

Breeding success of Pied Oystercatchers on Corrie Island and Winda Woppa sandspit, Port Stephens NSW, summer 2024/25

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INTRODUCTION

This note describes the successful breeding of Pied Oystercatchers *Haematopus longirostris* on Corrie Island Nature Reserve and the adjacent Winda Woppa sandspit in the summer of 2024/25. Corrie Island (32°41'8"S, 152°08'15"E) and the Winda Woppa sandspit (32°40'46"S, 152°08'44"E) are located at the mouth of the Myall River in Port Stephens, New South Wales (NSW) (**Figure 1**). Corrie Island is a low, deltaic island of sand and shingle, covered largely by mangroves. It is a gazetted Nature Reserve, and part of the Myall Lakes Ramsar site. The Winda Woppa sandspit is a recreational reserve of the MidCoast Council. It is used as a stockpile site for dredged spoil from the eastern entrance to the Myall River.



Figure 1. Satellite image of Corrie Island and Winda Woppa sandspit showing 2024/25 nest sites (red circles) and nursery sites (white triangles) (Google Earth accessed 16/09/2025).

Pied Oystercatchers are known to have been present on Corrie Island and the Winda Woppa sandspit since 2000. Nests were first located on Corrie Island in September 2017 (Fraser & Stuart 2018). Another pair was found nesting on the Winda Woppa sandspit in October that year (Stuart 2018). Since then, nesting has been reported regularly at both sites (<https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/explore>). The

Pied Oystercatcher is listed as Endangered in NSW (*Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*).

METHODS

Corrie Island and the Winda Woppa sandspit were surveyed mainly by Trish Blair and Sharon Taylor. The surveys were done approximately weekly, from mid-August 2024 to mid-January 2025, weather permitting. Kayaks launched from Tea Gardens and Hawks Nest were used to access the eastern shore of Corrie Island, before proceeding on foot to the western end. Surveys were conducted using the 500 m area search protocol of Birdlife Australia. The surveys were conducted in the early morning when wind conditions were most favourable.

All avian species seen along the access route and the nesting sites were recorded. For the Pied Oystercatchers, monitoring was conducted as per the NSW Saving Our Species monitoring plan for beach-nesting birds: their numbers and locations were noted, and for breeding pairs, nest locations, numbers of eggs, chicks and fledglings were recorded. These observations were supplemented by incidental observations made remotely by NSW National Parks Wildlife Service (NPWS) personnel from trail cameras installed adjacent at some nest sites.

Records were entered into the NSW Saving Our Species NPWS Google drive data sheet for beach-nesting birds and the Birdlife Australia Birddata database.

RESULTS

Over the summer of 2024/25, five pairs of oystercatchers nested on Corrie Island and two pairs on the Winda Woppa sandspit. The locations of the nests are shown in **Figure 1**, and the dates of first nest observation, number of eggs, number of chicks and number of fledglings are summarised in **Table 1**. From eight nesting attempts, the seven pairs successfully raised eight fledglings. The Crab Cove pair at Winda Woppa had two unsuccessful nesting attempts, while the other six pairs each nested once.

Table 1. Details of Pied Oystercatchers breeding attempts at Corrie Island and Winda Woppa sandspit in summer 2024/25

Nest site	Date First Observed	Eggs	Chicks	Fledglings
Crab Cove Nest 1	10/10/24	2	0	0
Crab Cove Nest 2	14/11/24	2	0	0
Winda Woppa Nest	23/08/24	2	2	2
Northwest Nest	23/09/24	2	2	1
Northeast Nest	11/10/24	2	2	2
Southeast Nest	23/09/24	3	2	2
Lagoon Nest	11/10/24	2	1	1
Southwest Nest	23/09/24	2	1	0
		17	10	8

**Figure 2.** Left: Typical Pied Oystercatcher nest in a sand scrape (the Lagoon Nest, Corrie Island). Right: Crab Cove Nest 1, located amongst beach wrack.

