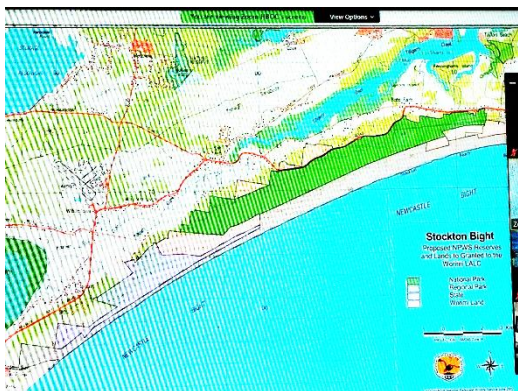


Worimi Conservation Lands



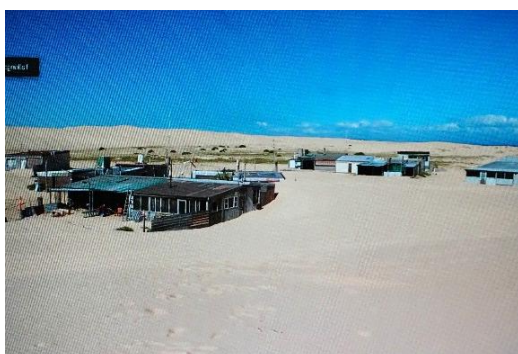
Worimi Conservation Lands also known as Stockton Beach on Newcastle Bight is a highly significant cultural site for the Worimi people. It is rich in cultural artefacts and middens all of which need protecting. Before about 2008 anybody could go there in their 4-wheel drives with no limit on numbers. The area is now co-managed by National Parks and Worimi Land Council and comprises a national park, state conservation area and regional park all of which have different rules and regulations. The beach front which we drive is about 32 km long.



Fencing, signs and protection for aboriginal sites have been installed and there is regular oversight on a daily basis. There is now a designated camping area as well. The beach front is closed if the weather is terrible to prevent accidents and further beach erosion. National Parks are installing fencing where the fore dune has been breached so that there is a build-up of sand and in time breaches will be filled. Storms uncover huge amounts of rubbish and sometimes more interesting historical things



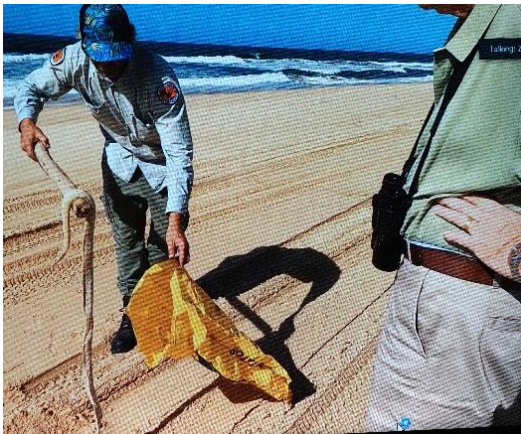
Storm damage finally took its toll of the Sygna wreck which went aground in the 1974 east coast low and it all but vanished in a storm in 2016.



Another feature is this legal squatter settlement known as Tin City which started as a shelter for shipwrecked sailors back in the late 1800s. The thing about Worimi is that it is very beautiful and every time you go it looks different. The swales behind the fore dune fill with water after rain. All manner of activities take place probably the most popular being fishing.



Chris, Liz and I went out there, the first time for me, sometime in 2008. Then in 2009 after conversations with the ranger, Warren Mayers, we have been doing regular monthly surveys of the birds since then. The main surveyors have been Mike Newman, Neil Fraser, Dan Williams and myself with other HBOC members filling in at times. Since then, Worimi visitor services assistants provide the 4-wheel drive transport. Some days are more exciting than others and sometimes we get caught out. Dan Williams provides his vehicle and expertise when permitted by covid restrictions.

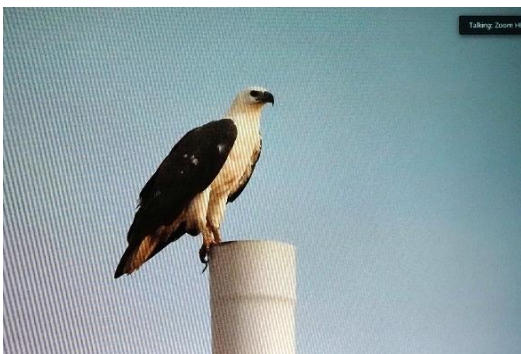


For the purposes of data entry, the beach is divided into three 10 km stretches and the species and numbers are entered into Birdata.

All sorts of animals turn up, some of them dead, some alive. There was a Port Jackson shark, very dead I'm afraid, then a seal pup which was taken into care, and then there was the day of the sea snakes. They were littered along the beach and our ranger caught them and we relocated them to a pool at the northern end of the beach.



We once saw a Great Crested Grebe in the ocean and these Wedge-tailed shearwaters were feeding right at the shore break and some died likely of starvation after a storm.



Now onto the birds

We see White-bellied Sea-eagles, quite a few White-fronted Chats, loads of pipits and Superb Fairy-wrens.

There are the almost rarities mostly migratory shorebirds from northern hemisphere—Sanderling, Great Knot, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Red-necked Stint and non-migratory Red-necked Avocet.



