

HUNTER BIRD OBSERVERS CLUB 2004 ANNUAL REPORT

The Annual Report for 2004 is presented by the President at the Annual General Meeting in February 2005. Copies of the report are tabled at the meeting and kept in the library for future reference.

HBOC was formed in 1981 with the following objectives:

- to encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat;
- to encourage bird observing as a leisure time activity.

This report documents the Club's progress in meeting these objectives during 2004.

1. STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITAT

Bird Sightings and Highlights

Everyone will have a bird sighting (or two) that is memorable for 2004 – and many of these are raised at Club Nights in that very special section of the meeting when we ask for members' observations. All those observations are collated by Alan Stuart for the Annual Bird Report, which lists all the birds that occur in the Hunter Region with notes on their status. Details of rare or unusual birds should be recorded on an "URRF" – an "Unusual Record Report Form" and submitted to the Records Appraisal Committee for acceptance of the record. This forces us to be careful in our identification, especially if the bird is unusual. During the year there were many highlights, as listed in **Table 1**. At this stage, not all records have been submitted, and processing of reports is still in progress by the Records Appraisal Committee. There were only two pelagic trips in 2004 (January and February), so there was less chance of finding some of the more uncommon seabirds.

Table 1 – Birding Highlights for 2004

Species	Place	Month
Black Noddy*	Pelagic Trip off Swansea	January
Broad-billed Sandpiper	Stockton Sandspit	January – March, and again in December
Little Bittern	The Wetlands Centre	February
Buff-breasted Sandpiper#	Ash Island	February
Freckled Duck	The Wetlands Centre	February/March
South Island Pied Oystercatcher*	Stockton Sandspit	February
Yellow Wagtail	Ash Island	February/March
Swift Parrot (up to 14 birds)	Lake Macquarie	May to August
Regent Honeyeater	Quorrobolong	August
Fluttering Shearwaters (about 10,000)	Offshore	Late August
Pale-yellow Robin	First breeding record since 1983	
Bush Stone-curlew (breeding record)	Lemon Tree Passage	Spring
Ruff (male in breeding plumage)	Stockton Sandspit and Ash Island	October
Musk Lorikeet (breeding record)	Blackalls Park park	November
Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove	Harrington	November
Barred Cuckoo-shrike	Harrington	November
Grass Owl	Crowdy Bay NP	November
Grey Plover	Kooragang Dykes	November
Greater Sand Plover*	Old Bar	November
White-eared Monarch	Crowdy Bay NP	November/December
Ruff (male in non-breeding plumage)	Doughboy Hollow	December
Painted Snipe (pair)	Ash Island	December
Banded Stilt	Stockton Sandspit	December

Note: * New species for the Hunter Region

#Seventh confirmed Australian record for Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Hunter Bird Observers Club Annual Report for 2004

The predominance of sightings in the summer months reflects the migratory habits of many of these special birds.

Bird Surveys

Bird surveys are an important contribution to knowledge about Australian birds. During 2004, Club members participated in the Regent Honeyeater and Painted Snipe surveys organized by the Threatened Species Network, and in the Beach-nesting Bird Survey organized by the NSW Wader Studies Group. Steve Roderick coordinated the Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot surveys for HBOC and Chris Herbert coordinated the Beach-nesting Bird Survey results for HBOC.

The **Regent Honeyeater** surveys in May and August were singularly unproductive this year, with no Regent Honeyeaters reported from the Hunter Region. These results confirm the nomadic habits of these birds, which search for blossoming trees. Only 14 Swift Parrots were recorded this year from Lake Macquarie – again their distribution is dependent on flowering trees.

The **Painted Snipe** surveys can be frustrating when no snipe are located – and that was the result this year during the official survey days. However, in December Neville McNaughton discovered a pair of Painted Snipe on Ash Island and many people have had good views of these birds over several weeks. They favoured an ephemeral wetland in a farmer's paddock. Apparently, Painted Snipe 'freeze' for about 15 minutes when disturbed, becoming invisible due to their excellent camouflage, so snipe surveyors have to be very patient!