All nest sites were widely spaced from one another, 180-720 m apart. Six of the nest sites on Corrie Island and the Winda Woppa sandspit were crudely lined scrapes made in sand with shell grit or shingle, often on slight mounds (**Figure 2**). The initial nest site for the Crab Cove pair was amongst beach wrack while the second one was amongst grass (**Figure 2**).

The Winda Woppa pair were the first to commence nesting, in late August, as they had done in previous years. The other six pairs began nesting about one month later, over a two- to three-week period from late September to early October (**Table 1**).

Four nursery sites were identified which were used by nesting pairs to raise chicks from day two through to fledging (locations shown in **Figure 1**). The nurseries were 50 m to more than 200 m from the nest sites and were characterised by thick beach vegetation that provided cover for the developing chicks. The westernmost nursery was shared by

both the northwest and southwest pair initially, until the northwest chick disappeared.

DISCUSSION

Regular surveys of Port Stephens since 2004 have identified it as a NSW stronghold for Pied Oystercatcher with up to 150 birds regularly present (Stuart 2020). This is 30-40% of the estimated NSW population and 1-1.5% of the world population, making Port Stephens Internationally Significant for the species.

The nests on Corrie Island and one of the Winda Woppa nests were typical for the species (Marchant & Higgins 1994). However, the nest sites for the Crab Cove pair were atypical, which may have been a factor in their lack of success.

Although some eggs and chicks were lost from the Corrie Island nests (**Table 1**), no predation or

potential predators were observed in the vicinity of the nest sites. At the Crab Cove site, either tidal inundation or a Lace Monitor *Varanus varius* may have been responsible for the losses of the eggs. Lace Monitors had been previously observed predated the eggs of Little Tern nesting on the Winda Woppa sandspit (Fraser 2017). The Crab Cove pair possibly were first-time breeders; if so, their inexperience may have contributed to the losses.

Signage prohibiting beach use due to the presence of nesting shore birds was installed on Corrie Island early in the breeding program. Despite this, boat users occasionally landed on the island's shores and on the sandspit, and fishermen frequented the island's eastern beach. Oyster farmers along the western shore also were a source of disturbance. On the Winda Woppa sandspit, heavy earth-moving equipment was actively moving the dredged spoil from the site.

There are pre-2024/25 breeding records for Pied Oystercatchers from six additional sites in Port Stephens, all in the western part of the port; Bato Bato Point, Tanilba (N. Karlson pers. comm.), Bushy Island (N. Karlson pers. comm.), Dowadee Island (T. Murray pers. comm.), One Tree Island (N. Karlson pers. comm.), Orobilbah Island (G. Little pers. comm.) and Snapper Island (T. Clarke pers. comm.). All these are on rocky islands or shorelines, which suggests they would be sub-optimal nesting locations (Marchant & Higgins 1994). All six breeding records involved single pairs, which highlights the importance of Corrie Island and the Winda Woppa sandspit which support multiple nesting pairs. Corrie Island's relative isolation undoubtedly also contributes to the species' breeding success.

The success of the 2024/25 breeding season on Corrie Island is in stark contrast to that of the 2023/24 season. Five pairs nested on Corrie Island, making a total of eight attempts, but only one pair managed to successfully raise a fledgling. All the other chicks disappeared and are presumed to have been predated. A pair at Winda Woppa also successfully raised two fledglings. The key difference between the two seasons was two wild dogs *Canis familiaris* (breed Dingo) that were resident on Corrie Island in 2023/24; they were removed from the island prior to the 2024/25 season. These dogs had been recorded predated both eggs and chicks, despite electric fencing being installed around nest sites.

CONCLUSIONS

Corrie Island and the Winda Woppa sandspit are the prime nesting sites for Pied Oystercatchers in Port Stephens. The 2024/25 season has shown that, with effective predator management and minimisation of disturbance, the breeding population can achieve high levels of fledging success.

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