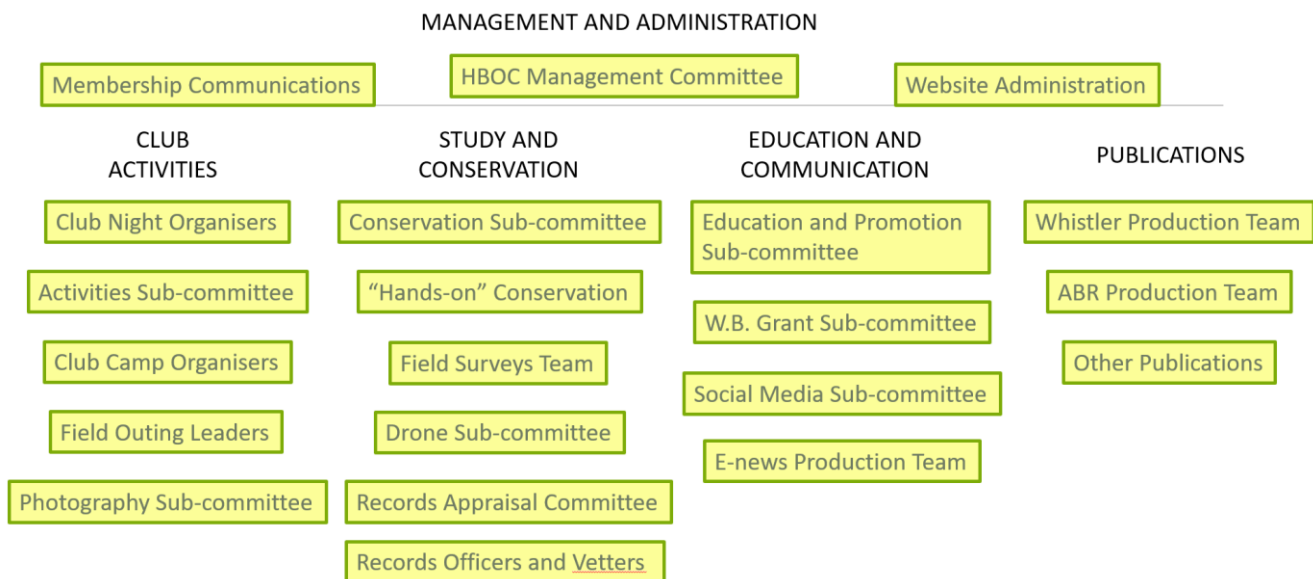


Hunter Bird Observers Club 2022 Annual Report

Introduction

The 2022 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 8th February 2023. It is available via the club website at www.hboc.org.au.

In recent years the Club has continued to grow in terms of both membership and the range and depth of activities that are undertaken. A review of the Club organisational structure has been undertaken to better reflect the current operations. A preliminary organisational structure chart is provided below:



This reporting in this document is structured in line with the above chart.

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 2022, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

The Club has reviewed its Constitution, following the release of the *Associations Incorporation Regulation 2022*. The revised Constitution is to be put before the membership for approval at a Special General Meeting following the 2023 AGM.

During 2022 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.

Management Committee: The following people volunteered their time to the Club, holding positions on the Management Committee during 2022: Dan Williams (President), Mick Roderick (Vice President), Marg Clarke (Hon. Secretary), Helen McCall (Hon. Treasurer), David Atkinson, Greg Little, Judy Little, Jess Logan-Warner, Rob Kyte and Bob Stewart. David and Jess were new to the committee, although David had to step back from his involvement midway through the year. The Club gives thanks to Bob, who retired from his position on the Management Committee at the end of the year.

Website: The Club's website is an essential administrative and communication tool and is the platform through which membership applications and renewals are handled and that current information regarding upcoming Club activities is communicated. It also provides a portal through which to access many of the publications that the Club produces.

For many years Steve Merrett has done a fantastic job of being the website administrator for the Club. He has resolved security issues, added much-needed functionality and content, and responded promptly to urgent requests that require his attention. This is an essential service for effective running of the Club, for which Steve has tirelessly volunteered his professional services, despite not residing within the Hunter Region himself. For this reason, the Management Committee decided recently to acknowledge Steve's contribution to the Club by awarding him an Honorary Membership.