The **Annual Latham's Snipe Count** was very well attended this year, with 16 members participating in the count at Pambalong Nature Reserve. Eight other members surveyed several other wetlands in the Lower Hunter for Latham's Snipe on the same day to try to get an idea of the overall population of these birds. A total of 105 birds was counted and the results of the surveys conducted on 5 December 2004 are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1 – Results of Latham's Snipe Surveys

Wetland	Number of Latham's Snipe	Observers
Pambalong Nature Reserve	36	Liz Crawford, Penny Drake-Brockman, Sue Hamonet, Phil Hansbro, Chris Herbert, Di Johnson, Paddy Lightfoot, Greg Little, Nick Livanos, Charlie Mann, Mike Newman, Jenny Powers, Alan Stuart, Fay Thomson, Doug Thomson, and Mick Todd
Newcastle Wetlands Reserve	22	Tom Clarke and Robert McDonald
Market Swamp	0	Tom Clarke and Robert McDonald
Irrawang Swamp	35	Max Maddock and Heather Maddock
Seaham Swamp	0	Brian Gilligan
Walka Waterworks	8	Paul Baird, Grant Brosie and Jim Smart
Tenambit Common	0	Paul Baird, Grant Brosie and Jim Smart
Morpeth Wastewater Treatment Works	0	Mike Newman
Private Property, Seaham	0	Max Maddock and Heather Maddock
Private property, Woodville	4	Mike Newman
TOTAL	105	

In January 2005, Mike Newman noticed that the numbers of Latham's Snipe at Pambalong Nature Reserve had risen above the 36 counted in December, so another survey was organized for 23 January 2005. Ross

Hunter Bird Observers Club Annual Report for 2004

Carlton, Liz Crawford, Neil Fraser, Chris Herbert, Ann Lindsey, Terry Lindsey, Robert McDonald, Lorna Mee and Alan Stuart counted about 79 Latham's Snipe in the usual survey area and an additional 41 in the northern part of the swamp that is not usually surveyed, making a total of about 120. This confirmed Mike Newman's observation and the fact that these birds congregate at sites where foraging conditions are optimum.

The **Beach-nesting Bird Survey** on 16 October 2004 was held a month earlier than in previous years. Jack Adams surveyed Nine Mile Beach north of Swansea Channel and found 4 Pied Oystercatchers and a couple of Masked Lapwings, along with several 4WDs, fishermen and dogs. Neil Fraser surveyed the beaches south from the entrance to Port Stephens and found Magpies, Silver Gulls, Australian Ravens and a couple of White-bellied Sea-Eagles. One Eastern Curlew flew overhead, but no beach-nesting birds were seen. Liz Crawford, Chris Herbert, Leila McAdam and John McAdam surveyed Stockton Beach and found more than 412 other people, more than 204 4WDs, 26 quad bikes, 10 motorbikes and several dogs. Despite this high human activity, they discovered two Pied Oystercatcher nests, one with two eggs in it, a total of 9 Pied Oystercatchers and 9 Red-capped Plovers. The Pied Oystercatcher nests were located some 300 to 400 metres inland from the shoreline, well away from the main traffic routes along the shore and just behind the foredune. However, when the young birds leave the nest, the adults will take them to forage on the shoreline and their route to the shore will have to cross the traffic zone. One wonders how many would survive the 4WD factor.

On a brighter note, Ann Lindsey confirmed that at least two pairs of Pied Oystercatchers nested on the Kooragang Dykes during the year and successfully raised young there.

The fifth year of regular monthly **wader counts in the Hunter Estuary** continued during 2004, with three teams surveying simultaneously: one at Ash Island, one at Kooragang Dykes and the Big Pond, and one covering a variety of sites between Stockton Sandspit and Fullerton Cove. As in previous years, a large number of people have assisted with the wader counts:

Alan Stuart, Mick Roderick, Stephen Roderick, Karen Pearson, Craig Anderson, Cassie Anderson, Keith Laverick, Nick Livanos, Paddy Lightfoot, Noelene Rutherford, Jenny Spencer, Robert McDonald, Grant Brosie, Chris Herbert, Liz Crawford, Ann Lindsey, Mike Newman, Jenny Powers, Terry Lindsey, Liz Huxtable, Alan Richardson, Michelle Foate, Chris Eastham, Steven Cox, Penny Drake-Brockman, Monica O'Wheel, and Brooke Corrigan.

