

Farewell to Max Maddock

The birding community of the Hunter Region suffered a great loss with the passing of Professor Max Maddock in July 2016 at age 87. He made an enormous contribution to the community; perhaps most notably for his key role in establishing the now internationally recognised Hunter Wetlands Centre.

The Hunter Wetlands Centre is the spiritual home of the Hunter Bird Observers Club. It provides a venue for our meetings and wonderful grounds where we can introduce new members to a variety of birds. School education programs with a focus on birds and natural history will hopefully foster future generations of bird watchers. The Centre also provides a forum for more social bird-orientated gatherings like the finish of the annual Twitchathon. This amazing wealth of opportunity stems from the vision, inspirational leadership and dogged determination of an exceptional person, Max Maddock. It is fitting we publish this tribute to his passing in *The Whistler*.

Heather, Max's wife, says his life can be categorized in three phases (one might say obsessions); initially athletics, then horses and ultimately birds. Towards the end of the equestrian phase Max leased land at the Wetlands Centre site for his horses and was fascinated by the egrets, attracted by the periodic flooding. The egrets inspired not only the concept of the Wetlands Centre, but Project Egret Watch, a community project embracing all of Eastern Australia and even New Zealand.

Paddy Lightfoot provides the following account of the genesis of the Wetlands Centre.

"In 1983 I was on the committee of the Newcastle Group in The Society for Growing Australian Plants – now the Australian Plants Society. The Committee had received a letter from a certain Professor Max Maddock in the Education Faculty at Newcastle University.



"Professor Maddock in his letter had requested that our Group attend a meeting in the Environmental Field Study Centre, Dudley to discuss an idea he had to purchase a property in Sandgate. He proposed to build an Environmental Education Centre on the property.

"Reflecting and knowing Max now I feel that letter may have in fact commanded rather than simply requesting we send a representative.

"The Plant Society suggested, as I was secretary, that I attend the meeting. My brief was that in the event this very unlikely project would proceed only Australian Native Plants be planted around the proposed environmental centre.

"We attendees sat in a circle around the room. Max, whom I had never met before or whom I had never even heard about, introduced himself. He asked us individually to stand and explain to the group who we were and why we were there.

"Paddy Lightfoot from the Society for Growing Australian Plants. Our group want to ensure that only Australian Plants be used in your proposed project'. 'Right you are on the Landscaping Committee'. I wasn't sure that I had heard Max correctly! He did not know me – we had just met. He did not ask, 'Would you like to be?' or 'Have you the time to be?'

"The site he had in mind was the defunct Hamilton Marist Rugby Club – the Club had made two mistakes. They developed playing fields away from their supporter base and breathalysers had been introduced in 1981. The Club was in liquidation.

"As the events unfolded in the years ahead, Max with extraordinary vigor and strength of mind managed to bring most of Neville Wran's NSW Government to

Newcastle and persuaded them that the project was worthwhile. As Max said it was a goer - and his dream of an Environmental Education Centre could become a Bicentennial Project for Newcastle and for education. Max then persuaded the Newcastle City Council to rescind their motion to extend the nearby Astra Street dump over the Marist Rugby Club land and to re-route Motorway 23 to by-pass the Club land instead of through it."

The Hunter Wetlands Centre is unique within Australia in providing an environmental hub in the middle of an industrial city. It is amazing that a single entity has an educational function, is a bird observatory in an internationally acclaimed wetland and a field study centre with projects embracing the spectrum of natural history.

Max was the ultimate communicator, as exemplified by Project Egret Watch. He recruited teams of Hunter volunteers to band and tag egrets, both at the Wetlands Centre and at Seaham Swamp near his home. This was expanded to something akin to a small empire by the early 1990s with Max securing funding to employ a full-time Project Egret Watch coordinator. Banders were now tagging egrets under the Project Egret Watch banner at nine coastal breeding colonies from Seaham north to Bundaberg as well as in the Macquarie Marshes in inland NSW. He then recruited observers throughout Eastern Australia to seek and find where the egrets went when they departed from their breeding colonies. Records were obtained from as far afield as southern Tasmania, South Australia, and even New Zealand. Max sustained his collaborators by continual feedback on the value and meaning of their sightings. To put this achievement into perspective one has to appreciate this was happening before the advent of email and today's instant communication systems (those were the days of snail mail). Seldom has a project been sustained in such a personal manner; his observers were valuable collaborators not today's anonymous citizen scientists. Again we draw on Paddy Lightfoot's recollections to grasp the essence of his style.

"Birds seemed to have an affinity for Max. When he visited Seaham Egret Colony the birds stayed placidly on their nests – they recognized him wandering around with his telescope or binoculars, camera slung around his neck and note book. Any other birders visiting and the nesting colony erupted.

"I well remember the egret tagging sessions for his Project Egret Watch – thoroughly wet, mud and bird poo covered – Max in his zenith! He even taught surgical non-slip knots to those helping to attach tags to the birds.

"Max had a network of tag watchers around Australia – one couple reported being approached by the police wanting to know why their binoculars were trained on a

farmhouse – the sceptical men in blue took some persuading that they had their binoculars trained – on a number – on a tag – on a wing – on a bird – on a dam in front of the farmhouse!"

Max's concern for his egrets progressively expanded to concern over their wetland habitats in the Hunter Estuary and beyond. He became deeply involved in the RAMSAR process for the wise management of wetlands. Increasingly disillusioned by regulators' blatant disregard for wetlands, which were all too frequently seen as cheap and convenient land for industrial development, he became a passionate advocate for their conservation. Monumental dissertations were prepared, but of course they have to find their highly buffered target audience. Heather describes how Max, now past his prime, gate-crashed a visit by Peter Garrett, the Federal Minister of the Environment, to hand deliver his personal submission on the plight of the Hunter wetlands. It is fair to claim that the outstanding ongoing examples of wetlands rehabilitation and environmental advocacy, for which the Hunter Region is being increasingly renowned, stem from the awareness and culture Max generated. He encouraged some outstanding disciples including many members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club.

Science-based evidence is the prerequisite of effective conservation and advocacy. Again Max provides a role model with his peer-reviewed publications on his egret studies, becoming an acknowledged expert on herons and related species. Sadly, we have only one paper by Max in *The Whistler* "Breeding population decline in Cattle Egrets nesting at Seaham Swamp Nature Reserve and the Hunter Wetlands Centre Australia." The cover of this issue, Number 5, appropriately shows a Cattle Egret resplendent in its breeding plumage. We were privileged because that was the last formal paper Max produced. If Max was writing this his message would be: "Get your work written up while you can, time is short!"

While Max's ornithological productivity may have diminished in his final years his love of birds and fascination with their behaviour blossomed. An astonishing variety of birds were photographed in his small garden at Ashtonfield, attracted by native shrubs and supplied with copious quantities of meal worms. Can Superb Fairy-wrens suffer obesity? Max always tried to find patterns in and explanations for their antics; his mind inquisitive to the end.

Thanks Max for your legacy and to Heather for your support and encouragement of this remarkable person.

Compiled by Mike Newman drawing on the recollections of Paddy Lightfoot, Kevin McDonald, Brian Gilligan and David Geering.