

Hunter Bird Observers Club 2024 Annual Report

Introduction

The 2024 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 12th February 2025. 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 2024, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

During 2024 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.

2024 was a particularly special year, as it played host to the 40th anniversary of the Club's physical and spiritual home of the Hunter Wetlands Centre at Shortland. A week of events and activities was held at HWC in honour of this, culminating in a Gala Dinner on 27th September, which was attended by several Club members.

Management Committee: The following people volunteered their time to the Club, holding positions on the Management Committee during 2024: Dan Williams (President), Mick Roderick (Vice President), Marg Clarke (Hon. Secretary), Helen McCall (Hon. Treasurer), Drew Garnett, Greg Little, Judy Little, Rob Kyte, Phil Straw and Louise Williams. Drew and Louise were new to the committee. The Club gives thanks to Dan and Phil, who retired from their positions on the Management Committee at the end of the year. They will both continue to support the Club in the Annual Bird Report and conservation issues, respectively.

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.

Throughout the year, the new website has been developed and will go live in the coming months. Several Club members will be given training to facilitate their adding content to the site. Thanks are given to Rob Kyte who has been instrumental in driving this process.

Club Membership: Our Treasurer, Helen McCall, continued the recording responsibilities of membership during 2024. 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.

As of 31 December 2024, there were an estimated 481 financial memberships of HBOC, which represents a small increase on the previous year. 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: The monthly speakers at Club Meetings continued to be recorded to enable access to members that are unable to attend. The recordings are initially shared with Club Members and ultimately hosted on the Club's YouTube Channel (given appropriate speaker authorisation). Thanks go to Lene Parashou for continuing to manage this task.

The earlier 'supper' refreshments have continued to be enjoyed by the membership for social networking, and the Club Meetings were generally well attended throughout the year. The speaker program was varied in content, of a high quality and very well-received by the Members who attended throughout the year.

Whilst not a Club-run activity, many members continue to gather at the Shortland Hotel after the monthly Club Meetings. This is a beneficial 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 culling of outdated material was also undertaken recently.

Outdoor activities: The Club ran a full programme of outings during 2024. This includes the monthly Sunday and midweek outings, camps and other events, primarily focusing on the recreational needs of members. They also serve as a good way for new members to learn bird identification skills. The absence of an Australia Day camp was a disappointment for some of the membership, but it is important to note that finding suitable locations for a camp at this time of year is challenging. The Easter camp was held at Durridgere SCA, with the June long weekend camp at Myall Shores. The mid-week camp in August visited Sandy Hollow and the October long weekend camp was held at Wongalee in Appletree Flat.

Photography: The HBOC Photography sub-committee meets twice per year. Interest in photography amongst members and the wider community continues 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 BIL contains over 24,000 images, with the overall level of quality being excellent. However, more 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 2024. 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. Badges are currently available for those reaching the 300, 350 and 400 species milestones. The relevant section of the website is well overdue an update and this is expected to occur following some imminent changes in bird taxonomy.

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. Importantly, 2024 marked the 25th anniversary of monthly surveys in the Hunter Estuary and the 20th anniversary of regular surveys in Port Stephens.

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, Luskintyre Valley, Martindale Valley, and Earthcare Park surveys.

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 3" in the Annual Bird Report and an annual report from the RAC is provided as an appendix to the ABR.

Drone Surveys: The Club has a Drone Sub-committee to manage future use of the two Club drones (with one having thermal imaging capability). The Club is about to undertake some additional training of members to further our capabilities in drone surveys. The maintenance of appropriate qualifications and training for pilots and procedures for correct use of the drones for the purposes of Club surveys is no small undertaking. Thanks is given to Rob Kyte for his efforts in getting our house in order in this regard.

Much of the drone survey effort this year has been for the monitoring of breeding Black-necked Storks in the Hunter Estuary. It is expected that future uses will include further Australasian Bittern surveys and shorebird monitoring. The Club is also investigating the potential for selling drone survey services as an opportunity to cover the long-term costs associated with the drone ownership.

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.

Key submissions/letters in 2024 included:

- A submission to the NSW DCCEEW regarding the Draft National OECMs Framework.

- Submissions to both City of Newcastle and DCCEEW regarding a Planning Proposal for the future development of 505 Minmi Road, Fletcher.
- A submission to the NSW Portfolio Committee No.7 – Planning and Environment regarding the Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Biodiversity Offsets Scheme) Bill 2024.
- A submission to the Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in NSW.
- A submission to the Independent Forestry Panel of the Independent Planning Commission regarding the Forestry Industry Action Plan.

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. Conservation is a core activity of the Club and requires dedicated effort from volunteers to fight on behalf of the community for a better future for our birds.