Consistent efforts by core team members are greatly appreciated, as is the assistance of many other people from time to time. This is a tremendous effort from everyone involved and as a Club we can be very proud of the results of these surveys, which are published in the Annual Bird Reports.

On 8 February 2004, Mick Murphy of National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), organized a comprehensive survey of **waterbirds in Port Stephens** and requested assistance from HBOC. Thirteen members with wader identification skills took part in the survey which involved 5 boats covering 5 separate parts of Port Stephens. The results of this inaugural survey were astonishing: 112 Pied Oystercatchers and 649 Eastern Curlew put Port Stephens on the map as home to more than 1% of the total populations of these two species. The total numbers of shorebirds counted are provided in **Table 2**. Except for the Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers and Masked Lapwings, all these shorebirds are migratory, breeding in the northern hemisphere and spending the 8 months from approximately September to April in the southern hemisphere.

Table 2 – Shorebirds Recorded at Port Stephens on 8 February 2004

Species	Total Number
Black-tailed Godwit	51
Bar-tailed Godwit	888
Whimbrel	218
Eastern Curlew	649
Terek Sandpiper	6
Common Sandpiper	1
Grey-tailed Tattler	44

Table 2 – Shorebirds Recorded at Port Stephens on 8 February 2004 (continued)

Species	Total Number
Ruddy Turnstone	8
Red-necked Stint	20
Pied Oystercatcher	112
Sooty Oystercatcher	18
Lesser Sand Plover	5
Masked Lapwing	33
Total	2,053

Significant numbers of other waterbirds included 1056 Black Swan, 458 Pied Cormorant, 30 Australian White Ibis, and 178 Crested Tern.

NPWS provided a grant to fund the publication of the results of the survey, which Alan Stuart undertook to compile. Alan researched historical records for Port Stephens and included the regular monthly wader counts conducted at Swan Bay by Sue Hamonet and her team. The result is a very comprehensive and interesting account of the *Shorebirds of Port Stephens – Recent and Historical Perspectives*, a publication that we are all very proud of. This is the second HBOC Special Report – the first being the *Birds of Ash Island*, which Alan also produced in 2002. Thank you Alan.

Monthly surveys are conducted by Mike Newman and Ann Lindsey at the disused **Morpeth Sewage Treatment Works** where the treatment ponds are being maintained for bird habitat. Survey results are forwarded to Hunter Water Corporation, to assist them with site management.

Results of monthly surveys of the **Tank Paddock** are sent to Newcastle City Council, and have contributed to the decision not to allow rezoning of this land for residential subdivision.

Monthly surveys have been initiated this year at ‘**Gresham**’, a private property near Seaham, in order to monitor the results of on-farm Landcare activities. Tom Clarke, Anthony Gooden and Neville McNaughton are conducting these surveys.

The **Birds Australia Atlassing Project** is ongoing, after publication of *The New Atlas of Australian Birds* following 4 years of intensive atlassing between 1998 and 2002 by over 7,000 volunteers. Ongoing atlassing continues to provide data for assessing environmental change, as birds are an indicator of ecosystem health. Many HBOC members are also members of Birds Australia and the Club works in harmony with Birds Australia on many issues. During 2004, seven special atlassing days were organized by Grant Brosie, Nick Livanos and Ann Lindsey. These outings are often exploratory, searching for birds in areas that are not necessarily regular haunts of birdwatchers. The atlassing locations are listed in **Table 3**.