Following years of organic growth of the website content and functionality, it is becoming cumbersome and needs an overhaul. The Club will work towards achieving that goal this coming year, considering things such as a more modern user interface, aesthetic, streamlining the structure and the removal of non-essential content.

Club Membership: Our Treasurer, Helen McCall, continued the recording responsibilities of membership during 2022. She communicated with new and renewing members and 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.

As of 31 December 2022, there were an estimated 404 financial memberships of HBOC, which is consistent with the previous two years. Note that family memberships are counted as two members and the totals consider changes in membership type and members leaving the club.

2. Activities

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

Club Meetings: With the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic largely behind us, Club activities were largely resumed to pre-pandemic operations. Hybrid monthly Club Meetings were held throughout the year, being in person at the HWC with concurrent Zoom participation for remote attendance. However, the hybrid format presents significant challenges for the smooth-running of Club Meetings without access to professional conferencing facilities. This placed undue strain on the running of Club Meetings and diminished the experience for all.

Towards the end of the year the decision was made that the November 2022 Club Meeting would be the last one run in the hybrid format. However, the improved accessibility that this format offered Club Members was important to retain. Therefore, the Club will continue to record meetings, which will be hosted online shortly after the event for viewing by Members that are unable to attend in person. The Club has invested in some recording equipment to facilitate this.

The ability to host remote guest speakers using Zoom is another benefit of the hybrid meeting format that is to be retained. However, the hosting of remote speakers via Zoom will not be opened to broader remote participation. The remote speaker's presentation will instead be recorded and made available for later viewing, as for other speakers.

During 2022 the 'supper' refreshments were moved to before the meeting rather than following the meeting, which proved successful. There is now also a roster for rotation of individuals responsible for organising the supper each month.

Whilst not a Club-run activity, many members have taken to convening at the Shortland Hotel after the monthly Club Meetings. This has been a welcome addition to the social aspect of attending the meetings, as it enables further social engagement and discussion about all things 'birding' between members.

The library is accessible at Club Meetings and comprises more than 450 books, 66 reports and issues of journals related to Australian birding. New additions to the library are often received and a recent culling of outdated material was also undertaken recently.

Outdoor activities: With most of the COVID-19 impacts behind us, the Club returned to running a full programme of outings during 2022. This includes the monthly Sunday and midweek outings, camps and other events, primarily focusing on the recreational needs of members. The Easter camp at Durrigere SCA and June long weekend camp at Myall Shores were well attended, but the ANZAC camp to Martindale and the October long weekend camp to Giants Creek were both cancelled due to wet ground conditions. A small gathering at Munghorn Gap was hastily arranged in lieu of the planned Giants Creek camp which was cancelled at short notice.

The Club launched biannual nocturnal and seabird outings in 2022. The seabird trips only venture into inshore waters rather than being pelagic trips to the continental shelf break. They are a great way for members to test their sea legs and have an opportunity to photograph birds that are otherwise difficult to see up close. The winter trip was unfortunately cancelled due to inclement sea conditions, but a successful spring trip was held. The two nocturnal outings have failed to yield a single night bird yet, but the second trip did reward participants with great views of a Squirrel Glider. The first two nocturnal outings have been held within the Newcastle LGA, but next years are planned to be further afield and hopefully more productive.

Photography: The HBOC Photography sub-committee meets twice per year. Interest in photography amongst members and the wider community has continued to grow.

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/>). 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

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

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 2022. Check it out at <https://www.hboc.org.au/milestone-clubs/hunter-bird-photos/>

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 2022 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 2022 (Nick Livanos) with the sighting of the Asian Dowitcher at Stockton Sand Spit on 29th November.

3. Study and Conservation

This section encompasses the collection of data, monitoring and study of birds and the protection of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region and beyond.

Field Studies: 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. The Club continues to run many regular systematic surveys across the Region, with members also participating in the nationally coordinated Latham's Snipe surveys.

The monthly shorebird surveys are the largest and longest running systematic survey effort that is coordinated by the Club, with many members having been involved at some stage. These are supplemented by regular surveys of important wetlands within the Hunter Estuary.

