



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc
PO Box 24, New Lambton, NSW 2305
www.hboc.org.au
ABN 62 415 889 446

BIGnet Report, August 2020

The Hunter Bird Observers Club has two objectives:

- *To encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat*
- *To encourage bird observing as a leisure-time activity*

Between March 2020 to August 2020, these objectives were furthered through actions and activities as outlined below.

Conservation Efforts

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 included:

- March 2020. Letter of support for BirdLife Australia's submission to Dept. Planning, Industry and Environment re Fernhill Estate at Mulgoa. Regent Honeyeaters bred there in 2019, only one of five successful nests anywhere that season. Request to set aside land for Critically Endangered Regent Honeyeater breeding and foraging.
- May 2020. Submission to Cessnock City Council supporting the rezoning of the Hunter Economic Zone (HEZ) to environmental protection, largely based on (but not restricted to) the significance of the site for Regent Honeyeaters (breeding/wintering) and Swift Parrots (wintering).
- June 2020. Submission to Independent Planning Commission objecting to development of the coal seam gas field in the Pilliga forest south west of Narrabri.
- July 2020. Letter to Shortland Waters Golf Club asking for follow-up treatment of Water Hyacinth.
- July 2020. Advice to aquatic ecologist re Singleton Council's and Hunter Water Corp's plans to divert water from Doughboy Hollow favoured by large numbers of Plumed Whistling-Duck, one of few places in Hunter Region where they occur.
- July 2020. Submission to Maitland Council regarding inappropriate land-use proposals at Walka Waterworks in the draft Destination Management Plan.
- Tomago Wetlands Eastern Swing Gates were finally installed in June 2020. Trials will take place about the amount of tidal water to be let through so that private land is not affected.
- Submission into the review of the EPBC Act.

Monitoring and Data Surveys

- Most of our field studies scheduled for autumn 2020 were cancelled because of COVID-19 restrictions; however, for our monthly Hunter Estuary survey we were still able to visit the majority of the survey sites in April and May as these only required small well-separated teams. The Hunter Estuary surveys reverted to near-normal in June as did our regular surveys of Broughton Island terrestrial birds and Port Stephens waterbirds, albeit with all of these field studies using smaller teams and with COVID-19 risk management protocols in place.
- In July 2020 we produced a report for NPWS covering the 2017-2020 field studies on Broughton Island. Since 2012 when the Broughton Island study began, several changes to the terrestrial bird population of the island have been identified, and the pace of change seems to have accelerated in

recent years as the island's vegetation recovers after the removal of feral animals. In May 2020, four of our members involved in the Broughton Island study published a paper in the ABSA journal *Corella* describing seasonal variations in the Silvereye subspecies visiting the island.

- In March 2020 we published our 2018 Annual Bird Report, the 26th edition of our ABR. The report was produced using Birddata and eBird records and from this data we were able to generate distribution maps for most species and accurate timelines for migratory species. Thanks especially to Dan Williams, Rob Kyte and others, our Annual Bird Report is a high-quality document that is a valuable reference for our members (all of whom receive a hard copy of the ABR).
- Since the previous BIGnet report, we have published another four articles online on our website for our peer-reviewed annual journal *The Whistler*. These and various additional articles will eventually form the 14th edition of the journal which for hard copies will be available for all Club members and sent to natural history focussed libraries worldwide.
- Club members also participated in Latham's Snipe surveys, though the May 2020 Regent Honeyeater / Swift Parrot surveys were cancelled due to COVID-19.
- All records from HBOC's outings and camps are entered into the national database, Birddata, and in mid-2020 we celebrated submitting our 5,000th Birddata survey.

Projects

Since 2003, HBOC 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. The combined volunteer effort in 2019 across all the projects amounted to 433 hours of willing contribution, and similar participation levels are on-track for 2020. Two long-standing projects, our surveys of Port Stephens and Broughton Island, are now registered in the NPWS VIP program, allowing volunteers' hours to be tracked and providing insurance cover for them, and we are in discussions as to how to extend this to some other projects e.g. our monthly Hunter Estuary surveys and our habitat restoration work.

HBOC is an active partner on a project focussing 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. HBOC is using drone technology to monitor bittern habitat initially in the Hunter River estuary, then potentially elsewhere in the Region. The early work in the project has used a drone belonging to one of our members and fitted with a high resolution optical camera. With Hunter LLS financial support, our club is purchasing a new drone fitted with thermal imaging technology. We expect this thermal imaging drone to become a powerful tool for us, not only for the Australasian Bittern surveys but for many additional applications. For the Bittern project we are also likely to assist with other fieldwork and future community education programs.

Activities

- All activities were cancelled from the 15th March. This included Sunday and mid-week outings, camps at Easter and June plus most of the regular surveys. However by June the surveys were resumed with reduced numbers of people and with social distancing rules being followed. Car sharing was employed. July saw the recommencement of outings using the same guidelines.
- In April the Management Committee was conducted using email where only the most important items were agreed upon. In May we trialed a Zoom meeting using the 40 minute allowance of free Zoom. This went so well that the club took out a Zoom Subscription.
- The April Club Night meeting was cancelled however by May we held our first meeting using Zoom and it was pleasingly successful. As were the June and July meetings. In June we also recorded the guest speaker and this was made available for members to view over the following month. This meant that more than 100 members were able to enjoy the presentation. The Guest Speaker Program included local and national subjects covering conservation issues, research findings, travel and general interest.

Education, Media and Promotion

HBOC continued to raise awareness of birds and the importance of their contribution throughout the whole Hunter Region. Some highlights were:

- Connect Muswellbrook – Liz Date-Huxtable and Kristy Peters prepared for and were to participate in this event at Muswellbrook on 25th March 2020 during which students from 10 schools and preschools in the Upper Hunter would learn about bird identification and the Aussie Backyard/Schoolyard Bird Count. However, it was postponed until term 4 2020, or until it could be rescheduled as COVID-19 restrictions are eased. The ‘What Bird is That?’ Starter Pack for schools was developed for schools in the Hunter Region, which includes BirdLife Australia brochures and HBOC bird route flyers, plus a Common Bird Survey Sheet and Instructions on using Bird Identification and Bird Survey apps.
- COVID-19 Lock-down. Liz Date-Huxtable ran a 5-minute Quiz each week for 8 weeks, which was based on BirdLife Australia’s Pardalote module, Alan Stuart’s Featured Bird Series and Alwyn Simple’s featured Bird Image Library galleries. Several NSW school curriculum-based resources (similar to the Starter Pack above) are currently under development, which will complement the Birdlife Australia curriculum modules for the Hunter Region.
- August e-News – HBOC’s newsletter will feature an Education Role for HBOC and Kristy Peters’ work in her BirdLife Australia role with students at Gresford Public School learning about endangered bird species.
- In May 2020 and August 2020 two HBOC members were nominated as ‘Hunter Heroes’ in the Newcastle Herald. In May, Tom Clarke was nominated for his work to conserve habitat for shorebirds throughout the Hunter Estuary. In July, Ann Lindsey was nominated for her advocacy for birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region.
- New Members Day. Seventeen established members welcomed 14 new members at our New Members’ Day on 19 July at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. The new members were escorted on an introductory birding tour of the wetlands.

Organisational Matters

The vacant position of club President was filled by Neil Fraser from July into early August. However circumstances led to Neil standing down and so the President’s position remains vacant at the time of writing. Committee meetings have continued to be conducted via Zoom. There are 365 members at the start of August 2020.

For more detailed information refer to the club’s web site at www.hboc.org.au

Neil Fraser
Hunter Birds Observers Club