

A Guide for New Members and Beginners to Birding



Azure Kingfisher
Ceyx azureus
by Stephanie Owen

Whether it's for pleasure or scientific purposes, finding, identifying and observing birds is an enjoyable, challenging and rewarding pastime. The following guide is intended for new Hunter Bird Observer's Club members and particularly for those just starting out.



**Hunter Bird
Observers Club**

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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a pdf with
hyperlinks
from
hboc.org.au



The joys of birding

Australia is home to over 850 bird species of endless beauty and charm. Half of these are found in the Hunter region. Birding can be a casual or passionate pastime done in solo or with company and is great for all ages and abilities. Getting out into nature provides physical and mental exercise giving purpose and enrichment to travel whether local, interstate or even overseas.

Objectives of the Club

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

Where to go birding?

You can go birding just about anywhere: in the garden, from the office window, while travelling, on your morning walk. The Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) has a large range of birding guides and featured sites covering our area but there are also national guides and books for those who venture further afield. Websites such as the Birdata site can be used to find a target species. Many towns provide bird lists, routes and bird hides, check at the local information centre or on-line.



A selection of Birding Guides available from the HBOC website.

Essential equipment

Just a pair of binoculars and a good bird guide will get you started!

Most birders use 10x40 (magnification x field of view), 10x42 or 8x40 binoculars. Prices range from \$400 – \$4000. Alternatively, buy second hand or borrow.

Consider: clarity, field of vision, magnification, robustness, waterproofing, weight, 'eye relief', ease of use, feel, warranty and whether to use a strap or harness. Spotting scopes have their place e.g. for observing shorebirds.

Bird guides: there are numerous excellent books, but phone apps are more practical in the field (Morcombe and Stewart's eGuide to Australian Birds; and Pizzey and Knight's Birds of Australia). There is no end to additional resources you can purchase. HBOC membership allows use of a library, on-line access to the Handbook of Birds of the World, an Annual Bird Report, the journal The Whistler and a regular newsletter.



How to identify that bird?

Bird identification is a time learnt skill and an ongoing challenge. The initial aim is to categorise the bird into a general group e.g. bird of prey, seabird, parrot, kingfisher, honeyeater and use this to locate the section of a bird guide in which to start your search. Use the following aspects to assist.



- ✓ Physical features: bill, legs, wings, size, colour, body shape,
- ✓ Environment: shore, woodland, inland, coast or rainforest,
- ✓ Experienced birders make considerable use of bird call for ID. Phone apps provide type-examples,
- ✓ Flight pattern is often characteristic for ID,
- ✓ Distribution maps show where species are usually found,
- ✓ Seasonality: distribution can be influenced by migration, climate, food availability, rainfall, etc.,
- ✓ A photo is helpful and can be compared against a bird guide, the [HBOC Bird Image Library](#), or posted on a birding blog for an opinion,
- ✓ Most bird guides include an aid to identification and section showing images of type-species or 'key to families'. There are also on-line sites to assist, e.g. [Birds in Backyards](#),
- ✓ ID can be complicated by differences between sexes; mature and immature birds; breeding and non-breeding plumage; and between subspecies. Don't give up!

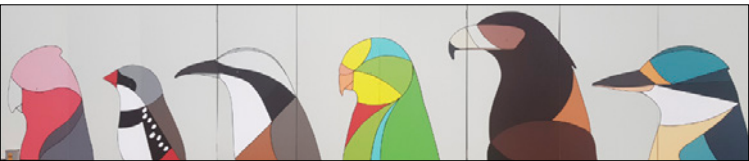


Image taken from a mural produced by Caragabal School (NSW)

Bird behaviour

Through an accurate identification it is possible to build a profile of the behaviour and characteristics of a bird. Identification and behaviour are complementary in that one assists the other. What a bird eats, how it collects its food, the environment it lives in, how it interacts with other birds and movement patterns constitute the nature of a bird; its behaviour. These criteria can in turn assist with achieving an ID.

Encouraging birds

Attract birds into your garden by birdscaping; the prudent planting of trees and shrubs. A constant water source e.g. clean bird bath, is invaluable but keep it clear of cats. Bird feeding is generally discouraged and some products, like bread, can be harmful. Installing bird boxes and saving old trees with nest hollows is helpful. Birds can be injured if entangled in nets, fishing line, discarded face masks and the like.

Ethics

Essentially, don't disturb birds especially when they are nesting or feeding. The welfare of birds comes first. Minimise use of play-back (taped bird calls to entice birds). BirdLife Australia and HBOC have policies covering these issues.



Black Swan with cygnets by Rob Palazzi

Bird conservation

HBOC is actively involved with numerous conservation matters as habitat loss, predation from introduced animals and hunting have seriously reduced bird numbers and endangered some species.