The Broughton Island and Rufous Scrub-bird surveys are mini expeditions that include nights away from home in spectacular environments. As well as collecting data for scientifically significant research, they also provide opportunity for socialisation.

The Club also supports local land care groups in the ongoing monitoring of woodland habitats and their restoration, with quarterly McCullys Gap and Luskintyre Valley surveys being added to the existing commitments in the Martindale Valley and at Earthcare Park.

In addition to the systematic surveys, all records from Club outings and camps are entered into Birdata.

Records appraisal is undertaken by a Records Appraisal Committee that oversees the assessment of rare and unusual reports of birds in the Region. The RAC reviews records of species that are vagrant to the Hunter Region but are not within the remit of the state (ORAC) or national (BARC) committees. These species are assigned as "Category " in the Annual Bird Report and an annual report from the RAC is provided as an appendix to the ABR.

Drone Surveys: The Club is an active partner on a project focusing on studying Australasian Bitterns in the Hunter Region. The project is being run by Hunter Local Land Services funded out of the Commonwealth National Landcare Program. The Club is using drone technology to monitor bittern habitat initially in the Hunter River estuary, then potentially elsewhere in the Region.

A second drone has now been purchased for non-thermal imagery requirements, with a view towards contributing monthly survey efforts to parts of Hexham Swamp that are not readily viewable from the ground. The habitat across Hexham continues to evolve following the opening of the flood gates, with mangroves now dominating the previous shorebird areas, which are now migrating further to the margins of the swamp.

The first images of an Australasian Bittern by the thermal drone were captured in autumn at Hexham Swamp. Some 11 HBOC members have been trained to fly the drone. However, only a couple of these have become licensed and are currently involved in the drone surveys.

With a growing demand for surveys utilising the Club drones and a need to comply with regulations governing both the flying of drones and the ethics of wildlife monitoring, a drone sub-committee is being formed. This will ensure that the use and storage of the drone is correctly managed, recorded and compliant.

Conservation: HBOC continues to take part in campaigns against overdevelopment that impinge on important bird habitat in the Hunter Region and elsewhere. These campaigns are time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, and we thank our conservation sub-committee for their efforts. Ann Lindsey resigned from the HBOC Conservation Sub-committee in February and the Club thanks her for her dedicated efforts in reinstating and managing conservation issues for HBOC over the years.

Key submissions/letters in 2022 included:

- Objection made to the State Significant Infrastructure application for the Kurri Kurri Lateral Pipeline Project.
- Letter were sent to local Councils in support of the Birdlife Australia campaign to stop councils using Second-generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides (SGARs).
- Submission made to DPE seeking improvements to offsets being tabled for the destruction of woodland habitat at the Kurri Kurri Hydro Aluminium Site.
- Submission to Maitland City Council objecting to the proposed tourist over development at Walka Water Works.
- Submission to the NSW Government objecting to the announcement by the Premier on raising Warragamba Dam wall.

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.

The Club is partnering with the Hunter Community Environment Centre and other local conservation action groups in the formation of a Barrington to Hawkesbury Climate Corridors conservation initiative. The Club is also assisting Maitland City Council in their development of a Green Corridors Initiative for the LGA.

Since 2003, under Tom Clarke, Club members 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. Currently the combined projects cover over 150 ha of the Hunter Wetlands National Park.

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.

Much of the Club’s field work and survey efforts are now registered in the NPWS VIP program, allowing volunteers’ hours to be tracked and providing insurance cover for them.

Separate supporting annual reports are produced for the Club’s conservation efforts and these should be referred to for further detail.

4. Education and Communication

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.

This year the Education and Promotion Sub-committee successfully launched the Fledglings initiative, which is a quarterly program targeted at children aged 5-12. The first two events were held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre in March and July, with a third held at the Hunter Region Botanic Gardens in October. This initiative has been well-received, and plans are in place for a calendar of events in 2023, beginning with ones at Maitland libraries in January.

The first ever “Our Bushland” Festival was held at Poppethead Park in Kitchener and included HBOC as one of the many key stakeholders. The festival included a great line-up of musical acts, headlined by William Crighton, guided day and night walks, arborist demonstrations and a variety of exhibition stands. The aim of the festival was to expose a wider Cessnock LGA audience to environmental and biodiversity riches on their doorstep. The event was a success, with several hundred visitors and grander plans are in the pipeline for next year.