Table 3 – Atlassing Sites and Highlights during 2004

Date	Location	Highlights	Observers
21 February	Mt Sugarloaf	2 male Spotted Quail-thrush	6
22 May	Gloucester Tops – Kerripit Road	Red-browed Treecreeper Large-billed Scrubwren Crescent Honeyeater Olive Whistler Bassian Thrush	3
26 June	Anvil Hill-Mangoola	Brown Treecreeper Rock Warbler Red-capped Robin Hooded Robin Diamond Firetail	3

Table 3 – Atlassing Sites and Highlights during 2004 (continued)

Date	Location	Highlights	Observers
31 July	Main Creek/Jerusalem Creek	Glossy Black-cockatoo Azure Kingfisher Large-billed Scrubwren Pale Yellow Robin Crested Shriketit	3
21 August	Bulga – Kings Gap	Speckled Warbler Western Gerygone Red-capped Robin Diamond Firetail	2
25 September	Watagan Mountains	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo Southern Boobook Scarlet Honeyeater Australian Owlet-nightjar	6
2 October	Anvill Hill – Mangoola	Australian Owlet-nightjar Brown Treecreeper Speckled Warbler Western Gerygone Red-capped Robin Hooded Robin	3

University Studies

It is very exciting to see studies of migratory waders in the Hunter Estuary being undertaken by University students. HBOC supports these studies and maintains close links with the students involved. The following projects were initiated in 2004.

Newcastle University

- Alan Richardson – Radio-tracking over-wintering Bar-tailed Godwits in the Hunter Estuary
- Michelle Foate - Radio-tracking Bar-tailed Godwits in the Hunter Estuary during summer
- Alice Howe – Estuarine wetland rehabilitation and ecohydraulics: the link between hydraulics, sediment, benthic invertebrates, plants and migratory wading bird habitat.

Australian Catholic University

- Jenny Spencer – Study of shorebird use of the Hunter Estuary

Members of HBOC have been involved in assisting these projects and encouraging these studies.

Conservation – Summary by Jenny Powers (Conservation Officer)

In 2004, HBOC members have been very active fighting potential threats to birds and their habitat throughout the Hunter. Most attention has focused on the Green Corridor that stretches from Stockton Bight, through the wetlands around the Hunter Estuary, across Kooragang and Ash Islands to The Wetlands Centre and the Hexham wetlands, through the Tank Paddock, Pambalong and Blue Gum Hills Nature Reserves to Mount Sugarloaf and the Watagans.

The conservation committee, led by Ann Lindsey, Neil Fraser, Mike Newman and Max Maddock, has continued to address bird-threatening developments proposed for the Hunter Estuary. Numerous letters have been written to the Premier, the Environment Minister and local members of parliament, with little response. However, both Protech and Austeel have withdrawn their proposals for developments on Kooragang Island

Hunter Bird Observers Club Annual Report for 2004

and the Tomago site respectively and the groundswell of protest against these sorts of developments may well have contributed to their demise.

More recently there have been calls for port-related development at Kooragang Island and Tomago. In response, Neil Fraser has produced a well-written and researched submission highlighting the damage that this proposal could have on the Hunter Estuary in general and in particular, the migratory waders.

Along the same theme, Max Maddock proposed that the Hunter Estuary Ramsar site (Kooragang Nature Reserve) should be listed on the Montreux record. This is a way of alerting the international community that the Ramsar site is not being managed in a manner that protects its ecological sustainability. The arguments for listing are based on the fact that the site was originally listed as a Ramsar site because of its importance for migratory waders and since that time, the numbers of migratory waders and species have declined due to the degradation of the estuary as a result of development, such as dredging.

During the year, Tom Clarke, Anthony Gooden and Neville McNaughton have continued to lead an active team of weeders at Stockton Sandspit. In between working, they obviously manage to watch a bird or two as they often come up with some interesting observations about bird behaviour at the Sandspit.

A Coastcare Grant was used to provide some excellent migratory wader signs produced by Chris Herbert and installed at the Sandspit. After much discussion, an Envirofund grant, originally obtained for a bird hide on Stockton Sandspit, is proposed to be used to remove mangroves at selected places on Ash Island. Mangrove removal to improve wader habitat on Ash Island has been approved by NSW Fisheries.

Earlier in the year, the Green Biodiversity Corridor was launched at the Jubilee Room in Parliament House, Sydney. Chris Herbert produced a great poster, which Paul Baird, Max Blanch and Robert McDonald took down to Sydney. HBOC's poster was one of eight on display and it focused on birds and their habitat and the desirability of continuous habitat, not a patchwork of fragmented bits and pieces.

