



# Hunter Bird Observers Club

*Affiliated with BirdLife Australia*

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## **HBOC Report to BIGnet April 2017**

2016 was a successful year for the HBOC; we enjoyed the celebrations of our 40th Anniversary and attracted a record number of memberships. All interest and activities groups continued strongly while our presence as an important conservation organisation in the Hunter region continued to build making collaborative progress with local development groups and government agencies.

The period through spring and the summer months, since the September BIGnet meeting, has continued to be active for HBOC. The club's commitment to regular monthly meetings, surveys, camps, outings and the finalising of publications, continuing to support the Hunter's birds and birding community.

The club continues to promote the enjoyment of birds as pastime, with a number of new members joining through latter half of the year. Many of our newer members are very keen birders regularly testing their identification skills in the pursuit of getting to know the Hunter's great diversity of avifauna. The regular collection of data about the region's birds continues to support important research and conservation initiatives locally, and a number of new authors contributed to the 10th edition of the HBOC's Journal *The Whistler*.

Throughout the end of 2016 and into 2017 ongoing wader and waterbird surveys continue within the region and estuaries of the Hunter River, Manning River, Lake Macquarie and Port Stephens. The surveys blend the appreciation of birds with the gathering of important population monitoring counts, while continuing to build liaisons with local land management bodies and key development groups.

### **Membership**

*Membership Secretary:* Rob Kyte, the club's Membership Secretary, continues to invent creative initiatives which enhances benefits to the membership and increases opportunities for local businesses to be involved in HBOC support. Many of these initiatives (which include discounts at retail outlets) have again been a benefit to the membership through 2016 and continue into 2017.

*Club Membership:* HBOC membership at 31 December 2016 was 345 financial members.

### **Activities**

HBOC has continued to run both Sunday and midweek outings on a monthly basis since the last BIGnet meeting and two camps have also been run in the intervening period. The October long-weekend camp was to the Baerami Valley in the west of the region, which is frequented by drier country birds and the January long-weekend camp was held at Smith Lake, which has always been a popular location, due to the diversity of avifauna habitat in its locality.

## Conservation

2016 saw a significant shift in the way threatened species legislation is enacted in NSW with a major review ending in the passing of the *"Biodiversity Conservation Act"* and *"Biodiversity Conservation Bill"*. HBOC made a submission to the NSW government on the proposed reforms, outlining the shortcomings and how they will effectively "wind the clock back" on biodiversity conservation in NSW. HBOC continues to observe how changes to legislative protection will play out, including the integrity of development offset strategies, which endeavour to cater to development aspirations while protecting the environment. There appears to be a shift to a focusing on vegetation mapping as a surrogate for fauna mapping instead of fauna survey, which may lead to false estimates in fauna population numbers.

The Hunter remains a stronghold for the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater and it was very heartening to see several young fledged from nests in the Upper Hunter late in the year, as well as evidence of successful breeding in the Lower Hunter; the first confirmed breeding in the area since the 2007 breeding event in the Hunter Economic Zone (HEZ).

HBOC continues to manage migratory shorebird habitat in the Hunter Estuary (see 'Projects') and was involved as a key stakeholder in the development of a plan by the Newcastle Coal Infrastructure Group (NCIG) to remove more than 15ha of mangroves from Fish Fry Flats on Ash Island.

HBOC put forward the proposal for the beneficiary of the 2016 Twitchathon (NSW funds) to go to the breeding seabirds of the islands off Port Stephens. Around \$18,000 was raised for this worthwhile cause.

In terms of local conservation issues late in 2016, HBOC was involved in making submissions and/or having representation on projects including, but not limited to:

- Warkworth Extension Project, Warkworth;
- Richmond Vale Rail Corridor Project, Shortland to Kurri Kurri;
- Soldiers Point Marina, Port Stephens;
- North Stockton Swing Mooring Upgrade; and

## Monitoring and Data Collection

Field Studies programs organised by HBOC and those conducted by individual Club members continued throughout 2016.

Autumn/spring surveys of Broughton Island resumed after an 18 month hiatus.

The Club's work in surveying the Barrington Tops and Gloucester Tops KBA was again focussed on monitoring 11 of the more readily accessible Rufous Scrub-bird territories supplemented by studies of the behaviour of individual Rufous Scrub-birds (including use of Song Meters) and some effort spent searching for new territories.