The highly endangered Regent Honeyeater (Rebecca Citroni) and Swift Parrot (Stephanie Owen). HBOC is involved in conservation work assisting both species

Photography and sound recording

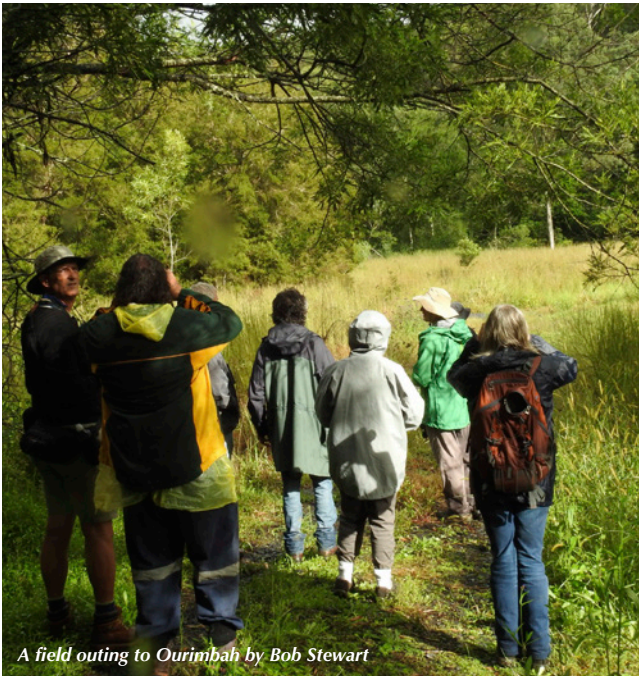
Photography is an important adjunct to birding and invaluable for ID, education and personal record keeping. Some birders use sophisticated camera and sound recording equipment for professional results. Aim to capture birds in the act of doing something rather than just sitting on a branch, i.e. record their behaviour. HBOC has a Photography Subgroup and extensive Bird Image Library as has BirdLife Australia.

HBOC activities

HBOC undertakes numerous activities including monthly field trips (1st Tuesdays and 3rd Sundays of the month) and a club meeting on the second Wednesday of the month (face-to-face and Zoom options). This features a 'bird of the evening' and main presentation along with member observations and news items. Camps are held over public holidays within the Hunter region and sometimes further afield. These activities are informal, and provide an opportunity to socialise, learn, obtain local guidance and visit new locations. There are other bird clubs throughout the country and most welcome visitors.

When out in the field consider the following:

- ✓ Safety, car-pooling, meeting instructions, field etiquette,
- ✓ Checklist (depending on the outing): back pack, hat, sunscreen, insect repellent, water, binoculars, camera, notebook/pencil, cell phone, bird guide/app, map, first aid kit, medications, sensible shoes (possibly gaiters),
- ✓ A camp chair, thermos and snack is a good idea for 'birdcall' at the end of a Club outing,
- ✓ Potential discomforts: heat, flies, grass burrs/bindies, rain, mud... most are manageable.



A field outing to Ourimbah by Bob Stewart

Safety

Birding carries a few risks but most can be mitigated through common sense and forethought. These include: sunburn, heat, dehydration, bites, getting lost, falls/injury/sprains/blisters.

Surveys, surveillance and records

HBOC conducts regular surveys to monitor the status of species for scientific and conservation purposes. Individuals are encouraged to upload observations to the Birdata app or eBird for personal record keeping, milestones, and to contribute to citizen science (BirdLife Australia's Birdata is the platform used by HBOC for official Club surveys). The annual Aussie Backyard Bird Count is popular too.



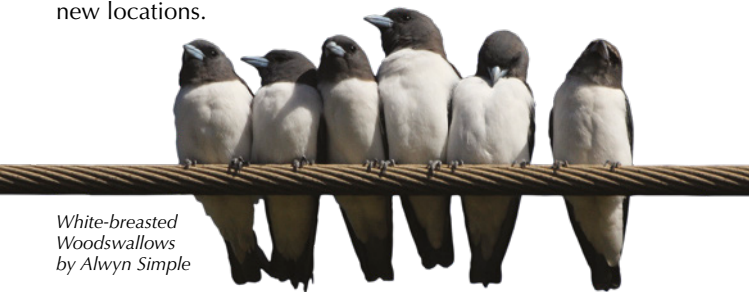
Shorebird survey by Rob Palazzi

Where birding can take you

Many people are content with casual bird watching activities but others take it further through greater club participation, surveys, research, bird-banding, sound recording, travel, conservation, photography, achieving milestones of regional and national totals, overseas birding.

Joining up with other birders

Through HBOC you can get involved with surveys, projects and other activities. Mixing with more experienced birders helps to expand your knowledge and introduces you to new locations.



*White-breasted
Woodswallows
by Alwyn Simple*

Blogs

Local and national email blogs are available for those who wish to be kept informed of the latest sightings. Hunterbirding links birders of all experience levels, providing a forum for questions, reports, unusual observations, help with ID and other bird-related topics.

Links and contacts

Hunter Bird Observers Club email – secretary@hboc.org.au

BirdLife Australia – www.birdlife.org.au

Cumberland Bird Observers Club – www.cboc.org.au