We once again held a display stall at Tocal Field Days, inside the Hunter LLS marquee which they provide free of charge for community groups. Julia Salnicki did a great job in organising the Club’s participation in the event this year and produced documentation to assist others in the future organisation of the Club’s continuing involvement in this very popular event.

In addition to the major annual community events in which the Club participates, there are a growing number of member-led community engagements happening across the Region. These include things such as guided bird walks arranged by Local Authorities and NGOs, U3A courses and other community events. A huge thanks goes to those individuals that volunteer their time to promote the Club’s standing within the broader community and to educate them about birds, their habitat and conservation.

Wilma Barden Memorial Grant: In 2022 the Wilma Barden Memorial Grant sub-committee awarded two individual \$3000 grants to members Mattea Taylor and Louise Williams to assist in their PhD studies at the University of Newcastle.

Mattea and Louise are studying shorebirds in the Hunter Estuary and so their efforts have strong ties to the Club. In addition to the WBMG, the Club is further supporting the pair in their endeavours, including providing references of support for other grant applications and a mentorship role. In return, Mattea and Louise are regularly involved in helping the Club with its shorebird and Broughton Island surveys.

E-news: The 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 monthly digital format allows us to be flexible while at the same time encouraging members to read further.

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. Copies of previous eNews publications are available on the Club’s website: <https://www.hboc.org.au/publications/newsletters/>

Social Media: The Club expanded its social media platforms this year, as well as reinvigorating its existing Facebook page. Thanks go to Jess Logan-Warner for her efforts on this front, who has been a welcome addition to the Management Committee and administers the recently formed Social Media Sub-committee. The Club now has Twitter and Instagram accounts, plus a YouTube channel, where recordings of previous Club Meeting presentations have been hosted. Thanks go to Rebecca Citroni for undertaking this task for the Club.

The *Hunterbirding* online forum is mainly for sharing local bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion. Hunterbirding is firmly established as the important go-to place where local issues, such as identification and interesting sightings are first disseminated to many within the wider Hunter birdwatching community, particularly those that are not active on social media. I thank Lene Parashou for taking on the mantle of the principal moderation and administration roles.

The e-mail service continues 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.

5. Publications

To contribute to the scientific, birdwatching and broader community with the publication of important materials, documenting key findings of the Club's vast knowledge and experience base.

The Whistler: is the Club's research-based, occasional periodical of refereed papers and notes that places on record observational details and analysis of HBOC members' field studies. Articles produced for *The Whistler* are published on an individual basis when ready and access is provided to the public through the Club's website. Once sufficient material is available, the editorial team produce a formal journal issue which is then made available in both digital and hardcopy formats. Volume 16 of *The Whistler* was finalised in late 2022. Congratulations to joint editors Neil Fraser and Alan Stuart, the production team and all members that contributed articles.

Hunter Region Annual Bird Report: The production of the ABR is behind schedule and the 2019 edition remains the most recent publication. I apologise for the continued delay with the next edition, as this is my responsibility. Juliana Ford has recently volunteered her assistance in the production of the ABR, for which I am extremely thankful. The current plan is for the current ABR (covering the period from 1 January 2020 through 31 May 2021) to be published in the first half of 2023. It will provide a set template for future editions, facilitating an expedited production process. The target will then be to bring forward the release of future editions until once again being current.

Other Publications: In addition to *The Whistler* and ABR, the Club produces several other periodic publications, including the monthly 'Featured Bird' articles written by Alan Stuart and the 'Birding Route' brochures to which many members contribute. The quality of all material that the Club publishes is of the highest quality and we are indebted to Rob Kyte for his generous contribution of skill and time in this regard.

6. Acknowledgments

In re-assessing the Club's organisational structure and in preparing this Annual Report it is staggering in terms of breadth and depth, how much the Club is involved with undertaking, both for our membership and the broader community. This couldn't happen without the hundreds (thousands?!) of hours of time that is volunteered to the Club by our members each year. A huge thank you to everyone that has otherwise not been acknowledged either directly or implicitly through the summary above.

Dan Williams (HBOC President 2022) 8 February 2023