good progress on documentation of field studies. There were three substantial publications in *The Whistler* about the long-term surveys of the Hunter estuary, Tomago Wetland and Morpeth Wastewater Treatment Plant, and also a paper in the AWSG journal *Stilt* about shorebirds in the Hunter estuary. Also, many members collaborated with BirdLife Australia to document the methodology used for the Hunter estuary surveys.

Data Collection and Management:

Important ways for us to document our field studies program include the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report (ABR) and our journal *The Whistler*. Results with a clear national significance were published elsewhere (*Corella*, *Stilt* and *Australian Field Ornithology*, each with one Hunter-related paper in 2021).

As improvements are made to our ability to digitally capture data, our response in terms of data management and use also need to improve. The recent advent of bird survey recording via smartphone apps has seen a substantial increase in the volume of bird records available to the Club. Where the purpose of the ABR was once to collate and report on a smaller number of records from several sources, there is now far more data than can be individually reported. The ABR has therefore transitioned to a high-level data analysis for all regularly recorded species in the Hunter Region. This high-level analysis is intended to identify and present potential changes and trends in the bird population that might warrant further investigation.

The latest change to the ABR seeks to support this focus on data analysis by changing from a calendar year publication to one based on seasons. Most of our non-resident bird species are summer migrants, including important ones for conservation, such as migratory shorebirds. This change will help in analysing and reporting on these species, that currently have each of their visiting periods split between two ABRs. Future ABRs will cover the 12-month period from 1 June through 31 May, with the 2020 ABR containing records from 1 January 2020 through 31 May 2021. Therefore, the planned release date is by May 2022. As the system for compiling

the ABR is improved, it is intended to reduce the production time, with the goal being to issue the ABR by the end of the calendar year in which the May records are submitted.

Another change for the 2020 ABR is the extension of the HBOC Region to include the area of the Hunter River catchment that is currently outside of the Region. This includes the Bylong, Wollar, Cumbo and Moolarben valleys. This area has seen recent mine expansions and apart from Munghorn Gap NR, has relatively few regularly visited birding sites. It is hoped that the inclusion of this area within the HBOC Region will encourage additional birding (and hence survey) effort by Club members.

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 2021 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.

Twelve cases of rare birds were reviewed by the HBOC RAC during the year, with one case assessed by BARC and three cases by NSW ORAC for birds recorded within the Hunter Region. The BARC case was for the Lesser Yellowlegs found on Ash Island 24th September 2020, accepted as the 3rd record of this species in NSW. The NSW ORAC assessed the Little Stint that was present at Farquhar Inlet during December 2018, accepted as only the 2nd record for NSW. A Soft-plumaged Petrel was seen on a Port Stephens pelagic on the 13th September 2020 and was accepted as the 14th record for NSW. An exhausted Red-footed Booby was photographed on a boat inside Port Stephens on the 24th April 2020 and was accepted by NSW ORAC as the 15th record for NSW of this species.

No new species were added to the Hunter list during 2021, though it is expected that BARC will accept the remarkable report of a Black-fronted Tern at Fort Scratchley on the 20th June 2021. Not only would this be a new species for the Hunter Region list, but it would also be a new species for Australia, as this species had hitherto never been found outside of New Zealand.

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 2021 (which will appear as an appendix to the 2021 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 30th June 2025.

Currently the combined projects cover over 150 hectares of the Hunter Wetlands National Park and since early 2003, just over 10,500 hours of volunteer effort has been accrued in these endeavours. The combined volunteer effort in 2021 across all the projects amounted to 208 hours, which whilst relatively low, was largely due to the low recruitment of mangrove seeds.

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 continues to be very low and the follow-up sweeps over all beaches and saltmarsh are easily completed. This was again the case in 2021 as only 18 hours (including time to access sites by kayak) was needed to complete the work.

The follow-up sweeps for 2021 were conducted across two separate days that coincided with favourable low tides. A single day in May successfully dealt with all the beaches and the great saltmarsh of Sandy Island and Smith Island. With such low recruitment rates the majority of the time is spent walking over the marsh proving it is clear of mangrove seedlings. The greatest infestations found were around the more recent areas cleared by contractors. A day of contractor chainsaw work focussed on expanding the established area and was undertaken when NPWS found some additional funds to manage it. As more funding becomes available, the plan is to keep pressing with this expansion.

Ash Island (Milham Pond, Phoenix Flats, Wader West, Wader Pond and Swan Pond):

The main focus over the Ash Island sites 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 2021 in just 30 hours (actual time spent removing mangrove seedlings) and matches the low-effort years of 2017 and 2018.

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 2021 amounted to only around 86 hours on this 4ha site.

This year’s Clean Up Day was well attended and the crew of twelve HBOC members plus four people from Newcastle Council very efficiently tidied up the entire place. A total of 23 bags filled with litter and an estimated two trailer loads of larger, non-baggable items was collected in just a couple of hours. This result was clearly less than other years and it was agreed that perhaps Stockton Sandspit (maybe the estuary as a whole) was less visited by humans during the COVID-19 restrictions.

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 once again to those cheerful and willing members of Hunter Bird Observers Club (in particular Faith, George and Rob) who volunteered their time and energy and made up the core effort throughout the year. Thanks also to those TAFE students who incorporate the estuary in the practical application of their studies and remind us that all is not lost.