And then there are the mega rarities –this Light-mantled Sooty Albatross taken into care but later died.



This Hooded Plover probably from Victoria got muddled up and headed north instead of south– it hung around for a month, Ringed Plover – a mega rarity from the northern hemisphere didn't hang around at all, South Island Pied Oystercatcher lost its way from New Zealand – might still be out there.



The Common Gull-billed Tern is a migrant from Asia to northern Australia but this one has strayed further south and has turned up a couple of times at Worimi. It may be the same bird as has been seen on Stockton Sandspit several times. This is probably an adult in non-breeding plumage.



Here it is compared with an immature Australian Gull-billed Tern.

The Australian Gull-billed Terns are mostly roosting on the beach front often with Silver Gulls and Crested Terns but sometimes they take advantage of the swales behind the fore dune.

But the birds I really look forward to seeing are the regulars, Silver Gull, Crested Tern, Australian Red-capped Plovers, Gull-billed Tern, Little Tern, Double-banded Plovers, Pacific Golden Plovers, and Australian Pied Oystercatchers because Worimi is their home on which they depend for at least some of their life cycle.



Little Terns arrive around October but they do not come to Worimi every year and if they do come, they don't necessarily breed and if they do, breeding is not necessarily successful. This breeding population of Little Terns is a highly threatened species mostly because they like to nest where humans with all our paraphenalia (dogs, sail boards, cars, fishing rods) like to be. As you can see, they like open, shelly sandy stretches with either no or only sparse vegetation. They often choose something to nest next to such as wood or seaweed. Incubation is about 22 days and chicks fledge at 17 to 19 days old.



In summer here in the Newcastle area we can see two populations of Little Tern – the one that breeds that we have been talking about and is in breeding plumage and the one that breeds in the northern hemisphere that migrates south for the northern winter. It will be in non-breeding plumage. But immature birds are in similar plumage to these non-breeding birds at certain times of the year so identification is hard.



Plovers lob in from northern hemisphere on their way to somewhere else mostly including the estuary. There is some evidence that the estuary birds shelter in the dunes during bad weather. We take e special care not to disturb them as they have likely just arrived and are tired out.



Double-banded Plovers start arriving from New Zealand as early as February and stay until August. When we see them they are mostly in non-breeding plumage but then in July plumage starts to change and by August they are in full breeding plumage. They spend their time loafing on the high beach front or sometimes behind front dune and around the swales. We rarely see them feeding. They are tricky to spot as they hide among the debris on the beach and in the wheel tracks. I will talk more about wheel tracks in a minute.



The star of the beach is Australian Pied Oystercatcher and it is present all year round although numbers may fluctuate. This iconic photo was taken when Chris, Liz, Dan and I did an exploratory trip onto the beach. and it really alerted us to just how vulnerable beach nesting birds are. Numbers of Pied Oystercatchers seem to have increased maybe because its favourite food which is the bivalve pipi has also increased due to measures to control how many are harvested at various times of the year.



We often find individually marked birds like P1. NSW birds are flagged on the left leg and Victorian birds are flagged on the right leg. P1 was flagged as a chick at Bunjulung NP on the north coast in 2010.



Pied Oystercatchers are agonisingly susceptible to injury from fishing line and other assorted rubbish. On one survey we found five injured birds which was absolutely heart-breaking. This bird has what I think are the remnants of those wretched balloons that people are so fond of letting go. One pair had two feet between them and Footless had no feet at all. We saw her in October but she did not look all that well. She actually found a mate one year but I don't know if breeding actually took place.



Then there's Lucky! We had seen this bird over a couple of months and the assistants had also been watching it but, because it could fly, we couldn't catch him. Anyway, his condition degenerated to the point where he couldn't fly anymore and one of the assistants managed to capture him one morning. He was taken to Taronga Park where they mended him and he was released a month later. He had fishing lure and line wrapped around foot. 2 hooks went through his foot. Both feet became entangled and he was infested with internal and external parasites. Had lost 40% of his body weight and was in terrible condition so he was in intensive care with a combination of antibiotics, antifungal and worming medication, fluids, B vitamins, pain medication, and a high calorie food supplement. He was banded at the zoo. His band states he is a WCL bird. Not the end of the story! In 2018 there he was with his family and then in 2020 we saw him sneaking up into the dune with a female. However, we have not seen him since but then we have missed many surveys due to covid.



Pied Oystercatchers breed mostly behind the dunes as it is far too busy on the beach front. They hide their nest pretty well and again there can be some kind of marker. This pair chose a very large marker for their nest.



The last thing I want to show you is how addicted birds are to sitting in wheel tracks. Mostly they just move off if you are driving slowly which we are but sometimes they give you heart failure by moving at the very last minute.



Here are a few numbers - **Highest Numbers recorded on surveys**

A Gull-billed Tern: 204 in November 2014

APO: 110 in April 2015 and in March 2018

Crested Tern:326 in February 2015

Double-banded Plover:173 in June 2014

Little Tern: 95 in November 2014

PGP: 155 in November 2020

Rec-capped Plover: 128 April 2015



Text by Ann Lindsey, photos by Ann Lindsey and Nadine Russell