The monthly surveys of the Hunter Estuary continued, including simultaneously at the newer tidal wetland sites Tomago Wetlands and Hexham Swamp.

A new initiative for 2016 was to have several members start to monitor the waterbirds at their local/favourite wetlands. Many of these are important second-tier wetlands in the region, sometimes hosting sizeable populations of waterbirds and some having breeding colonies of cormorants etc. This will lead to several new tables in the 2016 bird report.

In August, BirdLife Australia released its new Birddata portal and this reinvigorated our efforts to encourage local birdwatchers to submit records into the BLA Atlas. As a result, there was a surge in reporting in the final months of the year, and with several new Atlasers registering. Once again during the year we received a complete data set of Hunter Region records from BirdLife Australia, which has been used to inform our annual bird report as well as analyses of individual species (e.g. in publications such as *The Whistler*).

A GIS-based method for showing species distribution maps based on Atlas data was refined in 2016 and a method for showing timelines for migratory species was also developed. The maps and timelines were used in the 2015 bird report, which was published in late 2016.

HBOC is indebted to the Field Study and Data Management coordinators (Mike Newman and Alan Stuart) and to the many members, who organise and participate in acquiring and reporting observational data, for their expertise, dedication, and persistence in the pursuit of knowledge and better environmental outcomes for Hunter Region birds. Alan Stuart is the editor of the Annual Bird Report and his untiring commitment to this role is greatly appreciated and duly acknowledged.

## Rehabilitation Projects

*Ash Island Mangroves:* The effort from volunteers these days continues to be mostly about the hand-removal of mangrove seedlings that have invaded designated areas of interest (Milham Pond, Phoenix Flats, Swan Pond, Wader Pond) over the previous year.

*Stockton Sandspit:* The 2016 volunteer effort focussed on maintaining high standard saltmarsh and shelly sand areas, removal of mangrove seedlings over all areas plus the annual Clean Up Day activity. This has always been the case over the years. With the additional volunteer resource enjoyed once again this year, restoration of other non-roost areas was also targeted.

Volunteers representing International Student Volunteers, Wetland Care Australia, TAFE, CVA and HBOC visited the sandspit on 17 occasions to carry out restoration works during 2016 and a total of 425 volunteer hours of their time was put to good use. Since we have been keeping records (16th April 2003) an aggregate of 6,482.9 hours of volunteer work has accrued.

## Education & Promotion

In 2016 HBOC again anticipated raising the awareness of birds within the communities of the Hunter Region, which was successful through a number initiatives, including:

*Total Field Days:* HBOC again had a display stall with a steady stream of visitors interested in our bird routes guides and there are plans to provided a display stall again in 2017.

*Biodiversity Day:* Organised by the Office of Environment and Heritage in conjunction with NPWS and held at the Blue Gum Hills Reserve in Minmi in late September, the 2016 the event was a great success with nearly 1000 people attending, despite threatening rain and wind.

*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. HBOC participated at 2 events promoting the bird count; one at Cardiff and one at Tabbil Forest near Dungog as well as encouraging members to take part in citizen-science data collection.

*Maitland City Environmental Youth Forum:* HBOC through the expertise of Paul Baird presented 4 talks on 'endangered species' to Years 5-8 students. Many of the community do not understand the plight of threatened species and such subject matter is often received thoughtfully by young people.

*Website:* The HBOC website continues to be an indispensable interface between the Club and the rest of the world and again saw much activity during 2016.

*Facebook:* The number of followers of HBOC's Facebook page has increased considerably by 159 during 2016. A number of interesting posts throughout the year elicited much interest in the page. We expect to attract more interest throughout 2017.

*Publications:* The Hunter Region Annual Bird Report No. 23 (2015) was published during late 2016. No. 23 was once again a high quality publication, benefiting from many colour photographs and illustrations along with the remarkable amount of closely reviewed records and analysis.

During 2016 Hunter authors either authored or co-authored papers dealing with regional birds that have been published in periodicals such as *Australian Field Ornithology* and *Stilt* and our own Journal, *The Whistler*, with members enjoying its 10th edition.

For more detailed information on HBOC (including upcoming activities), refer to the club's website at <http://www.hboc.org.au>

Allan Richardson

President, HBOC

28 March 2017