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 15) was finalised in December 2021, steered through by the joint editors Neil Fraser and Alan Stuart and is currently in the process of being distributed. Volume 15's 106 pages contain ten separate articles about Hunter Region birdlife and involve nine 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.

Unfortunately, because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many community events were cancelled during the second half of 2021.

Maitland Environmental Youth Forum: Kristy Peters and Liz Date-Huxtable presented a workshop entitled 'What Bird is That?' at the Maitland Environmental Youth Forum on 4th May 2021. The workshop's aim was to encourage students and their teachers to participate in the Aussie Backyard Bird Count and especially to look for Regent Honeyeaters. Students were mainly from years 4-6 at 11 schools in the Maitland City Council area. They engaged enthusiastically with the 'What Bird is That?' quiz and the use of key features of birds in species identification. And they were interested in how the Aussie Backyard Bird Count app works.

Muswellbrook talks: At the invitation of Mick Brady, Sustainability Officer from the Muswellbrook Shire Council, Liz Date-Huxtable led a community birdwatch at Muscle Creek Nature Walk on 13th April 2021. The walk was attended by about 20 locals and 53 species of bird were observed. Muswellbrook Council has an ongoing revegetation program along Muscle Creek, which is currently being extended south adjacent to the town's golf course. The council has now received grants to carry out further revegetation of Muscle Creek with projects assisted by the NSW government through its Environmental Trust.

On 7th May Liz subsequently led another community walk on land owned by the Wanaruah Land Council. The morning was intermittently rainy and so only two locals attended. The day then proceeded with talks at three pre-schools, two schools and one OOSH (after school care), similar to the workshops presented at Maitland Environmental Youth Forum. These were well received. Two of the pre-schools already participate in the Aussie Backyard Bird Count and the kids know their common local birds already.

Total Field Days: We once again held a display stall at Total Field Days, inside the Hunter LLS marquee which they provide free of charge for community groups. This year some kids' activities were provided to engage younger children in bird observation and identification, including 'cut-outs' of bird images, a colouring activity and quiz. The kids' activities were managed by Kristy Peters and Liz Date-Huxtable and are part of their

initiative to expand the Club's offering to children, which will see a quarterly activity calendar rolled out in 2022.

Following the event, the Club undertook a review of the effectiveness of the Club display and engagement at the event. It is planned to make several changes to the way in which the Club will approach the 2022 event. Many thanks to all the volunteers that assisted with the 2021 event, enabling a continued presence throughout the weekend.

Cessnock Our Bushland Festival: The Club was part of a collaboration of organisations that planned event, but it didn't go ahead due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.

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 2021 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.

However, it has become increasingly apparent that some of the key pages that the Club would like to be prominent and easily accessible are difficult to locate. It is planned to update the front end of the Club website to address this issue.

Birding Routes: The "Birding Guide to the Cessnock Woodlands" was launched in March 2021. It is a flagship publication of its type and has received much positive feedback. This exciting project is a collaboration between HBOC, BirdLife Australia, NPWS, Cessnock Council and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council. Additionally, the Cessnock North birding route was completed and was printed in September 2021.

In 2021, 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: This 2020 initiative was continued through 2021 – 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.

Wilma Barden Memorial Grant: In 2021 the Wilma Barden Memorial Grant sub-committee received one application for funding from Milly Formby (a HBOC member) to fund her 'Wing Threads Online Shorebird Education Package'. Milly was successful in her application for \$2,920 of Club assistance. This innovative project will create a nationally applicable online education package to increase communication, education, participation and public awareness of the values of migratory shorebirds across all Australian states and territories. Through the creation of an online education package to accompany the upcoming children's book, *A Shorebird Flying Adventure* (publication date June 2022, CSIRO Publishing) illustrated by Milly, and her subsequent plans to fly a microlight around Australia to increase community engagement with migratory

shorebirds in 2022, this project will contribute to HBOC's objectives to improve and promote the research and conservation of birds and their habitat and raise positive public awareness of birds.

11. Special Recognition

Ian McAllan was awarded the coveted J N Hobbs Memorial Medal for 2021 for outstanding contributions to Australasian ornithology by an amateur ornithologist. This was primarily for his great work with the NSW Bird Atlasers and in particular, the production of the NSW and ACT Bird Atlas series. Although Ian lives in Sydney and is not often found in the Hunter, he is a long-time member of the Club. Ian becomes the 4th HBOC member to receive the Hobbs Medal following Mike Newman in 2012, Dick Cooper in 2019 and Alan Stuart in 2020.

Both Robert and Margaret Stewart were accepted as Life Members of the Club at the 2021 AGM, having contributed to a broad range of functions and activities of the club separately and jointly over many years, including the organisation of mid-week camps and mid-week outings, Club community events and regular Club surveys. Margaret has been the club's Librarian, while Bob has taken on leadership roles as Secretary, Treasurer and President. They are currently members of the active Conservation sub-committee. A well-deserved congratulations to them both for this recognition.

12. Acknowledgments

Whilst taking on the role of Club President for the first time in 2021 was initially daunting, the support and hard work of so many committee and general Club members helped keep my head above water. As we hopefully emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, I am excited to be a part of the Club expanding its offerings and engagement with the broader community on all things bird-related.

Dan Williams (HBOC President 2021) 9 February 2022