In further support of the Green Corridor, HBOC has actively participated in the draft plan of management for Pambalong Nature Reserve and continued to survey the Tank Paddock, which is located close to Pambalong. The bird species list for the Tank Paddock continues to grow. It now stands at 147 species, which is pretty impressive for a 160 hectare area. Recently, we have had wonderful views of Brown Quail, Leaden Flycatcher and Lewin's Honeyeater feeding their young and a poor little White-browed Scrubwren attempting to keep the food up to a Shining Bronze-Cuckoo. Fortunately, Newcastle City Council has recognised its value and rejected rezoning the Tank Paddock for medium density development.

Twitchathon

Four teams from HBOC participated in the Twitchathon in October: Hunter Thickheads, Hunter Home Brewers and Dodgy Drongoes in the main race; Lesticcum Phoradae in the champagne race. The Hunter Home Brewers recorded 220 species and won the main race; Lesticcum Phoradae recorded 156 species and won the champagne race! Altogether the teams raised over \$1600 for the Regent Honeyeater Recovery Program. A mighty effort!

2. ENCOURAGE BIRD OBSERVING

Program

As usual, HBOC ran a large program of activities throughout the year to encourage bird observing – a total of 53 activities in 2004:

- 12 Sunday outings (held monthly)
- 11 mid-week outings (held monthly)
- 12 Hunter Estuary wader surveys (held monthly)
- 1 Port Stephens wader survey
- 7 Birds Australia Atlas survey days
- 5 special surveys (2 for Regent Honeyeater/Swift Parrot, 2 for Painted Snipe, 1 for beach-nesting birds)
- 2 pelagic outings off Swansea

Hunter Bird Observers Club Annual Report for 2004

- 4 camps on weekends/long weekends

All of these activities were well attended and our thanks go to all those who helped organize these events.

Club Nights

We held 11 Club Nights during 2004 at The Wetlands Centre, where the average attendance was 42. (Details of these nights are provided in **Appendix 1**). Guest speakers covered a wide range of topics: *Development in the Hunter Estuary and at Dunns Creek*; *Birds of Cape York*; *Black-necked Stork*; *Regent Honeyeater Recovery Program*; *Up and Down the Amazon River*; *Tasmanian Robins*; *Dolphins in Port Stephens*; and *Birds of Mallorca*. Powerpoint presentations are now more common than slide presentations and our thanks go to all the presenters for their excellent efforts. Our thanks also go to Umwelt (Australia) Pty Limited for providing a computer projector on Club Nights.

The Bird of the Evening segment was a lot of fun with members discussing their favourite bird or some aspect of avian development. Our thanks go to all the presenters.

The Observations/Discussion section of the meeting provided valuable bird observations for inclusion in the Annual Bird Report.

As usual, the December Club Night was a lot of fun with members' digital presentations, a raffle with wonderful prizes, and a great supper.

Community

Waders in the Hunter Estuary were once more a focus of our community efforts this year, with two colourful and informative signs being installed at Stockton Sandspit, funded by a Coastcare Grant. Chris Herbert designed and organized production of the signs while Tom Clarke dug the holes and cemented them in place. The signs were installed in time for the Birds Australia Members' Day and AGM, held at Newcastle University in May. Chris Herbert and Liz Crawford presented talks on *Rehabilitation of Stockton Sandspit* and the *Status of Waders in the Hunter Estuary, past and present* at the Members' Day. Prior to Members' Day, Chris Herbert and Alan Morris were interviewed for ABC radio about waders in the Hunter Estuary and the rehabilitation of Stockton Sandspit. Earlier in the year, ABC radio in Newcastle conducted a series of interviews about developments in the Hunter Estuary and Ann Lindsey talked about the impacts of proposed developments on wader habitat on Ash Island. A short clip of this heartfelt interview was played repeatedly to advertise the series and helped to raise the profile of waders in the Hunter Estuary.