Two large renewable energy projects are planned for the Hunter Region – the offshore wind farms and the Hunter Transmission Project, both of which have the potential for impacts to bird conservation. The sub-committee is actively monitoring these and will consider making submissions at the appropriate times.

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.

The Education and Promotion Sub-committee is one of the largest growth areas of the Club. Thanks go to Liz Date-Huxtable and her team for their dedication to this field. The Fledglings initiative continued its quarterly program targeted at children aged 5-12, with events held at East Maitland Library, Hunter Region Botanic Gardens and Cessnock Bushland Festival. The program is being expanded to eight events next year.

A series of learning activities about migratory shorebirds were held at five schools in the Port Stephens LGA as part of Sister Wetlands Agreement between Port Stephens/Newcastle and Kushiro, Japan. A video showing these activities was presented at the Christmas Club Meeting and was truly inspirational. A fantastic effort by Liz, Eula, Miranda, Donna, Ross and Kate and a highlight of the Club’s community engagement during 2024.

The Club also hosted an afternoon cruise on Port Stephens in November, in recognition of the 20th anniversary of HBOC monthly surveys of that estuary. The event also coincided with the visit of several dignitaries from the Sister City of Kushiro, who joined us on the cruise. The itinerary visited some of the key shorebird sites that are surveyed, although Swan Bay was too far away to visit. A huge thanks to Mick Roderick and Helen McCall for organising the event.

Several educational bird walks were participated in during the year, including walks for the Muscle Creek community (quarterly) and a few different parks within the Maitland City Council LGA.

The “Our Bushland” Festival was again held at Poppethead Park in Kitchener and included HBOC as one of the many key stakeholders. We are hopeful that this popular event can continue to be supported by Cessnock City Council.

Keith Eastwood again delivered a series of Birdwatching Beginners classes to the Lake Macquarie U3A. Individual presentations were also given by Club members to U3A Newcastle, U3a Lake Macquarie and Newcastle Rotary.

Other events participated in throughout the year included:

- A Seniors Expo at HWC
- An MCC Water Education event at Gillieston Heights Community Hub
- A Great Honeyeater Migration Event at Belmont Wetlands
- An Aussie Bird Count with Muswellbrook schools and pre-schools
- A Breakfast with the Birds Walk at HWC, as part of the 40th anniversary events
- A Wollombi Landcare Event including a talk on local Wollombi birds and a bird walk.

Wilma Barden Memorial Grant: In 2024 the Wilma Barden Memorial Grant sub-committee oversaw the grant awarded to Judy Little in 2023 to assist in her Hunter Region Migratory Shorebird Monitoring project. Upon presenting her work to the Club, Judy will have completed her obligations of receiving the grant – congratulations Judy!

Sue & Ed Hamonet Memorial Award for Excellence: In 2023 the Sue & Ed Hamonet Memorial Award was established. It is to award groups or individuals in the participation of community education of birdlife and its conservation. This award has still yet to be given to any recipients and members are encouraged to promote the availability of the award to local schools.

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 Clubs Facebook and Instagram accounts continue to grow in both membership and content. Thanks go to Louise Williams for taking on the coordination role from Jess. The YouTube channel is being populated with recordings of Club Meeting presentation, but we would welcome additional appropriate content. We look forward to improved cross-platform media sharing opportunities with the development of the new Club website.

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.

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 through 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 18 of *The Whistler* was finalised in late 2024. 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 still behind schedule, with the 2019 edition remaining the most recent publication. However, the next edition is due for imminent publication thanks largely to several volunteers who stepped up to assist in the summarisation of records for individual species groups. The edition will cover 1st Jan 2020 through 31st May 2021, with subsequent issues spanning 1st Jun through 31st May. The process of volunteer assistant editors has worked well, and the plan is to release two ABRs each calendar year to bring the publication back to currency.

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

The Club continues to grow in many areas, including membership, social media, and community education. Through our consistent efforts in field studies and conservation, supported by high quality publications, the Club is well respected by its peers, industry, and the broader community. As we move forward into 2025, we can be excited about an imminent new Club website and the many opportunities that it will bring to further serve our members and raise our profile.

Thanks go to Mick Roderick, Marg Clarke and Helen McCall (and others on the Management Committee – particularly Rob Kyte for his many contributions in 2024) for their continued support – they make my job much easier. Thanks also to the 45 or so members of the ten sub-committees, who do a lot of work in the background to reduce the discussion and decision-making required by the Management Committee. Finally, a huge thank you to everyone that has otherwise not been acknowledged either directly or implicitly through the summary above.

Dan Williams (HBOC President 2024) 12 February 2025