

Shorebird Roost Rehabilitation at Stockton Sandspit

Project Report 2013

Introduction

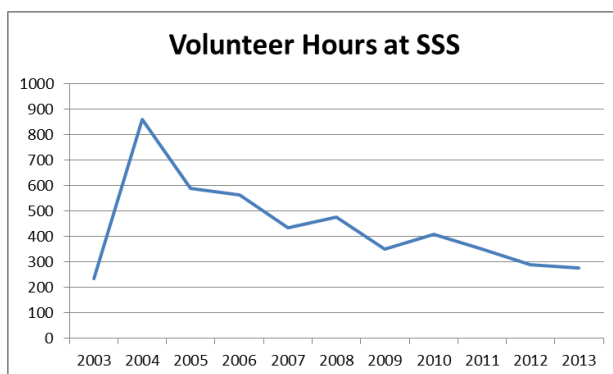
Stockton Sandspit is a small but vital component of the Hunter Wetlands National Park and is regarded as one of the premier day-time roosts for shorebirds in the Hunter Estuary. Shorebird roost rehabilitation at Stockton Sandspit (the sandspit) maintains a variety of roost habitats favoured by the shorebirds. In addition, these rehabilitation works provide occasional feeding habitat for shorebirds as well as breeding opportunities for some ground-nesting birds.

Volunteers from Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) have a long association with this site and over the last 14 years have held a strong site presence.

2013 Contribution

Volunteers from HBOC visited the sandspit on 15 occasions to carry out restoration works during 2013 and a total of 275.5 volunteer hours of their time was put to good use. Since we have been keeping records (16th April 2003) an aggregate of 4831 hours of volunteer work has accrued. The value of this effort in terms of productive habitat for shorebirds is immeasurable but when figured against contractor rates amounts to an in-kind value of over \$175,000.

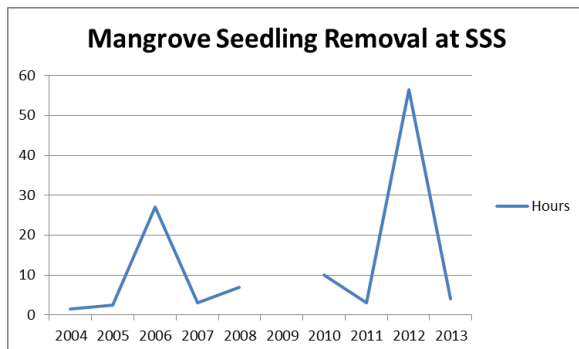
The effort required from volunteers to maintain the roost sites continues to fall but plenty of peripheral restoration work has been overlooked in the past couple of years. This has mainly been due to volunteer resources being utilised at shorebird sites on Ash Island.



The 2013 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.

Mangroves

To provide a shorebird friendly site all mangrove seedlings are removed (under licence) from designated areas. A permit issued by NSW Department of Industry and Investment (I&I) was in force until **20th January 2013** so an early start on the seedling removal was planned. It was with some relief that this year's effort proved to be far less than the previous year's and the job was completed with matchless efficiency.



With the exception of two major spikes, the effort required to remove mangrove seedlings at Stockton Sandspit is easily achieved in a few hours.

This work cannot happen however without the appropriate permit and a renewal is urgently needed before work can commence in 2014.

Clean Up Day

The first Sunday of March is a busy time each year at Stockton Sandspit and 2013 was no exception. A good mob of rubbish warriors turned up comprising of ten people from HBOC (Max, Jerry, Caryl, Paddy, Judy, Tony, Anna, Bryan, Juliana & Tom), two from CMA (Melinda & Jane), Wetland Care Australia (Louise) and nine civic-minded people with no direct affiliation at all.



Each year, it seems that nothing much changes regarding the litter that turns up at the sandspit and the tally of 39 bags of rubbish plus the equivalent in volume of large items is par for the course.



The added attraction this year was the Marine Debris Initiative surveys. CMA people handed out information and a few volunteers opted to take part in surveying the debris as they cleaned up.

Shelly Sand

Preparing areas of shelly sand remains the greatest challenge for volunteers each year at Stockton Sandspit and is sometimes referred to as the great winter effort. With the advent of a much reduced mangrove effort required this year an early start was possible. At any opportunity prior to winter a march on reducing the woody weeds from these areas was made. By the time June came around we were in a pretty good position to complete this work expeditiously.



A two day effort at the end of May by a team of International Student Volunteers (ISV) from North America absolutely nailed it. It was an absolute delight to work with these people who kept to the task cheerfully and with interest of the shorebirds.



Once again it was organised with NPWS to treat the ground with a rotary hoe and this component of the work was carried out in June. After some relatively easy raking of the sand for any last traces of vegetation the process was complete.



All ready now for migrant shorebirds to roost on and for residents to think about nesting. The first test scrape by a Red-capped Plover was discovered 21st June and an early start to the courtship behaviours was underway.

Ground Nesting Birds

Watching the breeding efforts of the resident Red-capped Plovers and Pied Oystercatchers has been a wonderful addition to the restoration work and volunteers have rode the highs and lows of this aspect.

Overall, the breeding Red-capped Plovers have enjoyed reasonable success over the years and 2013 appears to be normal for the sandspit.



By September it was possible to see fluffy runners from an early August nest and two other hens sitting.

The resilient Pied Oystercatchers have failed to produce young over the previous couple of seasons despite repeated attempts. Amongst the challenges these birds face is fox predation and it certainly took its toll last year.

The first breeding attempt by Pied Oystercatchers at Stockton Sandspit was in 2007 and remarkably it was successful with a single runner being raised to independence. Since then the birds have attempted to breed each season and up to this year had only enjoyed additional success on two other occasions out of at least fifteen attempts. It is always an anxious time waiting over the twenty eight days of incubation hoping that the current attempt might end in reward.



This year the birds nested in late September and by mid-October two fluffy runners were an absolute joy to behold. The record at this point is six youngsters from four successful attempts out of seventeen over seven seasons. Perhaps this not too bad but it is so disappointing on all the occasions that have ended in failure.

Acknowledgements

The project continues to succeed because of the valuable input by many people and this aspect is gratefully acknowledged. The sandspit enjoys the benefits of your collective efforts.

Thanks to Jo Erskine (Ranger) and Boyd Carney (Bush Regeneration & Volunteer Coordinator) for their constant support and to those NPWS field officers (Alan and Brad) for on-ground contributions.

Thanks to Jenna (CVA Supervisor) and Kyle (ISV Supervisor) for the safe and quality completion of the shelly sand preparation. Your energetic team has renewed my faith in young people.

Thanks also to Peggy Svoboda (KWRP) and the Koora Gang team for their efforts on planting up the areas under the bridge.

Newcastle Council for improving the amenity of the car park and upgrading the access track. These improvements hopefully will usher in a spirit of caring from the general public.

Thanks to Louise Duff (WCA) and Paul Davo the fox man for their continued contribution with fox control at the sandspit and other sites within the Hunter Wetlands National Park.

Thanks to all those volunteers that pitched in on Clean Up Day.

To everyone who has volunteered and left some part of themselves at this amazing site, your contributions have produced many good outcomes and the sandspit has benefitted greatly.

Tom Clarke

Project Coordinator HBOC

January 2014