As in previous years, HBOC mounted displays at The Wetlands Centre for World Wetlands Day in February and Catchment Day in October. These are a great opportunities to involve families in birdwatching and raise awareness of the Club. Several members participated in these displays and our thanks go to all of them. Communication with the community was facilitated by our webmaster Dick Jenkin, who maintained our website with its new address: www.hboc.org.au; by Peter Phillips, who made sure that all of our meetings were well advertised in local press and radio; and by Marion Walker, who continued to be our telephone contact point.

GENERAL CLUB OPERATION

Membership

Membership has reached an all-time high with 264 members in December 2004, an increase of 23 over the previous year's total. Membership consists of 88 single members, 172 family members and 4 junior members.

Finances

Once again, we are indebted to our honorary treasurer, Rowley Smith, who has kept a firm hand on the purse strings and provided financial reports to the monthly committee meetings. He has been cheerfully assisted at Club nights by Lesley Marshall. Review of our finances in October led us to reluctantly consider raising the 2005 annual fees to \$25 per family or single member. Increased insurance premiums, and ongoing running costs for the Club have necessitated this rise. Our thanks to Katrina Thornton for auditing our accounts.

Hunter Bird Observers Club Annual Report for 2004

During the year we received a grant from National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for publication of the Port Stephens Shorebird Survey Results and an Environmental Grant from Newcastle City Council for production and publication of two Birding Route brochures for Newcastle. The Shorebird Survey Results have been published and the Birding Route brochures are nearing completion.

Unfortunately, we were unable to provide an alternative project for the \$11,000 Envirofund Grant received in 2002 for removing mangroves from Stockton Sandspit and had to return this money during 2004. This grant was received a couple of months after the mangroves had been removed by NPWS. HBOC considered alternative projects and applied for additional grant money of \$30,000 to construct a bird hide at Stockton Sandspit. However, after detailed costing, we realized that we needed at least \$100,000 for this project. Despite applications to industry, we were unable to source additional funds and NPWS were not supportive of a bird hide at the Sandspit. Consequently, we have applied to change the project for the \$30,000 grant to removing mangroves from wader habitat on Ash Island.

Library

Grant Brosie took responsibility for the Library during 2004. The Library currently contains 420 books. Many of these were kindly donated by members and we thank them for their generosity. The library was moved several times during the year, as the space used by Community Groups at The Wetlands Centre was rationalised. Thanks to Tom Clarke for all his work during these moves. Borrowing was down early in the year but started to pick up by the end of the year. This was partly due to the library being housed in a small room off the main meeting room, out of general sight.

General

HBOC continued to publish a bimonthly newsletter, which is issued to all members as well as to other clubs with whom we exchange newsletters. We are indebted to Peter Phillips for editing, to Phil Rankin for preparing the newsletter for email transmission and to Tom Clarke for printing and distributing it. And of course, we appreciate the literary efforts of all our contributors! Keep it up!

The Management Committee worked well together during the year and kept things rolling when a large chunk headed off to the Kimberley for a few months. That's when the team effort really showed, with people stepping into roles they had not previously bargained on. My personal thanks go to all the members of the Committee for carrying on regardless and especially to Tom Clarke, our untiring Secretary who maintains that all important written contact with the outside world.

Committee members Paul Baird, Grant Brosie, Anthony Gooden, Ann Lindsey, John McAdam and Jim Smart, helped keep the Club running smoothly. The Committee appreciated input from Jenny Powers, Sue Hamonet, Chris Herbert and Robert McDonald, who were all regular attendees at the Committee meetings. Management Committee meetings are open to anyone from the Club to attend and participate.

Two special people help ensure Club Nights run smoothly: Judith Smith welcomes attendees at our meetings and Judy Westphal makes sure we all have a cup of tea and a biscuit at the end of them. A small army of volunteers helps set up and clear away chairs each Club Night. Sue Hamonet maintains our Club bird records and ensures that all our results are sent to the Birds Australia Atlas.

So many enthusiastic people in the Hunter Bird Observers Club make it a joy to belong to a Club that continues to maintain its twin objectives.

Thank you all.

Liz Crawford
HBOC President 2004